

Steina: Playback

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MIT List Visual Arts Center presents the first US museum solo exhibition in over a decade by the pathbreaking video artist Steina.

Opening October 26, *Steina: Playback* marks the artist's first US museum solo exhibition since 2011, showcasing her pioneering works in video, music, and technology in a focused retrospective.



Cambridge, MA, October 9, 2024—In October 2024, the MIT List Visual Arts Center presents *Steina: Playback*, the first US museum solo exhibition in over a decade of the pioneering video and media artist Steina (b. Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir, 1940, Iceland).

Organized by the MIT List Visual Arts Center in collaboration with the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, the exhibition will be on view across the List Center's galleries from October 26, 2024–January 12, 2025, and at the Buffalo AKG Art Museum from March 14–June 30, 2025. In October 2025, it will travel to Iceland, where an expanded version of the show will be jointly hosted by the Reykjavík Art Museum and the National Gallery of Iceland.

Since cofounding The Kitchen in New York City in 1971, Steina’s dynamic practice has traversed video, performance, and installation through an experimental approach to electronic processing tools, persistent explorations of what she calls “machine vision,” and an enduring ethos of play. A classically trained violinist, Steina took up video in 1970, bringing to her new instrument—initially a Sony Portapak—a musician’s attention to the “majestic flow of time.” Although Steina was included in pivotal media and video art exhibitions during the eighties and nineties, and her works are housed in major museum collections in the US and Europe, she remains underrecognized in a visual arts context, including in many recent assessments of video’s place in postwar art history. With a focused look at works from 1970–2000, *Playback* traces Steina’s work across three critical decades of video art, highlighting her radical commitment to play and the foundational place of musical concepts within the innovative compositions she developed.

Playback begins with early videotapes and installations coauthored with her life partner Woody Vasulka (1937–2019), which explore the medium of video through unique modes of processing, manipulating, and transforming its electronic signal. Among the Vasulkas’ iconic early works is *Matrix I* (1970–72), a multimonitor video matrix that uses early synthesizing tools to interface and cross-feed sound and video signals across a grid of CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors, creating the appearance of horizontal drift across their screens. Other works, such as *Noisefields*, *Soundgated Images*, and *Telč* (all 1974), furthered Steina and Woody’s interest in the peculiarities of the video signal and highlight early artist-developed signal processors (among them George Brown’s H.D. Variable Clock and Field Flip/Flop Switcher, Eric Siegel’s Dual Colorizer, and the Rutt/Etra scan processor).

Steina’s and Woody’s aesthetic interests diverged in the mid-1970s during their time in Buffalo, where they taught at the Center for Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo, alongside the era’s leading experimental and structural filmmakers. For Steina, the exploration of a liberated, nonhuman-centric subjectivity became a key facet of her oeuvre. She began *Machine Vision*—a series of installations and videotapes that incorporate what she calls “motorized gizmos” (moving cameras, turntables, and reflective orbs). In contrast to other artists concerned with the threat of surveillance and control, these works materialized her effort to explore the exuberant and even utopian possibilities of an “intelligent, yet not human vision.” The series is represented in the exhibition with *Allvision* (1976), a sculptural installation that comprises two cameras on a turntable

slowly circumnavigating a central reflective orb. The two camera feeds, shown on monitors nearby, show the entirety of the space. “When people look at *Allvision*, they see themselves and, therefore, assume it is about them,” Steina has said. “But then they leave and *Allvision* keeps going.”

Her videotape *Orbital Obsessions* (1975–77) takes “machine vision” to a pulsing crescendo; viewers encounter images and afterimages, rapid-fire switching and keying between camera feeds, and a dizzying picture-in-picture portrait of the artist in her Buffalo studio. Multiple cameras circle monitors, and the video image switches, rotates, and zooms to disorienting effect. *Orbital Obsessions* lays the groundwork for her concept of the “constantly moving image” and her efforts to move beyond the human eye as the essential subject position and perspective from which images can be generated. In this particular work, Steina herself adopts the behavior of a turntable, though it is unclear whether she is operating the machine or if its performance sets the cues for her.

Coming from the world of music, Steina approaches video as a “time-energy construction” and brings qualities of play and performance to her sense of composition and interfacing of musical instruments and video imaging tools in real time. *Violin Power* (1970–78), her “demo tape on how to play video on the violin,” uses the audio frequencies from her instrument to disrupt and displace the video footage of her playing it. Video allows Steina to keep using her violin as a creative tool but also, for the first time, as a deformative, destructive one. “I could use my violin to steer a bulldozer down the road ... my dream is to demolish a whole building by playing the violin,” she once quipped. Sound, for Steina, has the power to figure and disfigure, to make and unmake images.

