

The background is a monochromatic blue with a grainy, textured appearance. A dark, almost black, irregular shape is positioned on the left side, extending towards the center. The overall effect is that of a close-up of a rough, crystalline surface.

S T E I N A

STEINA: INVOLVING PEOPLE INTO THIS MAGIC

Burchfield Penney Art Center At Buffalo State College

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James Carey Evans Endowment and the Institute of Electronic Arts, Alfred University.

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The Burchfield Penney Art Center is proud to present this exhibition and subsequent programs in recognition of the significant contribution Steina has made to the cultural and intellectual life in Western New York. On behalf of the Board of Trustees and staff of the Burchfield Penney, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to the organizations and individuals who contributed to the production and presentation of this exhibition. It is with great pride that we recognize our lead sponsor Cannon Design Inc. Their vision and commitment to the artistic community is most commendable, and we look forward to continued partnerships in our shared desire to enrich the quality of life in Western New York. In the same manner, we also thank the National Endowment for the Arts for their support of programming activities and publication. Special thanks to Peer Bode and Andrew Deutsch from the Institute of Electronic Arts at Alfred University for their collaborative spirit. Their willingness to share their knowledge and assistance in the planning and preparation of this undertaking was invaluable. We were most fortunate to have several individuals who have embraced Steina's work for years, and contributed essays and interviews for our web site and publication. For these efforts we are indebted to writers John Minkowsky, Chris Hill, and Gerald O'Grady. Our appreciation extends to the many artists who, recognizing the significance of this venture, worked tirelessly on our behalf throughout the course of this endeavor. These artists include Brian Milbrand, Tom Kostuziak, Allan Powell, Brad Wales, The Carrier Band and the Reactionary Ensemble. Special thanks to Buffalo State College, most notably Dr. Stanley Kardonsky for his encouragement and support as we moved through, at times, a most tenuous process. Also, thanks to Kris Kaufman from Buffalo State College for all his assistance in helping us to establish a comfortable environment. Finally, and most personally I would like to thank the entire staff of the Burchfield Penney Art Center whose commitment to excellence is both humbling and inspiring. It is a great honor to be associated with this most admirable community.

**Don Metz, Associate Director
Burchfield Penney Art Center**



I N V O L V I N G P E O P L E I N T O T H I S M A G I C

By Don Metz

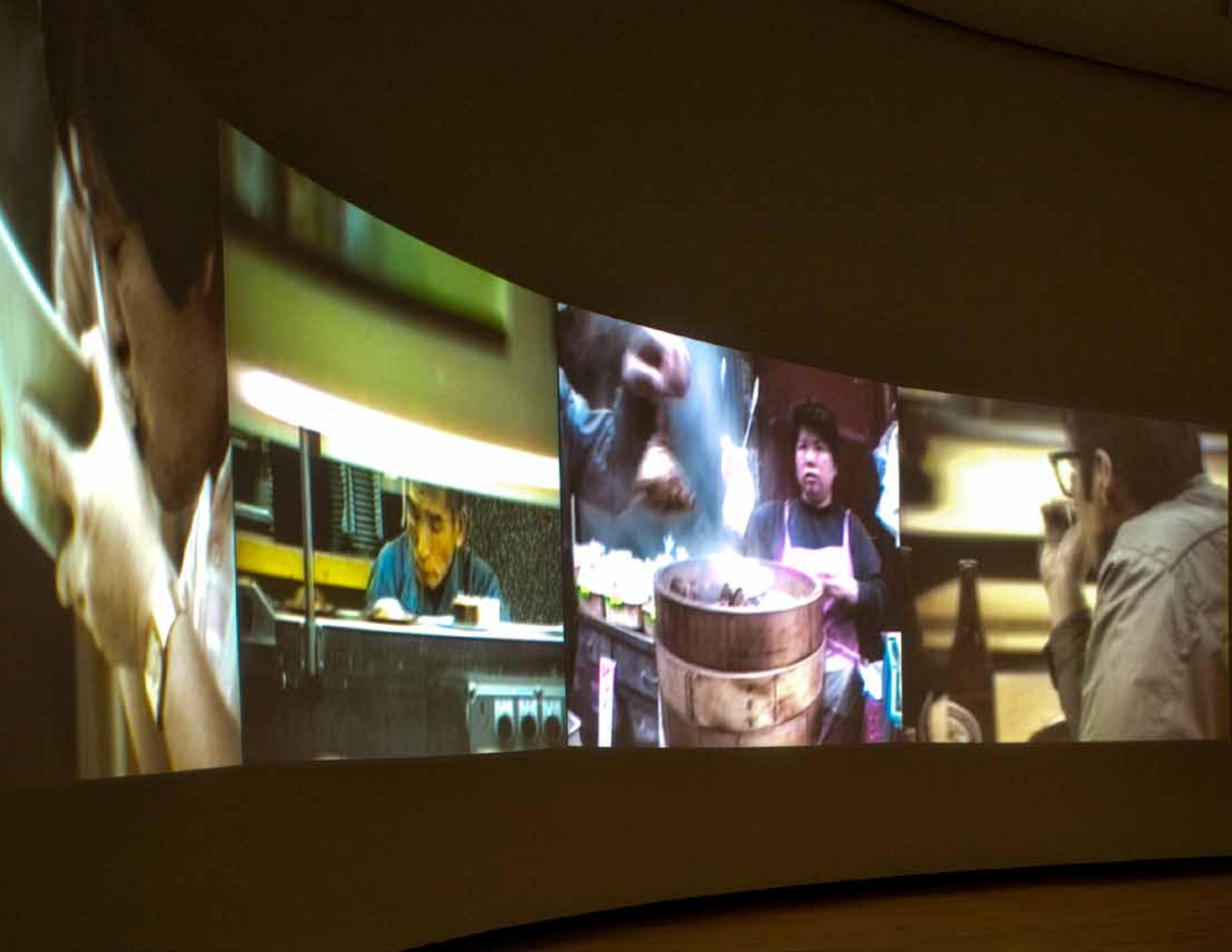
Buffalo, New York — 2011

Steina's love affair with art began as a young girl growing up in Reykjavik, Iceland. She began playing violin and attended every concert, play, opera and gallery she could. In 1959 she received a scholarship from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture to attend the State Music Conservatory in Prague. While studying in Prague, she met Woody Vasulka and the couple married in 1964. In 1965 they moved to New York City where Steina worked as a freelance musician and Woody worked as filmmaker. Through his film contacts, Woody came across video in 1969. Of that discovery Steina states: *Both our lives were changed forever. Woody introduced me to his new discovery – what a rush! It was like falling in love; I never looked back. As soon as I had a video camera in my hand – as soon as I had that majestic flow of time in my control – I knew I had my medium.*

For the Vasulkas, in the early days of video, everything was an installation or an environment. Their environments consisted of involving “live camera or live switching of tapes.” They used multiple screens that were typically stacks of monitors and several tape players

and they created machines to let cameras find images that humans could not. With the development of video projectors and computer imagery, these environments expanded the exploration of transforming image and sound to larger more diverse settings. In addition, it gave artists additional screening surfaces on which to present their work. Moving from monitors, to film screens, to translucent surfaces, to walls of various skins. In many ways, this exhibition deals with assorted mediated surfaces, that examines a variety of viewing opportunities while experiencing video installations. Surfaces consisting of black and white video monitors, color video monitors, and high definition video projections that can be projected on wall surfaces, video projection screens, and transparent video screens.

Steina's work is a magical aural and optical journey, carefully formulated through the use of counterpoint between sound and image that uses surveillance, engineering, and physics to capture and present compositions of extreme complexity into environments of compelling beauty.



STEINA : A BRIEF OVERVIEW

By John Minkowsky

Cambridge, Massachusetts — 2011

Throughout most of her solo career, Steina has used a combination of electronic techniques and optical tools of her own devising to transfigure camera images of the external world. The larger number of these images have been of nature—rushing water, arid and rocky terrain, fire, and arboreal scenes, as in *Flux*, *Selected Treecuts*, *Mynd*, *Borealis* and *Lava and Moss*—but not to the total exclusion of artisanal processes and industrial products, of the cityscapes of Minneapolis and Tokyo, or of her in-studio experiments and their documentation. Her single-channel tape and multi-channel installation work is formidable in its scope and variety, and all of it stamped with a distinctive style.

Steina's earliest work in video was done between 1969 and 1974 in close collaboration with her husband, Woody Vasulka. Their artistic partnership was an exploration of the primal power of the electronic signal to create and transform image and sound, in the process of which they developed a number of new video instruments and techniques. Taking that experience and combining it with other

interests, Steina broadened the scope of her work, especially in the employment of the video camera as a fundamental means of image gathering. She would henceforth be known solely by her forename.

