

Hearing Voices, Seeing Demons Perception, Memory, and Interface in works of Steina and Woody Vasulka

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*Near the end of Binary Lives, Peter Kirby's documentary on electronic art pioneers Steina and Woody Vasulka, each artist insists on an orientation for their creative output that is at once dramatically different from the other and complementary to the other. When Woody says that he has given up the phenomenological world for the cybernetic world, he adds that it is nice to have Steina bringing home images that she has made from a world now closed to him. Woody's satisfaction with images that she brings home, Steina says, she cannot understand: for her to create an image, she must go to the place where the image originates as an event. So, she must go to the volcanos in Iceland, she must go to the blacksmith's workshop, she must go to the desert. Going into the world ensures that the images she makes are her own. Woody, in response, suggests that the images are not made by her at all: they are created by god, by nature, by the sentience of the world she wanders through. By contrast, he says, he uses computers to generate his images, because this method provides a challenge to god: computers provide humans with the first opportunity to produce images that nature has not created first.*¹

Bringing home images of the overheated landscapes of the deserts around them, of a blacksmith's fire, of the burning world alive in flaming magistry, she gives him a hearth. But this hearth is

¹ Kirby, Peter, *Binary Lives: Steina and Woody Vasulka* (Grand Canal and Media Art Services Co-Production, 1996)

not located at the center of the home, rather, it is a hearth of images from a nomadic agent roving through many worlds, their centers each time marked with her camera. Her worlds are the worlds found around the mobile camera center. Woody's charge that it is "god", not Steina, who originates her images is denied by Steina: God has never done with fire what she has. But in a sense, Woody's version of Steina's output seems apt. To some degree, Steina is collaborating with the world around her. She is playing games with the gods; she is playing duets with the world; she is playing with fire. And if to experience her work is to get the feeling that Steina is extraordinarily adept at holding each end of god's jumprobes at the same time as she goes dancing about in the middle of a double dutch world, I get a different impression from Woody's engagement with his tools of artifice: God must make room for him and his electronics, the form of the world must retreat a bit, and allow him to begin to put another one in place. We are gifted with a new space within which to play with fire, but our Prometheus is bound with constraints on memory: camera, computer, display. The form of the new space depends too on the constraints inherited from these tools for its production.

Hearing a call and response between Steina's play and Woody's discipline may help us reach a richer understanding of these artists' work, and of the way each experiences the world, and the way each brings the world to us for us to experience. As each artist has worked intensively with electronic tools, the call and response between them has produced many and manifold explorations of our interface, *our engagement in perception and memory*, to the worlds we believe we live in. Necessarily, Steina and Woody's aesthetic interventions change the way we know our worlds. Steina's play and Woody's discipline in electronic arts trend along the lines of two dynamics of interface that are especially interesting when considered

together². The first dynamic of interface, Steina's world, might be summed up, in rather unfortunate phrasing, as the *filtering of raw data*. The second, Woody's, in an equally inept terminology, is that of *replacement and immersion*. And I wonder whether these dynamics have reached critical and fruitful mass in their work because of gifts each artist long ago made to the other. Steina, violinist, gives Woody music, voice, polyphony. Woody, filmmaker, gives Steina vision, the image, the world to capture.

Steina, musician thus gifted with a view on the world, makes viewing musical, subjects it to a musical idea, filters the raw data of the world through sight and sound. In her work is a constant search for the perceptible between orders of perception; she uses synchronization of sound and image as a way of naming what happens between both, and as a way of understanding what sight and sound produce together. In *Summer Salt* and *Voice Windows* I discern a one-two step that can help us engage with the noisy and turbulent streams of the physical world she so tranquilly and playfully presents. Here I will discuss aspects of these works as musical experiments in the reproduction of perceptible spaces.

Woody, image maker gifted with the sound of music, makes images flow in a historical fugue as voices of the past are recalled in *Art of Memory*. The viewer is immersed in a cinema of memory, and just as the cinematic installation replaces our everyday world when we sit down to watch, memory replaces the cinema in the ebbs and flow of this work. In his newer installations, he matches a three dimensional cybernetic space with a place in the physical world. Here, replacement for the purposes of immersion is practical and profound. The display of the computer is externalized, and is synchronized with a bit of real estate that it takes over in order to

² While I am considering works of these artists together in this essay, it should be clear that the Vasulkas started out collaborating on works of electronic art but have produced work individually for many years.

make *itself* even more real. Woody invites us to live within the world he builds out of memories of himself.

It's the emotional valences of these works as they prototype a possible interface that interest me, not their technical presentations of interface as such. Filters for data and immersive environments are never simply new tools to reach the external world. At least, to regard these works as tools for interface as such cheapens them by suggesting ~~that~~ they are primarily technical rather than aesthetic. What we might do is the opposite: let's regard the interface as a kind of aesthetic experience wherein feedback with a commonly accessible object is possible. What we call the world around us, space, reality, is an object I presume we regard as such an object. By finding *Art of Memory* and *Voice Windows* in action together in the worlds of play and of discipline, of sight and sound, and of music and image, we see the nature of our interface to the world. We should realize this: an interface is more than the tools that it presents, is more than the model of actions predicated for those who use the tools. Engagement with a tool for knowledge of the world collects and redefines the model, the tool, and the world together in a reproduction of the body that inherits an important genealogy: all the ways we remake our world in order to know, to feel, however fleetingly, what we are within it. At minimum an interface both becomes the world it produces, only to destroy it; at best an interface is an act of love.

