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My Love Affair with Art: Video and Installation Work

Steina Vasulka

My love affair with art was all-consuming from the time I was 8 or 9 years old until my late teens. I lived by it. I went to every concert, play, opera and gallery show I could. Nothing else in life made any sense to me. I never chose to be an artist, I just knew I would not work in a bank or wait on tables. I loved playing my violin, but when faced with the prospect of being a professional musician, I realized I had made a dreadful mistake. I found myself in New York in the mid-1960s going from gig to gig, wondering if there was not more to life than black dress and meager fees.

DISCOVERING VIDEO

I had met Woody Vasulka in the early 1960s in Prague, where I was studying music at the time, and by the mid-1960s we had moved to New York. Woody was a filmmaker, and through his film contacts he came across video in 1969. Both of 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.

We already owned a two-track audiotape recorder, which allowed delays and speed changes. We immediately proceeded to process and manipulate videotape along the same principles we had applied to audiotape. During the same period, we were taking the portable video equipment to New York's cultural playgrounds: WBAI Free Music Store, Judson Church, La Mama, Automation House, the Village Vanguard, Fillmore East, Blue Dom, Kansas City Steakhouse, etc.

After those outings, everyone would gather in our loft to look at the instant playback—something that most people at that time had never experienced before. Even the word "video" was a brand-new addition to the vocabulary. By 1971, there was so much traffic in our loft that, when a friend told us he had found a large space in an abandoned kitchen in the old Broadway Central Hotel, we were ready. The space was intended to serve the artists, not the audience. We therefore named it the Kitchen-LATL (Live Audience Test Laboratory).

ENVIRONMENTS

In the early days of video, everything was an installation or an "environment," as we used to call it. In the first generation of ½-in reel-to-reel video there was no provision for editing. The

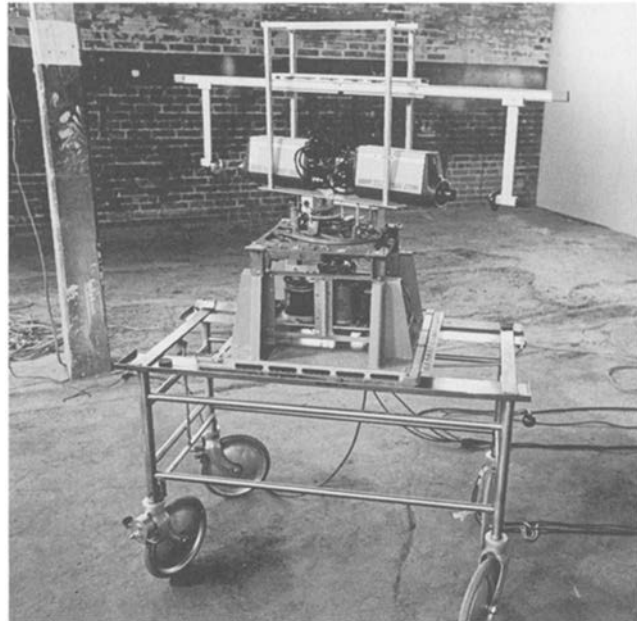
solution was to cut and glue, as was done with audiotape. Our environments, therefore, consisted of either "live" camera or "live" switching of tapes. Woody and I preferred to use multiple screens—typically, a stack of monitors and several players. One of our first installations involved the horizontal drifting of images from one monitor to the next. After we started the Kitchen, we had plenty of opportunities to do environments and live video performances. Later, when electronic editing became technically feasible, everyone became infatuated with editing, and installation work disappeared for a while—to be reinvented later by the art world.

In the 1970s, I did a series of environments entitled *Machine Vision*, the first variation of which was called *Allvision*

ABSTRACT

The author, a video art pioneer, discusses some of her works and the contexts in which they have been created. Her discussion ranges from the early days of video art in New York in the late 1960s to her most recent works.

Fig. 1. *Machine Vision*, series of video installations, 1976. (Photo: Kevin Noble) In the first variation of this series, two video cameras on a motorized turntable were combined with two mirrored half-spheres and two monitors, emphasizing a camera view that moves beyond the restrictions of the human eye—all-seeing, all-encompassing vision.