In 1978, Steina exhibited an environment of five freestanding installations collectively entitled "Machine Vision" as part of the VASULKA/STEINA/MACHINE VISIO/WOODY/DESCRIPTIONS show at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. These largely static-camera pieces, with various mobile devices on which the lenses are focused, have been descriptively referred to as: "Tilt," which makes use of a motorized pivoting mirror to scan the space vertically; "Pan," a complementary treatment of horizontal surveillance by way of another moving mirror; "Rotation" and "Double Rotation," which employ, respectively, a prism and a mirror to visualize the space through complete turnabouts along either one axis or two; and "Allvision," in which a revolving armature with a camera affixed at each end focusing on a mirrored sphere in the center presents a 360° view of the entire space in which it is installed.

The Burchfield Penney show includes two more recent “Machine Vision” pieces: “Zoom,” with an automated lens repeatedly moving from wide angle to close up and back; and “Bird’s Eye,” wherein the camera gazes at an overhead hemispheric mirror to display a view of the entire ensemble of installations from above. All of these instruments perform independently of manual intervention and are examples of what Steina herself considers her “rebellion against the hegemony of the human point of view.” That the “Machine Vision” works, with their specialized electro-opto-mechanical apparatuses, are still exhibited more than three decades after their inception, with no diminution of power to engage, is a testament to their significance. Moreover, many of the techniques have become part of Steina’s vocabulary, and the mechanisms employed have been incorporated into other pieces, such as *Urban Episodes*, *Summer Salt* and *Ptolemy*.

Steina’s musical training as a classical violinist informs all of her work with a masterful sense of rhythm, counterpoint and pacing, along with a continuing interest in the way sound can trigger changes in the image, and vice versa. This last has led her to collaborations with artists of extended vocal techniques, Joan La Barbara: *Vocaquad* (1990) and *Voice Windows* (1987) and Trevor Wishart: *Trevor* (2000), and the media artist and composer/performer Tony Conrad (*Music in the Afternoon* (2002)). She is well known for her *Violin Power* (1978–present), both a tape and an ongoing series of performances, in which the interaction of the bow and the strings modifies her live and pre-recorded representation.

Steina is a performer in non-musical contexts as well. *Orbital Obsessions* (1977) exhaustively explores the ways the artist can

integrate her presence with a camera on a rotating platform. In “Somersault,” the centerpiece of her engaging quintet of episodes, *Summer Salt* (1982), her movements about and with a camera, bearing a hemispheric mirrored lens attachment, creates a fisheye-like distortion of her own image, the result akin to a playful, eccentric dance in a funhouse. (Later, she would create the analogous, but electronically induced, sequence of physical contortions in the videotape *Warp* (1994). She would also develop, in a similar vein, the audience-interactive projection installation, *Bent Scans* (2002), in which live cameras capture and transform the viewer’s image; a new and particularly elegant version of this work is included in the Burchfield Penney show.) In a brief companion document, *The Making of Somersault* (1982), Steina demystifies the means of her achievement, as she had also done for the elaborate techno-optical instrument used in the production of *Urban Episodes* (1980) and for the Vasulka Digital Image Articulator in *Cantaloup* (1980).

It is a rare occasion, such as the Burchfield Penney Art Center now provides, that one can actually contemplate more than one or two of Steina’s installation pieces at any given time, and the current exhibition should be a cause for celebration. (No complete retrospective of her work, to my knowledge, has yet to be attempted.)

Since “Machine Vision,” Steina’s series of synchronized multi-channel large-scale works have been as visually arresting as they are formally rigorous and complex, employing a wide range of analog and digital effects and presentational modes. A few, like *The West* (1983), a two-video/four-audio channel piece that

takes as image source the landscape of New Mexico – from vestiges of earlier civilizations to the VLA (Very Large Array) radio telescope towers – are designed for multi-monitor matrix displays. In *The West*, the addition of subdued electronic color, which heightens and makes otherworldly the sublime beauty of the desert prospect, along with the employment of the mirrored sphere to alter the accustomed perspectival vantage and the use of horizontal panning to introduce the sensation of the image's fluent lateral glide from one monitor to the next, are all in play upon the phenomenal world. As regards the varieties of display, *The West* has been shown, as examples, as a large ring of TVs encircling the viewer; as numerous sets arrayed in a graceful two-layered horizontal arc; and as a 21 monitor, six-tiered pyramid.

Tokyo Four (1991), a four-video/four-audio channel projection work is in many ways the culmination of Steina's six month residency in Tokyo in 1988 made possible by a U.S./Japan Friendship Committee grant. During that time she recorded images that later resulted in two videotapes, *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* (1990) and *A So Desu Ka* (1994), works that offer a rapid scan of various traditional and contemporary rituals; nature, sculpture and architecture within the metropolis; further details of a bustling city with its workers, shoppers, markets and the like; and the performance of an experimental dance ensemble. The two tapes are very different in form and effect, making use of rapid zooming and cutting, chromakey, synthetic color, flip-flop switching, the division of the screen into quadrants to explore time delay as a kind of visual counterpoint, and other means. Much of the material used in these tapes made its way into *Tokyo Four*, combined with additional

footage shot at the same time, to create a tour de force of complex polyrhythmic structuring that Gene Youngblood has called "the audio-visual equivalent of a string quartet." It is panoramic and many-sectioned, with each segment defined by a particular visual motif, be it the arrangement of a Zen garden, the preparation and consumption of meals in a restaurant, aisles of colorful flower-shaped pinwheels, the aforementioned elevator girls – a now-defunct modern ritual – or the avant-garde dancers. In each of these instances, Steina plays – in the best sense – with the interrelationship of the materials seen on the large displays, and in the process, creates a more inclusive portrait of the activities and environs of the teeming city.

Pyroglyphs (1995), a three-video/three-audio channel projection installation, observes the metalsmith Tom Joyce as he works shaping his materials by means of fire. His procedures are meticulously documented by Steina, who at times makes use of slow motion to further emphasize not only the precision of the craft but also the flames, water, ash and smoke that accompany such activity. Regarding the attendant audio, as described in the catalogue for her 2008 exhibition at SITE SantaFe, "Steina processed the sounds of blowtorches, flames, and hammering metal through a digital device that allowed her to 'move' the sounds into unlikely rhythms." These strategic means permitted the creation of an audio score that is as potent as its visual counterpart, and her invocation of the four basic elements makes this, perhaps, her most physically affecting installation.

Mynd (2000) is a splendid six-channel video/audio projection which depicts the artist's homeland subtly altered through sophisticated

techniques. “Mynd” is Icelandic for image, picture, illustration or photograph; in the cognate language, Old English, it suggested memory. There are four distinct sections to the overall work, each defined by a different aspect of this natural environment (including the sea and pastures with horses), and the images in each section, transformed with consummate care via digital effects, are closely interrelated, varying in rhythm, direction, and other features. At times, their delicate rendering is almost painterly, with droplets of water in slow motion suggestive of finely executed brushstrokes. In the past, the six projection screens have been set contiguously along a single wall, or alternately placed in various arrangements throughout the given space.

Borealis (1993), a two-video/four-audio channel projected piece comprised of scenes of rushing water, similarly reconfigures its exhibition space by the distinctive placement of its video screens so that the viewer can move freely among them, creating his or her own sensory experience of surge and flux.

As water has been one of the most common visual motifs in her oeuvre, and as the waveform of the video signal was the material of her earliest electronic explorations, so, too, Steina’s approach has been fluid when it comes to exhibiting her installations, an aspect that distinguishes her from nearly all other video artists. While their basic image content remains constant, each new realization of these pieces becomes an opportunity to engage in a different relationship to and sense of participation in the image flow.



I N T E R V I E W W I T H S T E I N A

By Chris Hill

Santa Fe, New Mexico — May 1995

Hill: Your descriptions of the situation in New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s are especially important and valuable...

Steina: People grouped together, formed tribes so to speak, in order to afford the video equipment. They had to pool equipment; it was a tremendous expense. I don't know what the portapak (½ inch open reel video recorder, cabled to black & white camera with built in microphone) cost, but \$1000 was worth a lot more than it is now, so it was substantial. Everybody got into this endless thing—that they bought the portapak and then they needed a VTR (Video Tape Recorder) and then they needed to edit. Editing, for the first year or so, was mostly done with razor blades. The other reason for coming together was that NYSCA (New York State Council on the Arts) could not give money to individuals. They realized that this was a big problem, because it is the individuals that make the art, not the institutions. So they set up CAPS (Creative Artist Public Service Program). These were the 1960s and 1970s, and the outlook on art was totally different. First of all, there was a celebration of individual

creativity and distaste for institutions. It went together with—well, don't trust anybody over 30. To get money from NYSCA you had to be a formal entity, a non-profit organization. These production groups and collectives—like People's Video Theater and the Videofreex and Raindance and Global Village—all became non-profit organizations.