I imagine a hard nucleus surrounded by clouds of the upper air, I see an island, a mountain, I see an archipelago scattered in the midst of the clamorous sea, a jagged mass beneath the snow in the clouds. I imagine a set of distinct objects, pieces, sections of Babel, immersed in the confused murmur of tongues, walls penetrated or covered with viscous fury. I imagine the clear bathed in the confused, the distinct

overrun by the indistinguishable. I see flashes of unities amidst occulted multiplicities. I hear messages that rend the haze with the noise of their pointed and barbed overlap.

This, which I see and hear, which I imagine, is a theoretical and abstract landscape, a model of knowledge. And this, at the same time, is nothing other than the world.³

In one section of *Summer Salt*, Steina places a parabolic mirror on the camera and throws it around her body, capturing a warped version of the place of the body as that body produces the space around it. Here, the production of space starts in gesture, and goes inside out. The first gesture is one that precedes the production of this spatial world itself: it is that gesture which places the reflector in front of the camera lens. Then, it is a series of gestures which elaborate the world once its rule for production has been established: Steina plays with the camera as if it were a musical instrument of vision, and she accepts the accidents and distortions revealed in its movement with all the finesse of a concert master taming the chaotic vibrations of the violin. The sounds of the camera are just as important in the production of this spatial world as the images captured: as the camera bumps against the earth and her body, it makes grunts, more than anything reminiscent of the noises of bodily functions: burps, farts, swallows, gulps. Here she produces a world that coincides with the body of video. What is seen is the scene of seeing: reflected back onto the tape, the camera lens is a pupil, surrounded by the watery world of the cornea, in which Steina and the grass, trees, and sky which surround her are reflected.

And in *Voice Windows*, she captures the world with a soaring camera and filters it with the voices of singing birds, provided by her collaborator Joan La Barbara. La Barbara's warbles and melodies, her

³ Serres, Michel, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 127.

chatter and calls, have been electronically turned into a video matte using a frequency analysis. This matte is first keyed over a pure black, then over scenes of a city through which we are moving by car. Where the shapes of the frequency analysis is matted in, we can see through the background scene. What we see through the matte is a soaring aerial view of the desert, perhaps the natural habitat of this bird whose voice we see through. The city is backgrounded, then, as a musical foreground is filtered through it. The process at work in the matting of landscapes belongs to a practice of listening: the ear picks up many sounds at once, and only if their frequencies coincide does a nearer or louder sound mask a more distant or softer sound. The ear hears many landscapes at once, refusing to synthesize them into one on purpose, and for good reason: perceiving the differences between them is necessary to be able to move through them. What is seen, then, is two worlds at once, at least when the song is present. Song makes another world visible. And as the practice of listening is applied to the habit of seeing, we are moved not only through two different landscapes, but through two different senses. *Voice Windows* is an interface for navigating sight via sound.

Kaluli Tribe, poetics of weeping, becoming bird ✓

Production of Warped or Distorted Spaces, first around body

(Summer Salt), then through incomprehensible voice

Interface is when the apparatus of technological production becomes visible. The camera is visible, the world it sees is visible, we see the technological vision as well as the visionary technique. It becomes a question of not only perceiving but of tool-using. Or, the voice is made visible, using a technological analysis. Just as in a GUI: we see the "window" at the same time as we see what's in the window, and what holds the window. What Serres is describing, seeing the world at the same time as seeing the model of the world, this is the

moment of interface. (Applied backwards in time, some films become an interface to the cinema as a machine: Godard, Bunuel, Straub, other experimenters in form that make the cinematic apparatus or narrative system of the film visible. Greenaway, especially Greenaway, in *Drowning by Numbers*, or *The Pillow Book* each of these films offers an interface to itself.)

But what of our actions in these interfaces? They are interpretive, not gestural. Woody begins with the interpretive immersion of cinema and television. *Art of Memory*. Then he goes on to create installations that are physically immersive, and gesturally interactive. But we should understand the action of interpreting perceptions and memories that is basic to his interface: otherwise we might conclude it is a sort of tool, when it is a sort of emotional model and an emotional world that can tell us what our relationship to ourselves, our machines is like.

Conclusion:

Steina shows Steina shows us the nature of an interface; *Woody shows* Woody shows us how much we are inside it. *In looking at the Vasulkas' work* In looking at the Vasulkas' work in this way, *I'm trying to suggest that* I'm trying to suggest that interpretation, acting on a work of art, is at the base of interface and interaction. In this way, we can understand our bodies as the gestures that produce the models of the worlds we believe we live in. These worlds that we live in, to some degree, change in accordance with the models, but they also return to destroy the models we have formed. Understanding this we can avoid being destroyed ourselves, even as we let our models, our information, be swept away as a memory of so much rubble. To be sustained, to sustain in the face of this disappearing world: this is interface as an act of love in a time of destruction. This interface is

beyond the capacity of the computer; perhaps we will realize the computer is a part of our loving destruction. And then we can turn the machine off.