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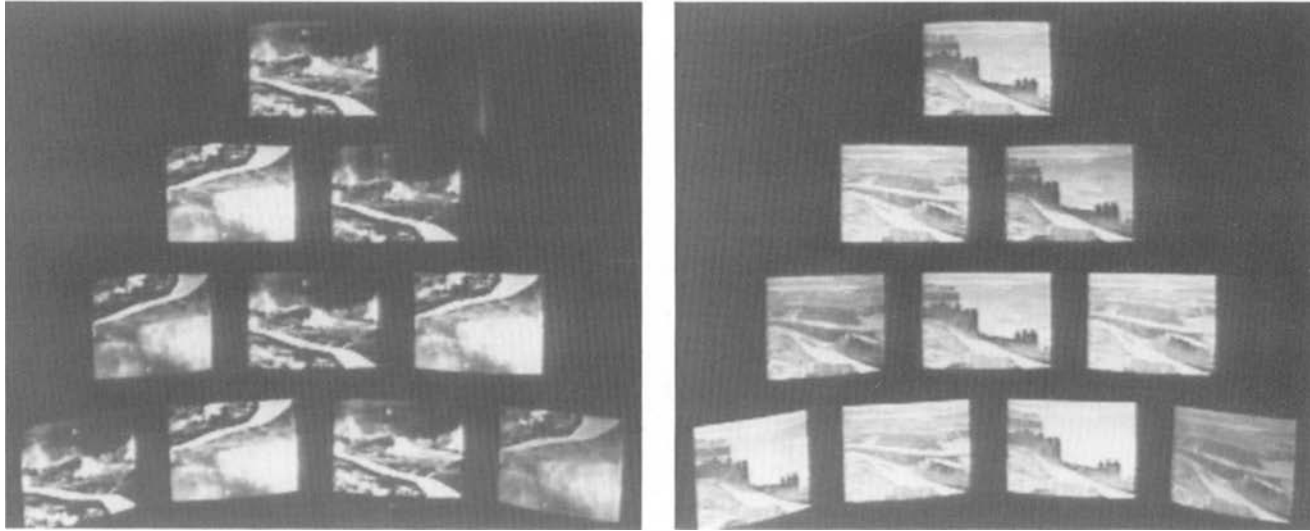


Fig. 2. *Geomania*, two-channel sound and video environment, 1986. This work, presented on a pyramid of monitors, combines site-recorded imagery and sound in a layering of natural landscapes and electronically generated color and texture.

(Fig. 1). For *Allvision*, I put a bar across a turntable and mounted two video cameras back to back at the center and pointing at two small mirrored half-spheres placed at each end of the bar. Each camera viewed 180° of the space and displayed the results on four pairs of monitors placed in the corners of the room. As the table slowly turned, the cameras captured the entire room, including viewers, monitors and the turning machinery itself. In a later version, I put a large sphere in the middle of the turntable with the cameras at each end pointing in. Another *Machine Vision* variation made use of a motorized moving mirror placed in front of a camera. Depending on the horizontal or vertical positioning of the mirror, the video monitor would display a continuous back-and-forth pan or up-and-down tilt of the room. A third variation implemented a continuous rotation of the image through a turning prism, while still another involved a zoom lens in constant motion, zooming in and out. These automatic motions simulated all possible camera movements without making the camera and its operator the center of the universe. Time and motion became the universe, with endless repetitive cycles and orbits.

I was a latecomer to this infatuation with machines, but I vividly remember, after moving to New York, going to Canal Street and looking at gears and motors as kinds of miracles that resembled life itself—mechanistic replications of the biological mystery. I love gizmos, such as the ones I find in surplus yards that can be refitted to serve my pur-

poses. If I had a lot of money, I would spend it on optical gadgets, mechanical toys and state-of-the-art electronics. I would make gigantic environments, such as monitors embedded in the floor from wall to wall all showing imagery moving in either the same or a contrapuntal direction. Or I would build a four-sided corridor in which viewers could look down a long lane of images that keep moving toward and past them. In reality, though, I am very flexible about the size of the display, since, to me, the size of an installation is not determined by the number of monitors, but rather by the complexity of the composition. I therefore often improvise how to configure an installation based on what is available at an exhibition site. For example, for my favorite installation of *Geomania* (1986) (Fig. 2 and Color Plate A No. 1), I stack the monitors into a pyramid.

I always intend these environments to be experienced in a quiet, dark place. A museum is potentially a good exhibition venue, but museum people always seem interested in placing video installations in a maximally visible location. They tell me triumphantly, “We are going to give you the lobby.” It is always assumed that video ought to be loud and public, but I really want it to be quiet and private—a thousand monitors and one viewer, and not the other way around. I want the viewers to be so absorbed by the work that they experience another level of mind. I expect them to share the kind of strong feeling I have for the material, and to my amazement, they sometimes do. An old man who had watched *Tokyo*

Four (1991) (Fig. 3) over and over once explained to me that this installation was all about death. At that moment I knew that he had really seen it—even though it is not all about death.

