

Interview with Steina Vasulka

by Greg Weiss and Melody Sumner, for Crosswinds, In Santa Fe, November 1992

Born in Iceland in 1940, Steina attended the Music Conservatory in Prague in the early sixties, which is where she met Woody. Steina's relationship to her long-time partner is cooperative, but they have taken independent paths. Steina's relationship to her machines is both cerebral and highly sensual, evidencing her interest in a synthesis of spontaneity and control. Since the early seventies, images formed on motored mirrored spheres have played a significant part in her work and constitute one of her most significant innovations. These installations titled "Machine Vision" or "Allvision" involve two cameras moving in a circle around a spherical mirror which captures images of the viewers, the surrounding machinery, and the entire room including the playback of the machine's "vision" itself as displayed live on monitors.

Since moving to the southwest in 1980, Steina has produced The West, Geomania, Vocalizations, Ptolemy, and Tokyo Four (filmed during a recent fellowship commission in Japan). In their creation, these multi-screen installations engage a technique that comes closest to musical composition. And the effect on the viewer too is musical — one sits in front of a curved bank of monitors from which enveloping waves saturate one physically with sensation and sound. Steina and Nature seem to be acting in unison to compose and conduct the work. The West has been widely praised as "ecstatic," an "exhilarating tour-de-force." The work traces the efforts of humankind to alter and map the land — from cliff dwelling to radio telescope systems, and it uses an evocative technique in which the image drifts from screen to screen unimpeded by the discrete boundaries of the forty-eight monitors.

With characteristic wit and ingenuousness. Steina says of her recent works: "I moved here from New York because I wanted to experience what it is to live in the beauty. I did not want to think it was going to affect my images as much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it. First of all, the beauty of the West is so seductive. Secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take on God?" —M.S.

What did you do between the time you arrived in New York from Prague and when you started the Kitchen?

It was about five years, and five gorgeous years because to be in New York in this period, in the late sixties, was absolutely fantastic. We would just party a lot and drink and drug and all those things and suddenly the flower revolution was upon us and it meant going to Central Park and seeing sit-ins and be-ins and smoke-ins and all those things.

At that time we bought a magnetic audio reel-to-reel recorder that had sound-on-sound capacity so you could record first one track and then the other and then it had an echo between the two tracks. We would take microphones and speakers and investigate feedback and stuff, to see how controllable audio feedback was and then by mid-1969 we rambled into the first video.

When you saw the feedback what were you seeing? What did feedback seem like to you?

It was the energy. It was very cosmic. For me, it was like America. You see I never understood electricity. It comes out of the wall and makes things work. And this was the same thing. You were harnessing this energy of the camera and the monitor and making them into these bursts of light which video feedback is.

How did the Kitchen come into existence?

In 1971 we found this wonderful space with a friend of ours, just another empty loft that had been the kitchen of a sort of bar mitzvah place and hotel. We talked to the landlord and asked him if we fixed it up could have it for awhile and he said that we could and whenever we got money for rent we should pay. The space was really very beautiful. We had a lot of volunteer help and in June of '71 we opened it as the Kitchen and it immediately took off. We didn't much run it because it was sort of self-run. There were so many volunteers and whoever wanted to show there always got in. It was mostly used by musicians, mostly electronic and avant-garde musicians, and by the performance artists who weren't known as performance artists at the time and the rest of it was video.

When you were doing Machine Vision. . . what was the machine part of it?

I wanted to have moving images that were moved not by the musculature of the hands of an artist but moved in some kind of mechanical way. I was also after a vision that was not a human vision, that was not something that we conventionally see. Why repeat that? Our normal, average vision?

So you would put the camera in a place that it would take a picture of something but what it was you didn't really know?

Yeah, in my religion of this I could never change anything. If I was in my house and was doing the turntable idea and had forgotten to remove the chair. . . it was really stupid to have the chair there but at that point, religiously, I couldn't move the chair because that would be altering the scene.

What happened after "Machine Vision"?