Hill: So probably by 1971, when NYSCA first started funding video projects, they turned themselves into non-profit organizations?

Steina: Actually, the first grant to be given to the video “tribes” was to come from the Jewish Museum. For some reason, the Jewish Museum, as a non-profit organization, was going to receive a large NYSCA grant and allocate it out to the tribes. Russell Connor was the NYSCA staff member responsible for video. He had been hired by Ken Dewey, who was actually the instigator, because he decided before anybody else that video was art and should be funded. NYSCA was the first council in the nation, two

or three years before the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), to acknowledge video as an art medium. Then Russell Connor ran around both New York City and upstate New York instructing people to incorporate, because that way they could receive funding. He contacted Ralph Hocking, who was already active at that time. Hocking had been in touch with Nam June Paik, who was building a colorizer with Shuya Abe. It was the beginning of the ETC (Experimental Television Center) in Binghamton.

NYSCA also advised Howard Wise to get out of the gallery business and incorporate as EAI (Electronic Arts Intermix). Eric Siegel was a protégé of Howard Wise Gallery, so when Howard asked him who else he wanted in his group, Eric chose us. Like us, he understood that it was about the tools, the magic, the signal. Eric suggested the term “Perception” for us. When the Kitchen became its own sub-program of Electronic Arts Intermix a year later, the Perception group was reorganized. Eric Siegel remained and was joined by Ira Schneider, Beryl Korot, Juan Downey and Frank Gillette. This idea of the tribes was totally supported by the New York State Council, which even suggested to groups that they move upstate so they could receive NYSCA money. The State Council had this way of sending people to their destiny, because of the political problem of dishing out too many grants in New York City.

Hill: They have always been very directive, so it is not surprising. It’s interesting how these institutions became structured.

Steina: I thought it was so wrong to mix arts and politics this way, but historically it turned out great, especially upstate.

Hill: The Kitchen was started by you and Woody. Were you working with anyone else to start the Kitchen?

Steina: The third person was Andy Mannik. He had worked a lot with Merce Cunningham as a stagehand, carpenter, this and that. He was passionately interested in dance, so he saw The Kitchen as a performance/dance space. He not only co-founded it, he physically found it. He dragged us to this location and said “look at this space” and that was it!

Hill: Where did the idea of the space come from? I know that Woody talks about the Kitchen being called LATL for “Live Audience Testing Lab.” Was this a thoroughly American model? Was there any European model that you were thinking about?

Steina: Even if you justify it by saying we wanted a space outside our home because our place was getting too crowded and people were there late at night...that wasn’t really the reason. The reason was much more innocent. We saw the space that became the Kitchen and fell in love with it. Andy brought us up to the space and said—how do you like this space? At that time we were dragging monitors from one place to another in those big checker cabs. The monitors were big, but we could fit up to four in a checker, and we just did it. We were wishing under our breath that we would have a permanent home for the equipment and to be able to showcase our work...but we were willing to drag along in this kind of a difficult New York City life. Andy saw one of those events and thought we ought to have some kind of a base.

Hill: What kinds of performances were you doing at the time?

Steina: Before we had the Kitchen we would arrange to get spaces like Judson Church or the WBAI Free Music Store. We would set up as many monitors as we could borrow in a long row, and then let the images drift from one monitor to the next. The audio was mostly video driven synthesized sounds. Because of the era, and I mean the flower power era, people just sat there and watched for hours. They didn't care; they would sit cross-legged or lie on the floor, some would rock back and forth. There would be a fair amount of marijuana smoke in the air. It was casual. It wasn't like now where you have to come on time and pay money.

Hill: What was unique about the Kitchen?

Steina: The Kitchen had a friendly atmosphere; the place itself had very good vibes. We usually welcomed everybody at the door. I sometimes joke that I lost interest in the Kitchen when I could no longer shake hands with every member of the audience. People were a part of it. Out in the lobby there was an extraordinarily popular feature—a bar. People could start in the bar and drift into the Kitchen, or more likely, when the performance was too boring, they could drift out into the bar. I remember once there was a pretty long, minimal performance, and everybody eventually left. But they didn't go home; they went to the bar. Finally the artist himself entered the bar and everybody applauded wildly.

Hill: Did you and Woody live there?

Steina: No. It was a theater complex, a converted hotel lobby with

ballrooms. Our place was indeed the kitchen and the place where bar mitzvahs were held in this former hotel. Most of the complex had been converted into theaters or actors' studios, and different kinds of places like that. They were all fairly experimental. They all shared the bar in the intermissions; it was lively.

Hill: So there were people going into the other theaters for things as well. How did Paik work with the Kitchen? It seems that he was very close to what was going on at the Kitchen at this time. Is that right?

Steina: Nam June lived down the street from the Kitchen. He would casually drift over in his house slippers with several scarves wrapped over his belly. He just had a way of brightening up the space, entering with this triumphant smile. Then he would promptly fall asleep, and at the end of the show he would walk over to the presenting artist and say: "Young man, I think you are a genius."

Hill: So it was kind of like a performance?

Steina: Yes. Then he oftentimes performed, tried out things. Actually, when he had his events, the crowds came, the Madison Avenue type people, with their skins and pelts and pearls and high heels. It was a strangely different kind of crowd.

Hill: He was already well known. He himself would attract a crowd.

Steina: He was in the art world. He was starting to get a name in the gallery world.

Hill: Who do you think your audience was at the Kitchen? Video was one day of the week and dance and music had other days. It sounds like people had shared or similar projects, and would come to the Kitchen because you or others might be working with similar ideas. So was it a group of mostly artists?

Steina: Yes. The music program was fairly separate. It was the most successful, and the success came partially because there were two young energetic reviewers: Tom Johnson for *The Village Voice* and John Rockwell for *The New York Times*. The musicians who had worked so hard for no money, at least got rewarded with those reviews. Video was rarely written about – except by Jonas Mekas who basically hated everything he saw, but he did write though. When the directorship of the Kitchen changed hands in 1973, priorities changed. The crowd that would experiment with the audience was left out homeless, I think, for about a year. And this is where Jonas Mekas is so intriguing. Of all people, it would be him, who under the curatorship of Shigeko Kubota, would let the video experimenters into his precious Anthology Film Archives.

On Fridays or Saturdays there would be live performances, often live synthesis of video and audio. The people involved with that included a guy named Walter Wright who just loved to do live synthesis with actors and have the music drive the video or vice versa. There would be an incredible pooling of instruments, people brought in yet another keyboard, another synthesizer, more cameras.

Hill: What you are describing has a lot to do with basic generosity too. Do you think that the fact that you weren't getting a lot of attention in

the press had something to do with it, or do you think it had something to do also with the non-capitalist, the non-product oriented ideas of the times. What was the basis for this kind of sharing and openness?

Steina: That was the times. It was everywhere, sharing equipment— mutual favors. And everybody was always sending you to meet someone you ought to meet because they could help you. New York was a very friendly place in those years and the idea of sharing and pooling and using instruments and hooking them together—it was all in the footprints. Yet it was at the same time, the police was running around arresting people for having long hair, all the paranoia of the Nixon years. Video was totally spontaneous, it wasn't yet a medium. It wasn't acknowledged. No writer had a vocabulary. The journalists were scared of it – stayed mostly away.

Hill: Tony Conrad talks about the underground film scene. Was this completely separate from what you were doing? Was there any relationship at all?

Steina: Almost none. Only people like Tony came over. And Tony came, I think because he knew Rhys Chatham, or Rhys knew him, and so it was the music connection that brought him over. Then he said he wanted to show this film. For us it was no problem to set up a projector instead of a monitor. Woody had always been interested in film, but it was much later that other filmmakers became interested. We were just on the verge of establishing an underground, independent movie showcase. But then we split for Buffalo, and really became interested in the film scene through Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits.

Hill: Do you want to say anything about the *Women's Video Festival* and what you think was going on at that time? Do you remember having discussions about what you were going to include?

Steina: I will tell you the story. In 1971 San Francisco did something called *The Tapes of the Tribes* at the same time as we did the first Video Festival in the Kitchen. When we started preparing to make this festival, we did not know of each other. So of course, Skip Sweeney and Arthur Ginsberg were in our show, and we were in their show, and we thought it was all funny and hilarious that it was happening at the same time. But there was a remarkable lack of women participating in both festivals. I especially thought that this was a paradox, considering that almost half of the video makers were women, very active women, very interesting women. They were aggressive and active with video, but when it came to the festivals, they were nowhere. That's why I talked Susan and Shridhar into helping me make some kind of justice.