Borealis (1993) (Fig. 4) uses two video projectors that project through a split-beam mirror onto four translucent screens (“translucent” meaning that the image appears with equal intensity on both sides of the screen). Upon entering the room, the viewer can watch the work from far away and see all four screens at once, or walk directly up to and around one screen—a much more intense experience. The images are mostly of rivers, oceans, steam and sprays.

SUBJECTS

The aspect of the process of creation I like most is the initial recording. Sleet or snow or howling rain, I love that part, especially if I am alone out in nature. In New Mexico, where I live, my images are rivers, mountains and arroyos, but when I found myself in the metropolis of Tokyo, my material became the people. The Japanese have a social protocol that, for them, is a daily routine, but to a Westerner looks like fabulous theater—the way they bow, the way they make certain signals. For example, when the Japanese want to cut through a crowd in a hurry, they put their hands forward in a chopping gesture and a magical corridor appears in the ocean of humanity. They have hand signals for “yes” and “maybe” (although “maybe” usually means the unutterable “no”). They seem to wear an invisible armor, a “no

man's land" around their bodies. Elevator girls in a perpetual state of performance, train conductors, taxi drivers in their white gloves and Shinto priests ritualistically pruning their arenas are all elements of *Tokyo Four* (see Fig. 3).

Between taping and editing, there is usually an intermediary step during which I alter and mix the images, change color or run things upside down or backwards. This is where the particular uniqueness of working with the electronic image comes into play. It is somewhat akin to photographic darkroom techniques, but it really reminds me of playing an instrument. I change style, timbre, dynamics and key in an improvisational and spontaneous way.

MUSICAL TECHNIQUES

In my multichannel video compositions, I often make a ground image of a certain duration, which I then duplicate as tape #2, tape #3, etc. I then drop different but complementary images into the copies, and a phenomenon similar to musical composition starts occurring. Starting with a melody or theme, I add harmonic lines and discover that the melody is far less interesting than the counterpoint. Sometimes there is an emergent melodic structure that interweaves through the instruments or (in my case) the video screens.

Late-twentieth-century art is fast—too fast for me. But I realize that I am out of sync with the mainstream, which wants things fast. Multichannel compositions liberate me from this concern with speed, since they rely on different time principles and are more like music.

TEACHING

I do not like teaching, just as I did not like going to school. It is an absurd theater, the teacher supposedly all-knowing and the students posing as eager minds waiting for illumination. So when I do teach, I go through the theory and the techniques—video is rather complex technically—and explain about frequencies, voltages and the timing structure of the signal. I go into history, show a lot of tapes—mine and those of colleagues—and discuss them with the students. Then I ask them if they believe in UFOs (unidentified flying objects), at which point the whole class gets very uneasy. Half of them say they do, half say they do not.

The class sessions that the students seem to appreciate most are the ones in which I present "the world according to