Then we moved to Santa Fe. We didn't have any studio here to speak of, so I moved outside and said, "Okay, this is now my studio and it has an infinite high ceiling and it is blue with nice white clouds on it and the walls are invisible and it's all for the better." And that's when I started doing my landscape pieces. I did an installation called "The West." Since then, I've become more and more drawn into making installations, having multiple channels.

Do you see the videos as musical compositions?

Yes, but I usually compose it from the visual. I find visual material that matches or counterpoints, and then I work with soundtracks, rather than having the soundtracks ready and then put the video over it, although I have done that too.

So the idea is that music has two forms, one that you hear and one that you see?

Yes, I have no relationship to still images personally. I love them as a consumer, as a viewer but for me a painting and photography lack movement. I have my camera and I snapshot but it doesn't mean anything to me because it doesn't relate to the previous and the one after. It is of great importance to me to have the flow, the movement and that comes directly from music because music doesn't exist in a still. It's always the progression.

Your work revolves around cooperating, making, building the relationship between you, the machine and the image. What do you see in the machine that fascinates you?

I think it is the flow. It is the majestic orbits of the universe that everything works in streams, in orbits. Everything repeats in cycles and everything, in a way, is time-driven. So it is rather time than the machine per se as a result. I don't know where I got this fascination for machines. I didn't have it in my childhood. I'm not one of those who had that workshop in the basement, but I remember discovering those things like gears and DC motors as some kind of a great mystery and a miraculous

thing and I find it very close to life. A mechanistic replication of the biological mystery.

Can you describe the process you go through to create?

It's a very interesting question because I wake up in the middle of the night and ask myself what I'm going to do and why I think that this is of interest even to me, much less to anybody else. Of course, you know in moments of self doubt you have absolutely no idea what you are doing. But then once you start doing it, you have this conviction that this is completely the right thing to do and everybody must see it that way. You're put into this hysteria that if you tape something in Japan and put it up in four screens that the whole world is going to just be at your foot steps. It's so important that you do it and you fall into this particular state of mind, this kind of creative contemplative state where time flies and you feel very good about yourself. Then comes the moment of truth when you show it to all the people and they say, "So what!" And you say, "Yeah, you're actually right. So what." That's how you compensate for this disappointment and then you look at it again a little later and then you say, "But it is still a good work. I still do like it." You like the work and it doesn't matter that the world doesn't. It has nothing to do with it. And I think that a lot of artists work this way. From one work to the next. And every time they are absolutely convinced that now they've got the masterpiece.

When you review a piece of your work and decide you like it, what qualities does it have?

I don't suffer looking at it. First you go through the period where you do it and you put it together and you know what you are after and then you have the audience with you, looking at the work and you see it through their eyes instead of your own and you suffer tremendously but you say, "Now, they are thinking this is too long and they are looking at that part and saying 'If she only had . . .'" And so you edit in front of the audience. Then I go back usually and I revise the work and look at it again with the audience and I like it. That's the criteria. Look at it as though it were somebody else's. Basically, you take the ego out of it but then once you take the ego out of it, it either stands or it doesn't. And if it doesn't then you revise it.

What role does fun play in the creative process for you?

A great role. A big role. It's all play and people accuse me of that. They say, "But you are just playing" as though it were bad and I'm very proud of that because I think that is a primary function of human beings. You see it in children; they don't know any better than to play but eventually you unlearn the playing. A lot of adults

unlearn it and stop playing and then they even think that there is something wrong with playing. That it's sinful or something. I can't remember any art that doesn't have that sense of play however serious its mission is.

Would you say that's what you pay most attention to when you're working?

It always starts with me trying to be, you know, mind over matter, you know me trying to impose my divine vision onto the machine and when I succeed I always come home with the trivia because my mind isn't that interesting. But if I decide to have matter over mind and keep this dialogue open, I can get quite interesting, paradoxical images that I will then be able to use in my work. The motivation is always to do your vision and then it's a matter of compromise and the more you compromise the luckier you get. That's my rule. — G.W.