Hill: So you think that half of the people who were working with video at the time were women?

Steina: There were a lot of women working with video in the early seventies, far more than in film. Maybe because video was so unglamorous, so low resolution, viewable only on small black and white monitors. In our *Women's Video Festival* that I subsequently organized in the Kitchen with Susan Milano and Shridhar Bapat, the women indeed came up with excellent tapes. One was *Always Love Your Man* by Cara DeVito, about how her own grandmother coped with her grandfather's abuse. You were being introduced to

works seen from a female point of view. The rape tape—four women talking about being raped. They sat in a circle taking turns holding the camera. These were just four horrible stories, told with this kind of intimacy. I liked the format; the cameraperson was not somebody on the outside looking in.

Next year when I arrived in Buffalo a women's film festival had been planned. We changed the title to the *Women's Film and Video Festival*. I suggested a lot of the tapes from our *Women's Video Festival*. There were just as many men as there were women in the audience. They were all there, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton. Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow's wife, had a piece in it, so they both came from Toronto. Shirley Clarke came up from New York.

Hill: Did Shirley Clarke ever use the Kitchen?

Steina: Oh yes. But she didn't really want to show tapes. She always wanted to show the process. She wanted to have everything live, live cameras. Her real contribution to the Kitchen, right on the opening night party, was to suggest that we should have an open house for showing new works. Following her suggestion we organized the open *Wednesday nights*, where the makers sometimes brought tapes so fresh that they had not had an opportunity to play them through themselves. They would arrive breathless at say nine o'clock wondering if there was still time to show this world premiere. And there was another festival that we started at the Kitchen in 1972. It was the *First Annual Computer Festival*. I thought it was funny to call it a "first annual" before you had a second, which we then consequently had. It was a very enthusiastic group; a lot of them

were from Bell Labs. There was a lot of music, computer music and experimental films, early computer animations.

Hill: I was talking with Bob Devine about this time, 1968–1970. He said that they were doing electronic media in Antioch College completely independent from what was going on in New York. They didn't even know what was going on in New York until *Radical Software* started publishing in 1971. They already had a community media center at Antioch in 1966.

Steina: Then they must have had 1-inch machines.

Hill: They did; in fact, they had 2 inch machines. It was before the portapak (½ inch open reel video recorders cabled to a black & white camera with a built in microphone). Could you talk about what that period of 1968–1971 was like before the Kitchen? One of the things I remember Rhys Chatham saying a few years ago was that during this period, everybody lived in Manhattan because the real estate was so cheap. People sort of naturally bumped into one another frequently, and that was very different from what happened later, in the 1980s, when the real estate started getting so expensive, and everybody had to spread out to cheaper rent areas, and rehearsal and work space became more expensive.

Steina: Soho was a true village. We were all in walking distance from each other. For me, personally, video started by walking into Howard Wise's Gallery. It was July or August, 1969. I don't trust people who say that the history is much older. Skip Sweeney was early because he had a portapak already in 1968. Then in 1969 came

the Howard Wise Gallery show, *TV as a Creative Medium*. It was on 57th Street. I remember, you went up an elevator, and as you stepped out, the first thing you saw was *Wipe Cycle* by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette. You would stand, a little confused, in the hallway and wonder what is going on? And then you saw yourself walking out of the elevator. I had already seen an instant playback but this one was on a delay-loop.

Hill: But were you already working with the portapak at that time?

Steina: Woody was, because he was working at Harvey Lloyd's studio. They were doing multi-screen projections for film, and he just realized that video was a much more natural multi-screen medium. He talked Harvey into buying some Sony equipment, and then we started hanging around after studio hours, watching feedback, watching ourselves and all the things you do with video when you first discover it.

Hill: So when was the material shot that is included in your tape, *Participation*, 1968 or 1969?

Steina: The first piece in it is actually something like the Jethro Tull performance which was in 1969. Woody started taking the portapak out in late 1969. I count my first tape as having been made on January 1, 1970, where I really held the camera and made my first tape. I was watching video through Woody's eyes for a half year before that... We were inviting people to come into the studio and do experiments, and that's how we got involved with Rhys Chatham. Woody wanted to see if video synthesis was like audio synthesis.

Hill: So you got to know Rhys through that, and later you both worked at the Kitchen?

Steina: Rhys was an incredibly polite teenager. In the beginning we said to him that he should be the music director at the Kitchen, and the only thing he did was to play himself and to invite Lori Spiegel to play with him, week after week. And after awhile we suggested that he call LaMonte Young. We urged him to call him and say that you have a place for him but it's for free and he's not going to get any pay. So he calls LaMonte and LaMonte was immediately very interested. Of course he said he could only do this free of charge if he made it a premiere of his new record. So he set up this whole ceremony and (Marian) Zazeela came and showed all of her slides, and the Kitchen was overfilled with people because he had a real following. So after LaMonte had been there everybody wanted to be there, and Rhys didn't have any problems calling anybody.

Hill: And you were interested in LaMonte Young's music at that time?

Steina: Yes, he changed our minds. That was that same fall, 1969. He gave a big concert at NYU in a big hall. We walked into the hall late, and it was thick with marijuana smoke. Thick. People were sitting everywhere, lying down standing up. He created those standing waves so if you would walk around or if you would move your head the sound would change and you could create your own sound by walking around the room or moving around. It was drifting, over a very long period of time. The whole room was magnetic. That was a watershed event for me. It must have been after 1970, it must have been after I started doing video. I remember I had a problem with time in video—

that things had to have a beginning and an end. Walking into this LaMonte event that had to have lasted five hours, I understood that things did not have to have a beginning, middle, and end.

Hill: One of the things that is interesting about *Participation* is that it seems to be a documentation of the gay underground theater scene. It seems that you were interested in that scene, even if that scene wasn't interested in what you were doing at the Kitchen.

Steina: We were interested in all scenes in New York. I would never have pursued the gay scene if Jackie Curtis hadn't continually asked us. One time it would be at La Mama Theater, one time at Andy Warhol's Factory or a record-releasing party on 57th Street. They would be coming over to our place, hanging out. They did use the Kitchen, as did the New York Dolls and the Trocadero de Monte Carlo group, which was an ensemble of male ballerinas. We just gave them the key. When I met them some time later I asked, "Hey, listen, I gave you a key, why don't you use the space?" And they said, "Oh, we use it every morning." They were just so clean; they even swept the floor after themselves. We had no idea they were even there.

Hill: So they wanted you to document them with video?

Steina: Yes, but we wanted to videotape other parts of the scene as well. We were very interested in jazz; unfortunately we didn't have good sound equipment. We have a lot of tapes from the early seventies, not all useful because we were just learning how to use the equipment. We were once hired to tape in the Audubon Hall in Harlem. I think we did a very nice job for them. It was very exciting – a talent show.

When it was over, the manager wanted the tapes immediately. He paid us in cash and I said, “Wait a minute, shouldn’t we copy them first?” He did not want that, which I regret to this day. I know that a lot of that stuff would have made it into *Participation*.

Hill: The one group in *Participation* was so amazing. I think it was shot at the Fillmore East. I think you said that that was a drug rehabilitation group? And then there was the gay theater scene, where a tall thin drag queen dies of a heroin overdose as part of the theater. Do you know which theater that was?

Steina: It was in a storefront on the Bowery. It might have been what later became the CBGB.

Hill: I believe *Participation* is a really important document. I assume that there are probably other documents from that period, but they are not cleaned. At this point in time, *Participation* is a really important piece.

Steina: Every scene in *Participation* is excerpted from a much longer piece. It would be nice one day to clean the tapes and see what is underneath there. It was all done on ½ inch reel to reel. At this time we were also working as technicians for Alternate Media Center, an offshoot of NYU under the directorship of George Stoney and Red Burns. Their agenda was to fight for open access to the newly established cable companies on Manhattan. Although we were very interested in documentaries, we did not share their enthusiasm for changing the world. I guess we didn’t see it that way because we were the cynical Europeans. Anyway, we used the salary from AMC to pay for our day-to-day Kitchen expenses.

Hill: What about the TV Lab?

Steina: We became artists-in-residence at the TV Lab (the Television Laboratory at WNET-TV, New York). We were the first ones there with Nam June. And now our names have been so thoroughly erased from any involvement. We were on a payroll, and when we came to complain to David Loxton that we had nothing to do, that we didn’t get any time allotment, he just looked at us, completely surprised, and said, “Oh, didn’t you get your paycheck?” We were so puritanical then, feeling we should be there to make art not a paycheck. I have matured a bit since then, now I would probably just take the money and be quiet.