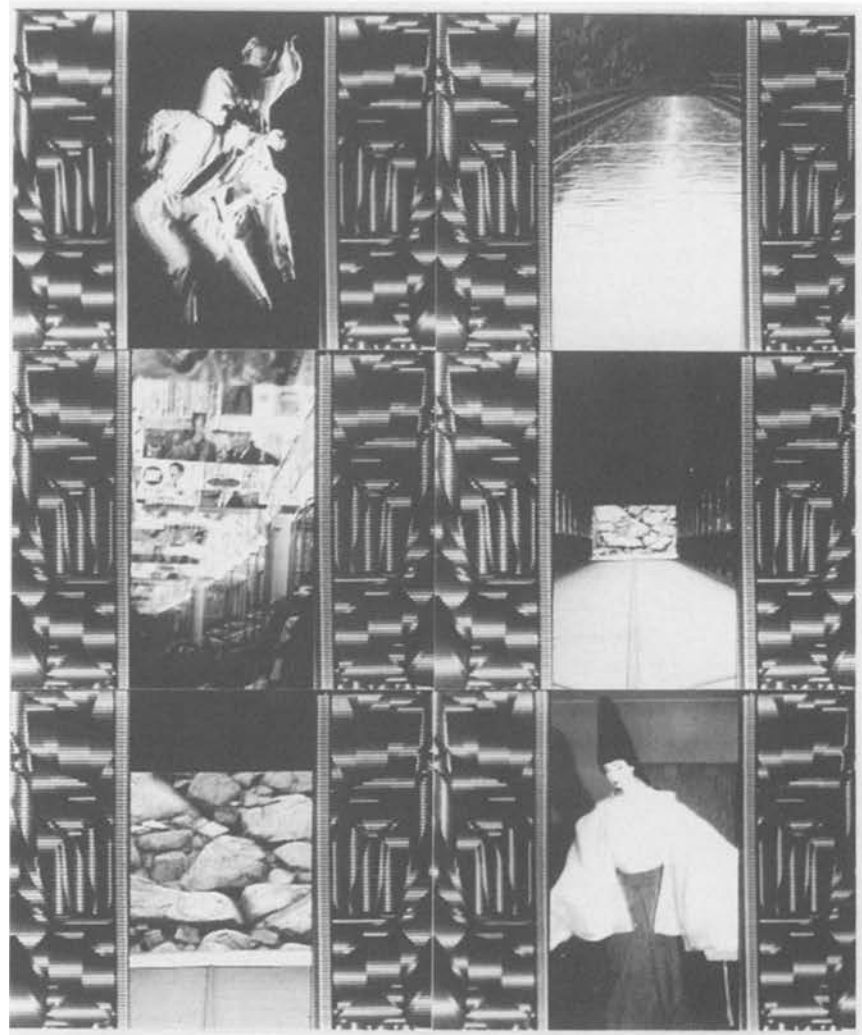
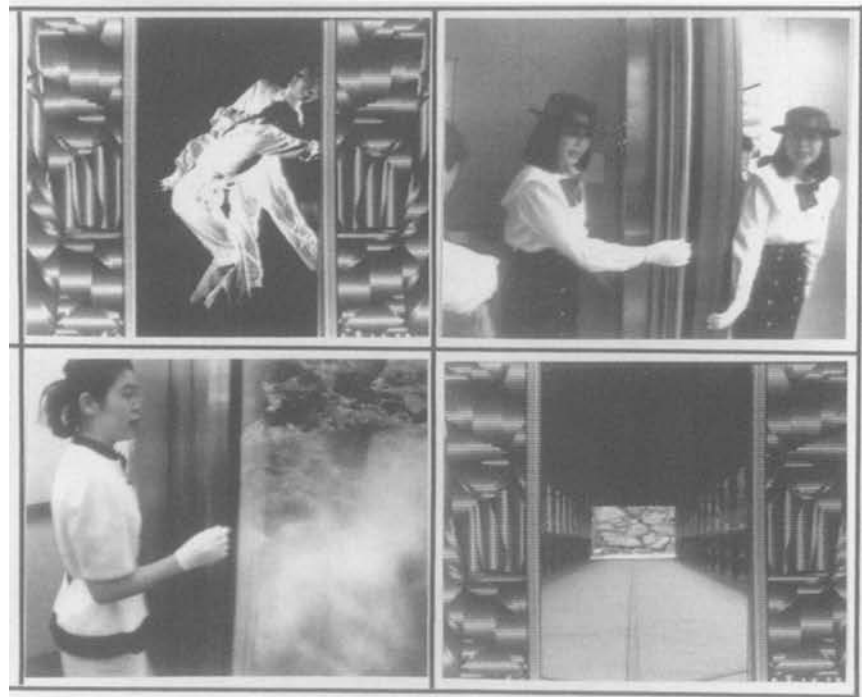


Fig. 3. *Tokyo Four*, multiscreen video, 1991. This work is organized around categories of imagery—Shinto priests grooming their Zen garden, train conductors, elevator girls, taxi drivers—in a visual montage reminiscent of a musical composition.

