

Beeing an Icelander ... an incurable disease: An Interview with Steina Vasulka by **Christian Schoen**, August 2005 (LIST-Icelandic Art News)

Steina, together with husband and collaborator, Woody Vasulka, is a key artist in the development of video technology and its use in the creation of moving image artworks. Steina is one of the most distinguished video artists working in the world today. Born in Iceland, she is a classically trained violinist who played with the Iceland National Orchestra.

Born as Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1940 she studied violin and music theory in her homecountry. In 1959 she received a scholarship from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture to attend the music conservatory in Prague. There she met Woody Vasulka. They married a few years later and moved to New York. Steina worked as a freelance musician and Woody as a multiscreen film editor, experimenting with electronic sounds, stroboscopic lights, and, by 1969, with video. In 1971 they founded, in cooperation with Andreas Mannik, The Kitchen, a media arts theater. The same year, Steina and Woody established the first annual video festival at The Kitchen. Later they organized a special - and one of the first - videotape show at the Whitney Museum.

In these early years, Steina and Woody collaborated extensively on investigations into the nature of electronic video and sound, and produced documentaries about theater, dance, and music, with a special fascination for the New York underground scene. In 1974, the Vasulkas moved to Buffalo, where they joined the faculty of the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York. At this point, their interest diverged: Woody turned his attention to the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor, while Steina experimented with the camera as an autonomous imaging instrument in what would become the Machine Vision series. In 1976, working first with Don MacArthur and then Jeffrey Schier, Woody began to build the Digital Image Articulator. This device introduced him to the principles of digital imaging.

Since 1980, the Vasulkas have lived and worked in Santa Fe, New Mexico (USA), where Steina has continued her work in video, media performance, and video installation. Woody has continued to produce work in video, three-dimensional computer graphics, and media constructions. In 1992, the Vasulkas organized *Eigenwelt der Apparate-Welt: Pioneers of Electronic Art*, an exhibition of early electronic tools for Ars Electronica, Linz, Austria.

Individually and collectively, they have received funding from several international councils and institutions; just this summer Steina received an award from CIA.IS - Center for Icelandic Art. For the Venice Biennial in 1997 where she represented Iceland she developed the audiovisual environment "Orka".

Interview

Christian Schoen: Steina, you were born in Iceland. You have lived in Prague and New York. You have spent a lot of time in New York and many other places of the world. Now you are living in Santa Fé. Is Iceland still your homeland?

Steina Vasulka: I fled out of Iceland. I felt everything was too small and I was fed up with this nepotism. I ran fairly out of the country when I was seventeen years old. I dropped school and left everything behind. First I went to Denmark and then to Germany before I landed a grant in Czechoslovakia which meant that I didn't have to worry about finances. But over the years I recognized how much of an Icelander I am and how strong those roots are. You know, you meet somebody from Düsseldorf or Kiel and you ask them: how was it to grow up there. 'Oh, it was just like normal,' they would reply. But if you talk to Icelanders they would say: 'Growing up in Iceland is as a whole a very intense experience ... and something extraordinary. So it dawned on me slowly that being an Icelander is an incurable disease. It is their whole orientation, their attitude towards nature, to inclemency of the weather and very deep friendships and of course the language is very special. It is a carrier of culture as well as being a medium of communication.

CS: So it was always Iceland that influenced you?

SV: Yes. In my work and in my life. I have never felt at home. A large portion of my life I have lived in the United States, much larger than anywhere else. I have never felt like an American.

CS: Has Iceland changed in the past decades from your point of view?

SV: The Iceland that I come to now is very different from the one I left. This has been a very remarkable renaissance here, especially in art and culture. Well, as you see in most other places there is a decline. And this is different here: I come home, I hear of new artists, of new musicians, that they have opened up cultural places all over the country. When I left Iceland there was basically no culture outside Reykjavík. The intensity of the activities and the places to show and everything is magnificent. So when I come back now, I am coming to a different country. But one that pleases me ... I am always very pleased when I come back here. But I am not a connoisseur of the visual arts although I am called a visual artist. So I could hardly judge the change in the field of the Icelandic visual arts scene.

CS: When I came here, I was expecting more artists working in the field of new media. I was expecting that the fact of geographical isolation would have caused an intensive work with the computer, the internet and video. But in fact it is almost not existing.

SV: It does astonish me too. I came here several times to school in order to teach. And when I started it was kind of shocking to have to start from the very beginning. But the few who could be called media artists they do very well here – Finnbogi Pétursson for example, he is of world class.