Hill: So what happened? They weren’t interested in what you were doing?

Steina: The engineer there was John Godfrey. I would ask, “Hey John, can I do this effect?” And he would answer, “Oh, you want to do the old Stan Vanderbeek trick.” Very discouraging. But he became our teacher, showing us how to read scopes; the black, the luminance, RGB, a negative going pulse, the works. So we got money, education and we made a tape called *Vocabulary*. In it there is a feed back loop spanning from the TV Lab on First Avenue and 46th street to the TV-thirteen station on Eighth Avenue and 57th street.

Hill: Oh, so you did that there?

Steina: Yes. And remember the dancer from *Art of Memory*?—the dancer in the cube? That was also done there, but they didn’t know

it. That's what was so weird, they just weren't interested. One day much later I realized that I wanted to have those tapes. I went up to TV Lab and asked if they could make me copies. They couldn't make copies. Could I? Sure, just go into the library and ask to borrow those tapes. I signed a paper and walked out with them. They were killing me, they were so heavy. Later there was a crisis when station wanted to dump all this worthless TV Lab stuff, just get it out of there. I think Anthology Film Archives came to rescue. I felt so triumphant to have walked out with my stuff. It wasn't my intention to steal it, but they never asked for it back, so I have it.

Hill: People didn't get copies of their work? Everything was owned by the TV Lab?

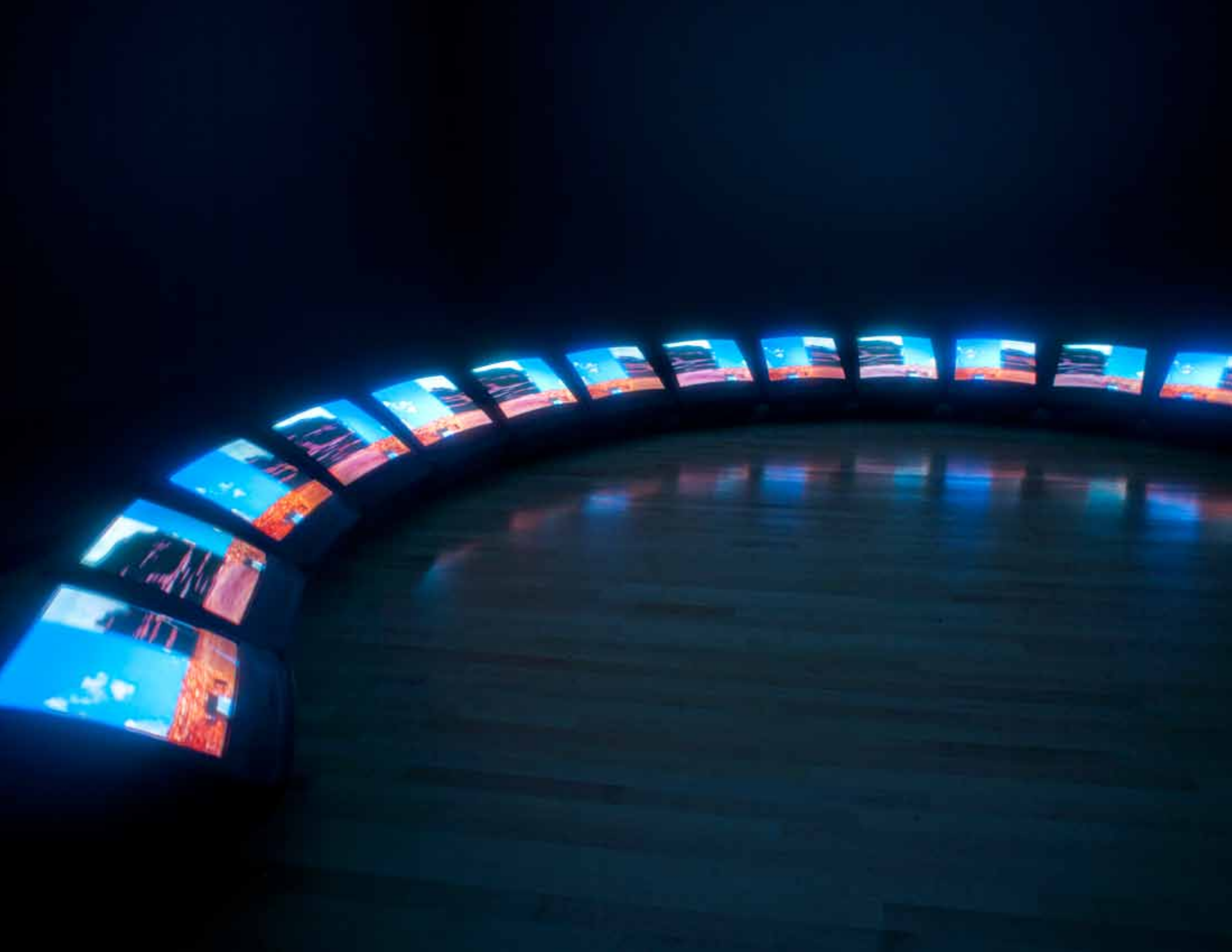
Steina: We could get copies but we wanted the originals. We got them and used them well. In that sense, the TV Lab served us well.

Hill: So you just didn't like working there?

Steina: No, it was all establishment. That is why we never understood why our colleagues like Bill Viola and Bill Etra and Shirley Clarke were knocking on their door, begging to be allowed in there to make masterpieces. We played the arrogant revolutionaries saying, this is an institution, you are not going to get anything from an institution.

Hill: They didn't even have the same equipment that you had. You had more...

Steina: We brought in some of our own equipment. That was not a problem. The atmosphere was just deadening. I would walk into the studio and get a headache right away. Not very conducive to making art. A very strange period. In the fall we moved to Buffalo.



T H E E M E R G E N C E O F S T E I N A

By Gerald O'Grady

Montreal, Quebec, Canada — 2002

In the mid-1970s, Steina, as she henceforth became known, began exploring the idea and the operation of what she called “Machine Vision.” She did not follow her husband Woody Vasulka’s attempt to ever more precisely capture, display, define- and finally program that most elemental electronic building block, the waveform, into what became an increasingly mental or conceptual or cognitive binary scripting, neither personal nor subjective, Steina, in what I consider an entirely different, yet parallel, fashion, began to set up apparatuses designed to completely dissociate the camera from a human point of view.

She began by utilizing a variety of mechanical modes of camera control, assembling some strange pieces of equipment originally built by Woody for use in his film work, but long stored away and all but forgotten. In her studio/laboratory on the third floor of 257 Franklin Street in Buffalo, she mounted two cameras on a moveable metal axis four feet long so that each observed the space surrounding itself in her loft, and, at the same time, observed the other moving camera. If there were humans moving about or through the loft, they were

observed as well, and all of the loft’s action was reported or displayed on two, three or four monitors. This was a tapeless, unrecorded, real-time surveillance. The essential fact was that the cameras were not operated by a human, nor were their operations altered or shaped at any moment by the intervention of a human sensitive to the location, situation, or space.

The concept was first unveiled in a two-camera alfresco (out-of-doors) setup in Cathedral Park, downtown Buffalo, on July 14-16, 1975 (see Figures 1 and 2), and then displayed as an indoor installation at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo as part of VASULKA - STEINA - MACHINE VISION - WOODY - DESCRIPTIONS (October 21 - November 26, 1978), and at The Kitchen in New York City later that year (December 15, 1978 - January 14, 1979) where it was set up diagonally in the middle of a 27-foot, 7-inch by 24-foot, 6-inch gallery. For these two indoor exhibitions, Steina had added a spherical mirror (see Figures 3 and 4). This is the way she herself described it at that time:



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

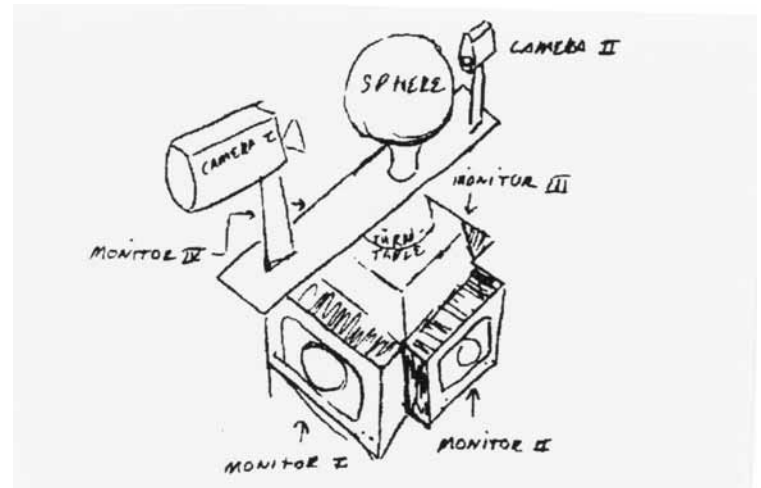


Figure 4

Two cameras were mounted on the ends of a slowly revolving axis with a perfectly spherical mirror at the center of the axis. On the monitors, viewers can see an artificially created 360-degree image. While the viewers are part of the 'real' space, they can at the same time see themselves in the 'imaginary' dimension created on the screens.¹

The construction in Cathedral Park was called *Environment* and the indoor installation was called *Allvision*. My memory is that both of these locations allowed and even helped the originality and the essence of the work to be misperceived, the first as something akin to a calm reflecting pool in Cathedral Park and the second as a quiet piece of lazily kinetic sculpture in the hushed space of the gallery.