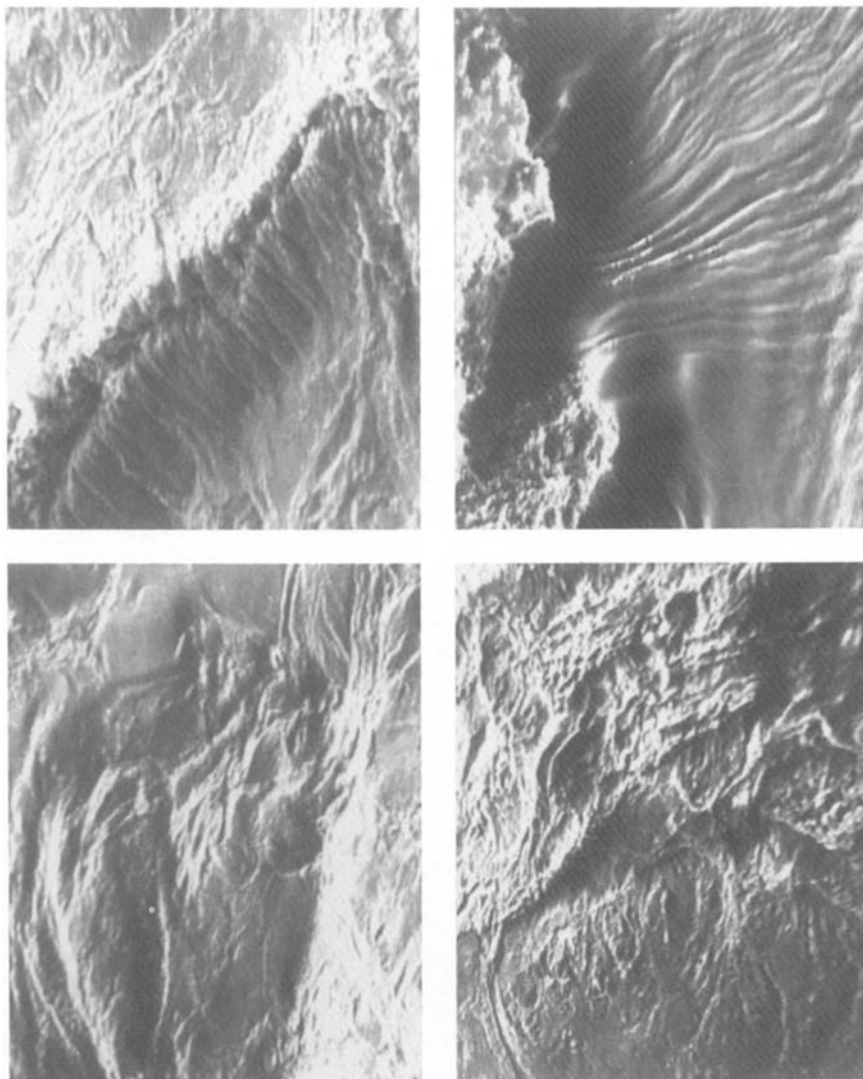


Fig. 4. Images from *Borealis*, two-channel video installation, 1993. In this work, two video projectors, through split beam mirrors, project onto four translucent screens in an otherwise darkened room. The images appear on both sides of vertically positioned 4-ft screens. Viewers are immersed in the rhythm of the imagery, surrounded by it as they walk in and around it.

Steina." We discuss the way the galleries sew up the art scene and make the artists kiss ass. I always tell them that they do not have to kiss ass. And they seem greatly relieved, almost as though they did not know this. I remember once overhearing a student say, "But we have to do this kind of conceptual/intellectual work because this is that kind of a school." I turned around and said, "NO YOU DON'T." And the whole class laughed because they realized that they really do not. I tell them that it is every artist's duty to be disobedient. We discuss what it means to be a mainstream person and have a comfortable life and how deciding to be an artist basically means deciding to live a materially uneasy but more rewarding life. They discuss this for a while—not that they have not already thought about it a lot, but they get lonely

and confused. So I reassure them that there is no grander life than the creative, artistic life. It is the unknown, the exploration, the fact of being your own person on your own time.

After I ask my students about UFOs (and some of them say they do believe and others say they do not), I tell them we are not going to talk about UFOs anyway but about how we must stick to our beliefs. I tell them that, if they believe in UFOs, they should raise their hands whether or not the other half of the class is going to sneer. The discussion turns to intimidation and lying about one's beliefs just to get along. It is emotionally stressful to admit to having an independent mind. One does not have to be an artist to experience this dilemma, but I believe it is the artist's duty to stay on the fringe.

CREATIVITY AND COMMUNICATION

The creative process, for me, is a tremendous pleasure, even when it is painful, such as when I feel inadequate to the task. People perceive this pleasure in my work and often object, "But you are just playing!" This comment gives me tremendous pleasure!

The motivation to make art seems to come from a deep desire to communicate; for some artists, it comes from a desire to communicate on a massive scale—something that does not particularly interest me. I see no qualitative difference in more people versus one person if I am communicating. Our whole existence seems to be about communication. It cuts through cultures, languages and continents. It also cuts through time. We spend so much time with people we have never met—often, with people who are long dead. But the primary motivation for all art is the desire to communicate with oneself. This is a spiritual idea. It has been the sad lot of many artists to communicate only to future audiences, but, through lucky coincidences, artists and their audiences have sometimes found each other in the same place at the same time. Paris in the 1920s was like that. New York in the late 1960s was like that for us. It was a luxury.

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