

STEINA: *PLAYBACK*

MIT List Visual Arts Center,
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In 1975, artist Steinunn (Bjarnadottir) Vasulka, known simply as Steina, began working on a new video titled *Orbital Obsessions* (1975-77). Steina began the piece shortly after she and her partner, artist Woody Vasulka, relocated to upstate New York, where Woody took a position as an associate professor in the now legendary Media Study program at the University of Buffalo. *Orbital Obsessions* marks a point of both geographical and philosophical transition for Steina. With access to a larger studio space—a Woolfian room of her own—Steina diverged from her artistic partnership with Woody and set out to explore her concept of “machine vision.” *Orbital Obsessions* offers a vertiginous, kaleidoscopic portrait of Steina in her studio, composed of multiple camera feeds which are in turn processed through keying devices which allow the artist to manipulate the video images’ electronic signals in real-time. With the functions of multiple imaging technologies on full display, *Orbital Obsessions* is a dizzying yet sublime machinic symphony. Decentering the primacy of the human eye with its singular perspective in favor of the multiplicity of elliptical machinic vision, whose rapid-fire immediacy presages the current moment, *Orbital Obsession* lives up to its name.

Steina: Playback, an exhibit at MIT List Visual Arts Center, opens with this piece, which is simultaneously a portrait of the artist through the lens of her studio and an immersive declaration of the artist’s aesthetic philosophies and skills, in the vein of works like Gustave Courbet’s *The Painter’s Studio* (1854-55) or Henri Matisse’s *The Red Studio* (1911). The first solo exhibition of Steina’s work in over a decade, the show was organized in collaboration with the Buffalo AKG Art Museum and curated by Natalie Bell and Helga Christoffersen. The exhibition celebrates Steina’s pioneering video, installation, and performance work, and highlights the pivotal role the artist played in the histories of new media art. Small and intimate, the exhibition nevertheless beautifully periodizes Steina’s work while emphasizing her ongoing concerns and experimentation with machinic vision, performance, and nature.

Following *Orbital Obsessions*, viewers turn into a transitional space in which the curators highlight Steina’s prolific career



Exhibition view: *Steina: Playback*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2024. Photo: Dario Lasagni.



LEFT Steina, *Orbital Obsessions* (1975-77). Single-channel video, black and white, sound; 24:24 min. Courtesy ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

BELOW & OPPOSITE Exhibition view: *Steina: Playback*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2024. Photo: Dario Lasagni.



not only as an artist, but as a successful advocate for funding, studio space, and exhibitions of experimental new media art. Pasted across the gallery walls is an assemblage of xeroxed and printed archival material—photographs, performance and exhibition posters, letters to artists, curators, gallerists and arts administrators, and grant applications. Culled from the Vasulka archives, this web of materials illustrates Steina's central role in early video art communities and networks well beyond her work as a co-founder of the New York experimental art space The Kitchen. Renowned figures in the field, including Gene Youngblood, Shigeo Kubota, and Howard Wise, among many others, appear in various documents on view. The curatorial decision to include these materials at the outset is an important one; it asserts a feminist material ethics, acknowledging the often overlooked organizational and administrative work of building and maintaining community which so frequently falls to women. This is an especially significant point in relation to Steina, whose work as both an artist and administrator paved the way for the institutional acceptance of experimental video art.

The remainder of the exhibition leads viewers through a trajectory of Steina's oeuvre, from the early 1970s to the present. Each gallery centers on a distinct practice and period of production – from the artist's single-channel and early mechano-optical experiments in the 1970s, to more performance-focused video in the 1980s, to her multi-monitor and large-scale screen installations from the late 1980s to the present. While the temporal structure naturally lends itself to a model of periodization, the curators carefully highlight the ideas, techniques, and technologies

which thread her work together. Experimentation with video signal and image processing machines, the compositional possibilities engendered through performance practices, and a profound consideration of landscape and environment emerge as sustained interests in the artist's work. The absolutely magical *Summer Salt* (*Somersault*) (1982), for instance, merges each of these issues. Adding a convex mirror to her camera lens, Steina is able to capture and distort the landscape. The viewer's perspective is distorted and made askew as she intermittently twirls the camera either around herself or herself around the camera, a phenomenological approach which resurfaces throughout her work, including in *Orbital Obsessions*. Whimsical and playful, yet philosophically astute, *Summer Salt* is a virtuoso *joie de vivre* of video's technological possibilities. *Borealis* (1993) similarly brings together these concerns while expanding the artist's interest in video's immersive potential. A multichannel project composed of four immense vertical screens, the piece features close-up images of flowing water from a geothermal lake in Reykjavik, which Steina reverses through camera rotations and mirroring. As viewers walk through the space, the rush and turbulence of these reoriented images is palpably dizzying yet hauntingly beautiful, an experience the curators aptly describe as an "electronic rapture." *Borealis* proves equal parts sublime and prophetic; it is a powerful reminder of the ways in which a shift from human-centered perspective can help us retune and reimagine our relationship to the world around us.

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