



# FIELD OF VISION No. 13, Spring 1985

Steina's  
Somersault

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## STEINA AND PTOLEMY

By Robert Haller

*Switch! Monitor! Drift!* is a videotape Steina made in 1976. It is part of her Machine Vision series—a group of tapes and installations that questions our assumptions of point of view, “our” visual spectrum, our sense of where we are in terms of what we see. Steina shows the tape rarely, apparently believing it to be too specialized or too long (at fifty minutes it is almost twice as long as any of her other tapes).

In the title of *Switch! Monitor! Drift!* we can see the first clue to her method. Each word has a double aspect: as a noun and as a verb. The exclamation points emphasize the verbal tendency, but also imply, by their profusion, an irony that leads one to question their absolute meaning.

Three sections of the tape exemplify the method that infuses the whole work. Early in the tape, following a mysterious series of 360 degree pans through the Vasulka's equipment cluttered work space, Steina appears with a violin in her hands. She proceeds to play it, and as the tone changes with each different position of the bow, so the video image changes—flip-flopping (to use Steina's words) back and forth between two cameras. Watching the image “played,” we deduce that the bow positions control the image. Yet later in the tape, when the image is again “played,” again with the sound-track changing with each flip-flop, one wonders if the sound is controlling the image, or the reverse. The sound might be the image, read on a different kind of machine (an approach already performed by colleague Tony Conrad in his film *Boolean Algebra*). Equally, the sound may be controlling the image, and might even be from the violin: because the image is so slowed that we can see the scans, and the sound is very base, the sound might be a “slowed down” violin.

How the tape was “shot” is another example of Steina's method. Not until the second half of the work do we see the machine that has been used to photograph so much of it. All of the imagery was double-exposed, either two alternating images on a switching device or two images in one frame, with a mat used to obscure one and reveal the other. The relation of the two cameras is not made clear until the moment when we see both, each rotating on its axis, both also atop another rotating platform—and both turning within slotted concave half-mirrors. Accelerating, slowing, then accelerating again, the apparent camera motion suggests the epicyclic movements of the planets in Ptolemy's classical cosmology. The confusion could be impenetrable were it not for Steina's intervention when she thrusts her hand into the frame to throw switches on the mechanism. She does so from the direction of the spectator, but she also does so only moments after we have seen her image facing us. It is at this point that the existence of the slotted concave mirrors becomes clear, and soon after that we can deduce the nature of the machine (although we never see it whole).

To so challenge the viewer (to move him from the position of Ptolemy to that of Copernicus!) is remarkable. A more remarkable set of images can be found in the brief sequences when Steina provides us with the only close-up images of her face in the tape. Multiplied and “rippling” across the screen, as if on the surface of an electric liquid, Steina's face appears seen slightly from below. After a few seconds it becomes recognizable, attentively serious, looking out of the screen in our direction. Suddenly from the right edge of the screen a form intrudes, a form that is Steina's silhouette. From the left edge another form appears, a video camera pointed toward the opposite face. The image stands like a kind of signature, and then is transformed by the recognition that in silhouette we can see how the image that is facing us was made; whether the images in silhouette are the source of

the background image is not that important—they could be. What is important is the sense one also gets from looking at Nam June Paik's Video Buddha (who contemplates a video camera pointing at himself): video as a mirror that permits us to better see ourselves.

Machine Vision is a series of tapes made by Steina between 1975 and 1977, and the 1978 installation Allvision. The five tapes are:

*From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda* (1975) 36 minutes, color  
*Signifying Nothing* (1975) 15 minutes, b/w  
*Sound and Fury* (1975) 15 minutes, b/w  
*Switch! Monitor! Drift!* (1975) 50 minutes, b/w  
*Snowed Tapes* (1977) 15 minutes, b/w

## STEINA'S SOMERSAULT

By Amy Greenfield

Steina's *Somersault* is an extension of her Machine Vision tapes, a series which began in 1975, while she was living in Buffalo, N.Y. Her machines extend and activate the video camera so that what the camera sees—the world—becomes reflected, re-activated, re-energized, magically re-designed. What the camera-machine sees becomes its world. And since the material for this world is also her world, her move from Buffalo to New Mexico has very much influenced her machines' vision.

*Somersault* is part of three tapes taken in the immediate environment outside of her house. The visual brightness and colorfulness, the sunlight and the physical freedom possible in the New Mexico outdoors are very much a part of the art of these tapes.

But *Somersault* is singular in this series. It centers around herself. Or rather, her machine image. It centers around the black eye of the camera lens itself, with her image revolving, somersaulting, gyrating, splitting, jumping—around this center. It is also different from the 1970s Machine Vision tapes, because she is controlling the movements of the camera with her own body.

When the tape begins, we see the black eye of the lens, the middle of the screen, pointed directly at us. Around the eye is a circle of light. This light begins to move, and we see a woman behind the lens, in what seems to be a fish-eye or fish-bowl, which distorts her body and motions in extreme ways. Throughout the tape, she moves madly around and behind, over and under the lens, caught and yet freed in this fish-eye world which can be turned topsy-turvy, landing her on her head, feet upward, then turned right-side up with miraculous ease. Or, she steps over the lens and, like a gigantic Jolly Green Giant, jumps/stomps on either side of it. Sometimes, quite often, her image and the lens collide violently. The violence orchestrated by the sound of the collision. At one point, the lens splits her body in two as she disintegrates, to either side, and then slides together again.

All during this mad dance, with her careening in impossible ways, the lens is immobile, staring out at us from the center of the screen. The lens looks at us, but seems to see her (she is behind the lens). We know that the lens can “see” her, because we can see a tiny reflection of the video image moving inside the eye of the lens. The illusion is a mystery. What's really happening? How is it done?

To make *Somersault* Steina attached a glass tube, two inches in diameter, to her video camera's lens, so that it extended straight out from the lens. At the end of the glass tube she attached a convex mirror, shaped like the narrow end of

CROSS REFERENCE w/ PTOLEMY