CS: But back to how Iceland has influenced your work. You were representing Iceland at Venice Biennia in 1997. Was "being selected as a representative of Iceland" an issue for you?

SV: Yes, of course. I took all the images from Iceland. I specifically went on a shooting trip to Iceland in spring because I was going to be in the Biennale and I did not want to present some other works. But I never thought of clichés – that has never been an issue. So definitely,

it was a topic. Although nobody in Iceland knew me, I thought I could represent Iceland – again it was the idea to be Icelandic. But I felt this kind of resentment that I was a foreigner, an outsider.

CS: After this Biennial Iceland will present their artists in a different location. The pavilion, built by the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, which was used in the past belongs to the Finnish government and they will use it in the future for their purpose. What do you think about this prospect?

SV: At first I have to say that I think every Icelander appreciated to being alone, to be the only representative. Other pavilions of other nations often share – the space and the attention. But I was not very impressed by the pavilion itself. I mean it was built by a very famous architect who has done marvellous things. But there was nothing remarkable about this building – as far as I remember. I don't know the history but I assume that it was not planned for eternity ... But I am afraid that the Icelanders will try to build the biggest pavilion ever, and they will send hundred people there...

CS: Originally you are a musician, and everybody who knows your work recognizes the importance of music. Can you explain how visual interrelates to audio in your work?

SV: You are right – although I have to say that I could draw ... but in fact I was excused from drawing classes in school. So my background is the music. And video for me rather – if it should be described – is more visual music or art in time which music is and visual art is only in video.

The sound I am using usually is from the source, from the recordings of the video. And however I then work with it, using existing sound or reprocessing it. I follow the original sounds mostly – that is very important for me and that also guides me through the visuals because I don't have a sense of editing images. Editing the sound is my saving grace. And then for some strange reason I have a lack of images.

CS: Since the late 1960s you work with video. How did it come that a musician started to work with video?

SV: It is very interesting: I was very tired of music. I was stuck in New York as a freelancer. I didn't like it anymore. It is not an interesting world to be in, to gigging around and the money isn't good. So I realized I was stuck. It started with Woody who was coming home with recordings like the one that was very important for me - what I didn't realized at that time (and this is actually the first time I talk about it). On New Year's eve he brought home a video footage he shot at Filmore East of Jimmy Hendrix. Everybody who was watching it was excited. And a few days later there was just a steady stream of people who came to hear the Hendrix recording because the official record came out like six months later. There was a song that was called "The Machinegun" that everyone wanted to hear. And the more I heard that song, the more I realized that this guy Jimmy Hendrix was a kind of incredible genius. And from that moment on I wanted to do that: I wanted to take pictures of my surroundings, because it was so dense at that time. So I actually kind of consider my entry into video New Year's eve of 1969.

CS: And how about a technical approach?

SV: We were very interested in feedback and watch these electronic phenomena of that medium. Our interest split very early into two directions: one was this kind of a

documentation, which was not a real documentation, it was just taping. And the other was synthetic videos, we called it. And to that extend we started integrating instruments, making tools or modifying what was available, because it could never do exactly what we wanted. Part of it was also working with oscillators – that is where I am linked to Finnbogi Pétursson.

CS: You very often use the term “video environment” to describe the setting of your work. What is wrong with the term “installation”.

SV: Yes, it is really interesting because this term “environment” was not really used in the early seventies. First and foremost we felt that what we were doing was building environments and when the term installation became so prevalent, we kind of didn’t like it. It reminded me too much of plumbing ... the plumbing installation in your house... But anyhow installation, especially as it is used now for everybody, does not really work anymore. I feel the term environment much more appropriate, because unlike a sculpture, which usually stands alone or you make a few sculptures which are related to each other, this idea of immersing the visitor that is the basic idea, to immerse him in sound and image.

CS: Allow me to ask a general question. What is from your point of view the importance of new media technologies in the arts today?

SV: Well, I think we somehow got out of sync with ourselves. I don’t know how to explain it but when we started with new media in the 1970s there were so many good artists. But most of them have disappeared, but they made interesting works ... much more interesting than the decade after. And this when we met them all like Nam June Paik or Bill Viola and Gary Hill. We found this universe very crowded with great thinkers and people who are going to go far and wide ... but that hasn’t happened. There is a lot of mediocrity in video that has then carried over to computer.

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