It was only in 1980, that the essence of her work became apparent when she placed a similar construction—an eight-foot-long plank capable of rotating atop a turntable, having a motorized camera at one end and a motorized rectangular mirror or rotating prism or spherical mirror at the other end outside on a street corner in the middle of downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. This time, her purpose was to make a one-channel recording on twelve twenty-minute videotapes, which she later edited for broadcast on KETA, the local station of PBS (the Public Broadcast System). Unfortunately, no still photograph was taken of her setup for this production, and thus the only documentation is its reflection in the spherical mirror in the tape itself, which is called *Urban Episodes* (8 minutes, 45 seconds) and aired in 1980. Figure 5



Figure 5

The one camera, in some episodes with a zoom lens and in some with a rotating lens, performed four basic movements—pan, tilt, zoom, 2 and rotation. The images we see are a combination of these movements of the camera, and of the images of downtown both directly recorded and those recorded from the three kinds of reflecting surfaces, all always engaged in their own motorized movements. Here is Steina's Diagram and Score of *Urban Episodes*. Figure 6

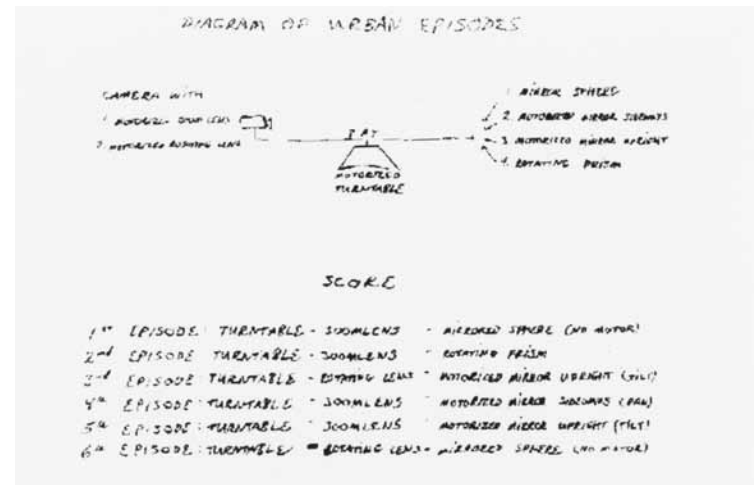


Figure 6

Like the cameras used in all of the *Machine Vision* explorations, this camera had no viewfinder. Thus, acting as a machine, it produced a non-human vision, but one that is intelligent and intelligible. I used the word “acting” because I have always remembered that once, in a seemingly casual conversation, Steina stated that all of her Machine Vision projects were performing systems. It is quite paradoxical that this most critical aspect or essence of her work, performance, is displayed much more clearly in this tape broadcast or in play-backs far from the venues of art, than in her gallery installations. On the tape, the cameras and the reflecting surfaces are seen interacting with the other mechanical and human activity downtown, such as red buses driving by, automobiles of various colors making turns, and pedestrians walking, talking and gesturing, activities as haphazard and irregular as those of the apparatus are programmed and regular. Given this kind of camerization, there appear to be splashes of red color, blurred motions of indistinguishable objects of various kinds, and buildings bent and stretched in the convexity of the sphere.

Figures 7, 8, 9, 10

The concept of action painting is a commonplace in our visual vocabulary, and, for this work, one would have to invent a term never used before, action video. The audio track is a recording of the whirring motors of the apparatuses themselves, the clear sounds of bells chiming a piece of classical music from a church in this urban American midwestern locale, the noises of the automotive vehicles, and the sometimes muffled and sometimes distinguishable conversations of the passersby. Ironically, the tape ends with two men speculating on what the machine is doing as parts of their conversations are being drowned out by the other sounds:

1st man: “What do they do it for?”
(inaudible).....

2nd man: “Well, it’s not supposed to do anything.
It’s supposed to be something.”
(inaudible).....
“They’re recording our comments.”

1st man: “Recording your voice?”

2nd man: “And yours too. It picks it up.”

The alternation between the impersonal and personable pronouns “it” and “they” is significant, I think. In transcribing the audio track into printed lines, I am communicating in the post-Gutenberg manner. In the recitation of poetry, printed lines are called *verses*, derived from the Latin *verto*, “to turn around.” And, of course, the conversation here is an interaction of interchanges in which the men, in turn, alternate between their oral and aural senses.

Thus, we have a mundane record of a mix of everyday activities which we have perceived thousands of times, and which has been transformed into an aesthetic vision by a machine. An episode is an experience or incident without a narrative, and episodic means “divided into separate or tenuously related parts.”³



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

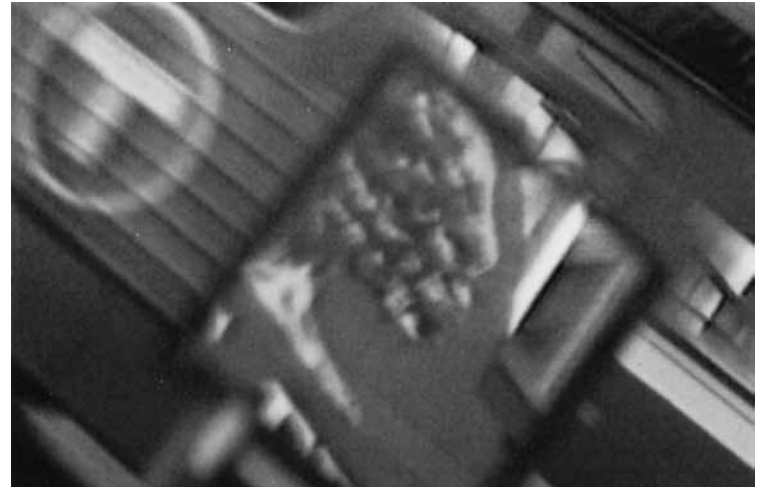


Figure 10

Les Levine described the usual camera actions seen on ordinary television in this way:

The TV screen is a small screen. It is not a movie screen. You can go to the left or to the right with the camera. But you can't go very far. You can only go 16 to 18 inches. So pans don't work very well. You can move the the other way, top to bottom, but tilts don't work very well either because if you go up too much, you're in the lighting and the lighting has a bad effect on the camera tubes.

He did not envision that the camera could be operated by a human or that it could be modified to see as a non-human.⁴

Machine Vision includes at least four other projects.

1. *Switch! Monitor! Drift!* (50 minutes), made in 1976, is about twice as long as any of Steina's other tapes. Each word in the title functions as a noun and as an active verb. On the screen are two images alternated by her operation of a switching device or by a keyer that reveals one while obscuring the other. The relation between the two cameras is only revealed when we see each of them rotating on its own axis, both atop another rotating platform, and both turning within slotted concave half-mirrors. Robert Haller, in his essay on "Steina and Ptolemy," thought that the camera motions suggested the epicyclic movements of the planets in classical cosmology: "To so challenge the viewer (to move him from the position of Ptolemy to that of Copernicus) is remarkable."⁵

2. *The West* was an installation consisting of two different 30-minute long tapes playing on two or more monitors. Steina prefers an array of 22 alternating monitors organized in a circle or in two parallel lines. The subjects of the tapes are radio telescopes in the multiple-antenna Very Large Array (VLA) in Socorro, New Mexico and the abandoned pueblos of the Anastazi peoples (c. 1100 A.D.), known to have been fascinated with the astronomical events of their time, in the ruins of Chaco Canyon. Because visible light is only a small part of the electromagnetic spectrum, since the 1950s radio telescopes have joined optical telescopes in exploring the sky. All of the footage was made with the motorized cameras operating from fixed positions and the spherical mirror used in *Allvision*. "I was not interested by using any kind of manual movement," Steina said, "because it seemed to trivialize the material". Figures 11 and 12

3. *Summer Salt* (18 minutes) is a series of five short one-channel videotapes made in 1982. These include *High Sky*, *Low Ride*, *Somersault*, *Rest*, and *Photographic Memory*. Appended to them is a brief explanation of the making of *Somersault* which I had the honor to name, and in which she herself performs, jumping, gyrating, splitting, and doing backflips and somersaults, all from angles unavailable to the human eye. The eye of the camera has transformed the rectangular video frame into a circle in which there is no up/down or inner/outer coordinates. She explains that, at times, she is stationary and the camera moves, and shows us a glass tube containing a half-sphere which she has fitted into the camera lens.⁷



Figure 11



Figure 12

4. In 1987, Steina, who had had no such concerns in *Switch! Monitor! Drift!*, took Robert Haller's *Ptolemy* as a title for a 10-minute, four-monitor installation which, thus far, has been exhibited only in Iceland and Czechoslovakia, neither of which I have seen. Gene Youngblood describes it:

The piece is named after the second-century Greek astronomer who believed Earth was the center of a flat disc-shaped universe. Amused by how wrong *Ptolemy* was, Steina treats her Santa Fe studio as the center of a polychronic, polytopic, and polyphonic universe that is spectacularly and often hilariously decentered....Steina's dizzy universe is at once synchronous and asynchronous, symmetrical and asymmetrical, centered and decentered.⁸

He also points to an entirely new element in this particular *Machine Vision*, one never present in any of the earlier projects. It is organized into six movements with variations in a kind of canon that falls apart, "identical voices, cycles, and repetitions, shifted in time and space, that chase each other and never quite converge as a true canon would." Here, then, is a new combination of a very non-human vision organized by a very human musical composition. There is an interaction between two performers, one for the eyes by the machines, and one for the ears (and the eyes as well) by Steina. Her camera was connected to a sound synthesizer so that the camera generated sounds and became a musical instrument. In 1992, Steina told Melody Summer: "If you listen to a quartet, there is either an intricate melodic that interweaves all four instruments, or something started in one instrument is picked up by another in a horizontal composing. The structuring of harmonics is vertical composing. I make use of both phenomena in my video work."⁹

Since 1991, Steina, who was once a member of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, has given live performances called *Violin Power* (see Figure 13) in which she composes, transfigures, and interacts with the electronic image while playing her violin which is connected to a laser videodisk through MIDI instrumentation. In 1991, she played her violin in Santa Fe, New Mexico, controlling the videodisk at the Electronic Cafe in Santa Monica, California via a telephone line. She also engaged in a performance called *Hyena Days* at Ars Electronica, Graz, Austria in 1992.

The various performances of *Machine Vision*, as well as these more readily identified performances with the violin and interfaces have escaped the attention of such books as RoseLee Goldberg's *Performances—Live Art 1909 to the Present*.¹⁰

Over a number of years, this still on-going project, *Machine Vision*, in all of its transmutations-alfresco environment, gallery installations, broadcast programs, and others - has been a record of the extraordinarily imaginative performance machines, but, still more stunningly, of the mental operations of an artist in the cognitive and emotional processes of collaborative interaction with the rotating apparatuses, cameras, monitors, mirrors and variously-processed videotapes, all done mostly in real time, the works conceptualized, seen, and heard as moving constructions in the act or drama of creating themselves, as they go about performing their operations, open to accidents, chance repetitions, and interruptions by any and all subjects, including babbling humans who happen to blunder and bluster into camera range. When I used the word "still" in "still ongoing" and "still more stunningly," I was thinking of Steina's own statement that "just as music doesn't exist as a still, so images do not make sense to me as still images."¹¹



Figure 13

¹ Steina, Program Notes for Exhibition in The Kitchen, New York City, 1978-79.

² Les Levine had written: "The zoom lens was invented for television" in "One-Gun Video Art," the third chapter in Les Levine, *MEDIA: The Bio-Tech Rehearsal for Leaving the Body* (Calgary, Alberta College of Art, 1979), p. 20.

³ In 1976, Paul Sharits had made *Episodic Generation*, a four-screen film installation (color, sound, 30 minutes), and *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*, a two-screen 16mm loop projection of indefinite duration with stereo sound, in trapezoid space with metallic walls. It was based on the recording of brain wave patterns on an electroencephalograph (EEG) and quoted *The Living Brain* by Dr. W. Gray Walter on "the majestic potentials of convulsive seizure." I saw it at the M.L. D'Arc Gallery in New York during its six-week installation there in May-June, 1976. See *Film Culture* (Paul Sharits Issue) nos. 65-66 (1978), 121, 123-124.

⁴ Les Levine, "One-Gun Video Art," p. 20.

⁵ Robert Haller, "Steina and Ptolemy," *Field of Vision 13* (Spring, 1985). See also, Steina, "Notes on Switch! Monitor! Drift!," *Field of Vision 13* (Spring, 1985), 12-14.

⁶ Robert Haller, *Galaxy: Avant-Garde Film-makers Look Across Space and Time: Catalogue for a Film Series, September 4-7, 2001* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 2001), p. 41. The quotation is taken from materials Steina supplied to Haller in 2000. This catalogue is bilingual, in French and English.

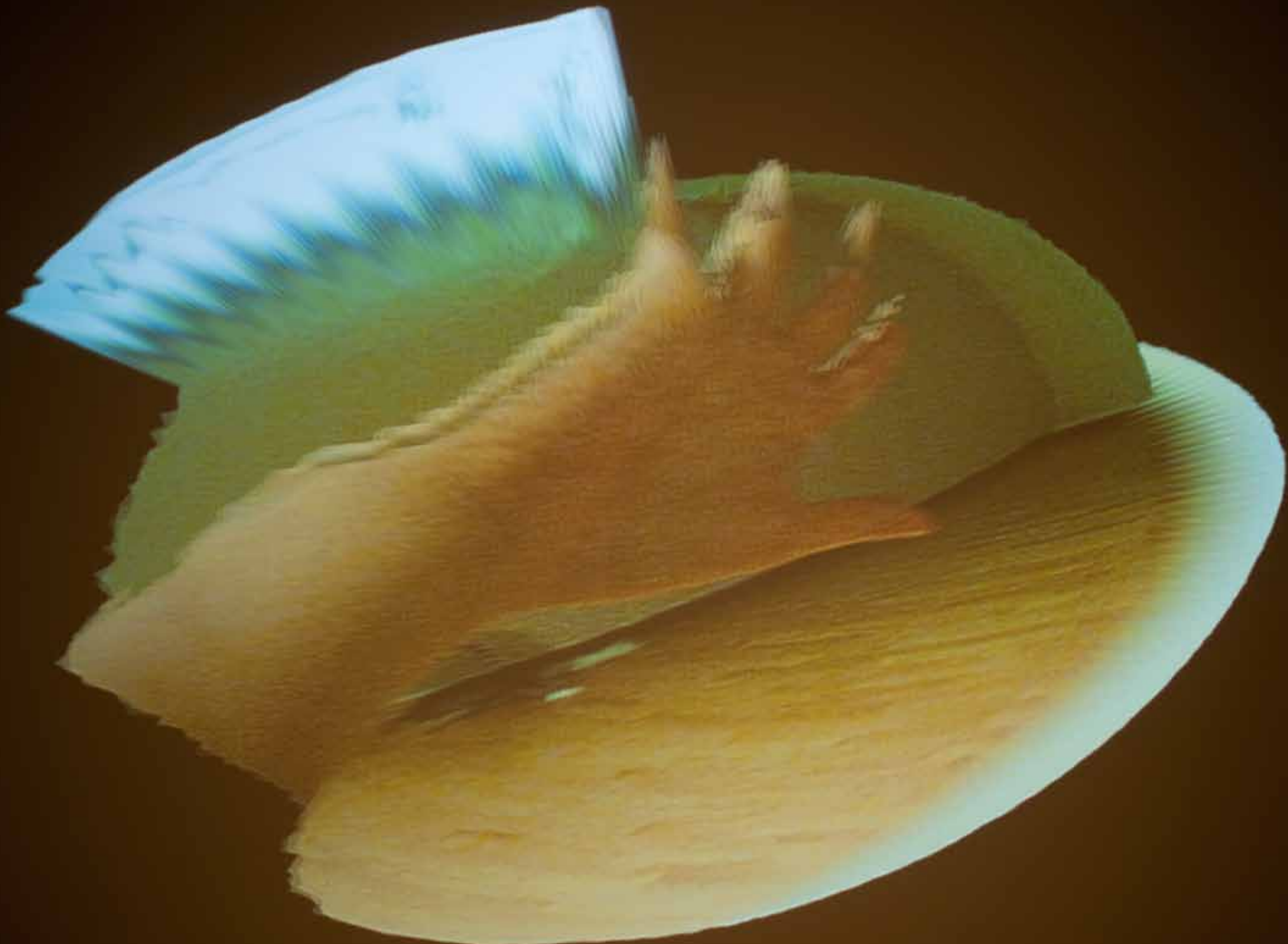
⁷ See also Amy Greenfield, "Steina's Somersault," *Field of Vision 13* (Spring, 1985), 15-16.

⁸ Gene Youngblood, "Multiscreen Music - The Video Installations of Steina Vasulka" ("Tonlist a Fjolskjam Videoinnsetningar Steina Vasulka") in Steina Leiftur Runir (The Reykjavik Municipal Art Museum (Listasafn Reyjavíkur: Kjarvalsstaðir), March-May, 1966), p. 18.

⁹ Melody Sumner, "Installations and Matrixes: Steina Vasulka," *FIKFI - Nordic Art Review 3* (1993), 8.

¹⁰ Roselee Goldberg, *Performance - Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979); Carl E. Loeffler, ed., *Performance Art Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art* (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980). The journal *Performance 3* (July-August, 1972) published a special issue, "Television," which included Barbara MacKay, "Equal Time: An Interview with John Reilly and Rudi Stern of Global Village," 71-80.

¹¹ Malina Wilson, "Interview with Steina" in *Scapes of Paradox: The Southwest and Iceland - exhibition brochure* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Jonson Gallery, University of New Mexico, 1986), p. 13.



INSTALLATION CHECKLIST

Steina: Involving People Into this Magic
Burchfield Penney Art Center At Buffalo State College
June 10, 2011 — September 25, 2011

Exhibition Image 1

Steina (b. 1940) *Borealis*, 1993; A Projected Video Environment;
4 Video Projections on Translucent Screens

Steina's means are simple. She takes stunningly beautiful yet turbulent clips of nature in her native Iceland, enlarges them, then turns them on end, literally and figuratively, so that they may be experienced as living abstractions on a scale equal to that of the human body. The effect is to tear them from their entrenchment in the cliché so they may be perceived free from the drag of representational history. Nature, having somehow survived the twentieth century onslaught of archaic industrial insults, speaks in the only way it can, through stormy electronic images by an artist with roots both in urban culture and in a remote land still precariously preserved in ice. —Lane Barden



Exhibition Image 2

Steina (b. 1940) *The West*, 1983;

An Electro/Opto/Mechanical Environment; 14 Video Monitors

Commissioned by the State University

of New York and the University-wide Committee on the Arts

The West revels in the vastness of the western spaces, the primeval quality of the landscape and ancient architecture, the rich colors of the earth and sky, and the all-encompassing light and warmth of the sun. The complex layering of spaces and the electronic manipulation of image, color, and form so central in Steina's earlier work is still an important aspect of this installation. But *The West* is emphatically a tribute to the grandeur of nature. —William D. Judson



Exhibition Image 3

Steina (b. 1940) *Bent Scans*, 2002; Life Interactive Environment;

3 Sony USB Cameras and Video Projection

in Close Collaboration with software writers Tom Demeyer and Rob Shaw

From early analog video days I have always had a fascination for signal/system interplay in image and sound processing. Digital video offers whole new vistas, especially through storing and retrieving of moving images in warped time. The installation uses three computers resulting in three different image projections, programmed to create a very different video image on each projection. By stepping into the camera view, the visitor will experience a different view of him or herself in an immediate past time. —Steina



Exhibition Image 4

Steina (b. 1940) *Machine Vision*, 1978; An Electro/Opto/Mechanical;
8 Black and White Video Monitors, 6 Video Cameras

When a human being operates the camera, the assumption is that the camera is an extension of the eye. You move the camera the way you move the head and the body. In video, unlike photography or film, the viewfinder is not necessarily an integral part of the camera apparatus. . . . In the late seventies, I began a series of environments titled *Machine Vision* and *Allvision*, with a mirrored sphere. Another variation has a motorized moving mirror in front of the camera so that depending on the horizontal or vertical positioning of the mirror, the video monitor displays a continuous pan or tilt either back/forth or up/down. A third variation is a continuous rotation through a turning prism, while still another has a zoom lens in continuing motion, in/out. These automatic motions simulate all possible camera movements freeing the human eye from being the central point of the universe. —Steina



Exhibition Image 5

Steina (b. 1940) *Mynd*, 2002; A Projected Video Environment;
6 Video Projectors

Mynd is a splendid six-channel projection displayed on six contiguous, vertically-oriented panels of a wall. “*Mynd*” is Icelandic for image, picture, illustration, or photograph; in the cognate language, Old English, it suggested memory. There are four distinct sections to the overall work, each defined by a different aspect of the natural environment of her homeland (including the sea and pastures with horses), and the images in each section, transformed with consummate care via subtle digital effects, were closely interrelated, varying in rhythm, direction, and other features. Their delicate rendering is, at times, almost painterly, droplets of water in slow motion suggestive of finely executed brushstrokes. —John Minkowsky



Exhibition Image 6

Steina (b. 1940) *Tokyo 4*, 1991; Video Matrix; 4 Video Projection

No form of moving-image art comes as close to musical composition as multi-screen video, where the different channels of image and sound are equivalent to musical polyphony, each functioning like a voice in a musical ensemble. And no multi-screen work is as spectacularly musical as Steina's. She works as a composer would, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture, and tone. *Tokyo Four* is the audio-visual equivalent of a string quartet. In one compositional strategy, Steina begins by assembling a long single-channel segment which represents the "melody," or what she calls the "ground track." Sometimes one screen is the melody and the others are accompaniment, then another screen takes the lead. A musical syntax emerges from this visual point/counterpoint. . . . *Tokyo Four* is organized around categories of imagery: Shinto priests meticulously grooming their Zen garden on New Year's Eve; train conductors monitoring rush hour crowds; elevator girls bringing a superfluous, but charming *High Touch* to the high tech world of the shopping malls, reminding shoppers to watch their umbrellas and to not forget their children; a segment about food, beginning with the vertiginous fisheye lens in a supermarket; and an emotionally charged metachoreography of a dance troupe's performance and curtain call. Her compositional devices include flipping or reversing an image and playing it at imperceptibly different speeds on different screens, which gradually all synchronize at the same speed. These strategies are especially effective in the final movement when the female dancer is bowing. The Lehar's waltz the dancers use would be banal without the manipulations of Steina's spectacular visual matrix, which transforms it into something at once exotic and poignant.

—Gene Youngblood



Exhibition Image 7

Steina (b. 1940) *Pyroglyphs* 1994; A Video Matrix;
3 Video Projection

The initial inspiration for *Pyroglyphs* was the ancient art of blacksmithing but it soon became a musical treatise . . . In Steina's words: "In 1994 I spent long hours with blacksmith Tom Joyce, videotaping the process of building an iron gate. I found iron gates a little too concrete, so I closed in on the intense and violent nature of materials being manipulated by torches, files, and anvils—the rapid flicker of flames. . . . Tom and I share a fascination with fire — as a phenomenon and as a medium that transforms other materials . . . as a medium of transmutation."

Steina videotaped, mostly in close-up, the activities of blacksmithing (hammering, filing, welding, manipulating fire), the phenomenology of fire (flames, sparks, combustions, glowing metals), and various improvised scenes — a vise crushing a timber, a stack of books burning, paper and wood being scorched.

Editing this material into three complementary image tracks was relatively easy (the visuals were similar or dissimilar in compatible ways) but the sounds of those images were often too similar or too strident, competing for attention. So the sounds determined the editing. Steina processed them through digital devices like harmonizers, which couldn't turn the random noises into harmonics but produced interesting sounds anyway; pitch shifters that move a sound to the octave immediately above or below; and reverb circuits to create echo effects. The sounds and rhythms are rendered *allegro con brio*, *pianoforte*, or *pianissimo*: there is a lot of percussive

hammering, say, then all is quiet and we hear only crackling flame or the hollow whisper of the blowtorch. . . . *Pyroglyphs* is a spectacular meditation on fire. Steina has created a sublime landscape illuminated by the many-hued glow of fevered metals and shows of sparkling scintilla. She makes us feel the hypnotic pull of lambent flames even as our breath is caught by the preemptive ignition of the torch, our hearts quickened by the violence of the forge. —Gene Youngblood





BURCHFIELD PENNEY
ART CENTER
at Buffalo State College