In 1980, when the Vasulkas moved to New Mexico, Steina’s work embraced the grand proportions of horizon, desert, and cosmos; the landscape became her studio. Venturing into nature and combining imaging technologies with reflective orbs that first entered her work with *Allvision*, she reorients the human body’s relationship to the natural environment and expands how we can access natural phenomena through media. A symphonic tribute to the vastness of the land, *The West* (1983) features two channels of video that checkerboard across a double-stacked arch of twenty-two CRT monitors. Returning to the motif of horizontal drift that first appeared in *Matrix I*, it incorporates footage of ancient cliff dwellings made by Ancestral Puebloans, satellite dishes of the Very Large Array astronomical radio observatory, and sweeping vistas of

plains and rock formations. These images are cut with various forms of drift, sweeps, and layers and set to a haunting electronic soundscape composed by Woody. *Geomania* (1986), with its ziggurat-like stack of monitors, features Southwestern landscapes overlaid and intercut with those of Steina's native Iceland. Both *The West* and *Geomania* might be thought of as video earthworks: the materials of stone, earth, and sky are displaced and transformed—not physically, but through the video signal and formations of their screens.

The 1980s also marked a new phase of digital processing and programming in Steina's work, as documented in *Cantaloup* (1980), a documentary-like video in which playful demo sequences are intercut with Steina explaining the Digital Image Articulator, a tool that the Vasulkas developed with Jeffrey Schier. For the Vasulkas, artistic tools were meant to be shared and disseminated: their DIY spirit is reflected in the informational broadcasts they made for public television as well as their voluminous archive of documents and tapes, much of which is freely accessible online via vasulka.org.

In Steina's practice, movement has always been essential: in early works, automating a camera lens's pan, tilt, rotation, or zoom created nonhuman movement, while in later works, flows of rivers, waves, light, and wind serve as natural analogues to the electronic flow of video and audio signals. In the 1990s and 2000s, as video projection technology advanced, Steina began creating immersive multichannel video installations that are often dizzying in their scale and turbulent motion. *Borealis* (1993), for example, uses natural imagery from her native Iceland that is abstracted through rotations of the camera, editing that reverses the flow of water, and a mirror effect created by two channels of video projected on four translucent screens. Both *Mynd* (2000) and *Lava and Moss* (2000), presented in this exhibition, are simultaneously all-absorbing and environmental in scale while zooming in on the intimate textures of moss, rocks, ice, and water. In the late 1990s, Steina continued to develop image processing tools, such as the software *Image/ine* (with Tom Demeyer), which was used to create the stretched surfaces of *Mynd* and the funhouse-like displacement effects of *Warp* (2000).

Playback attests to Steina's fearless DIY approach to new media and pioneering synthesis of the electronic and the natural. With her distinctive translation of musical modes into the visual realm and her desire to use video to show us what the human eye cannot see, Steina reveals an electronic sublime that attunes us to the vibrant, invisible energies inherent to both video and natural phenomena. In bringing renewed recognition to Steina's innovative vision, *Playback* also looks forward, centering

Steina's work for a younger generation of artists as they question the place of technology and the human in relation to larger social and ecological concerns.

This exhibition is co-curated by Natalie Bell, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center; and Helga Christoffersen, Curator-at-Large and Curator, Nordic Art and Culture Initiative, Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

The exhibition is accompanied by a robust calendar of tours, talks, and public programs. The artist will appear for a public conversation with Bell, media scholar Chris Hill, and art historian Gloria Sutton on October 25, from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., followed by an opening reception. All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public.

The exhibition catalogue, *Steina*, copublished with MIT Press and Buffalo AKG Art Museum, will be released in spring 2025. Edited by Bell, and designed by Katy Nelson, it features lead essays by Ina Blom, Joey Heinen, and Gloria Sutton; an interview with the artist; and a roundtable conversation with scholars and curators reflecting on Steina's legacy. Plate section texts by List Center Curatorial Assistant Zach Ngin narrate various themes that endure across Steina's oeuvre: System Performance, Tools, Signals, Machine Vision, and Ecology.

Steina (b. Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir, 1940, Iceland; lives in Santa Fe, NM) trained as a violinist in Reykjavik and Prague and emigrated to New York City in 1965 with her life partner, Woody Vasulka. Initially working as a freelance musician, she began to focus on video in 1970, and in 1971, cofounded The Electronic Kitchen (later The Kitchen), the legendary multidisciplinary avant-garde performance and experimental art space in New York City. After moving to Buffalo in 1973, Steina helped develop the production lab at the Center for Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo.

Steina has shown at leading institutions internationally, including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh (now the Carnegie Museum of Art); Jonson Gallery, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Important collections with her work include the Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, National Gallery of Canada, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Julia Stoschek Foundation, and Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. Awards and grants include: Rockefeller Foundation and NEA grants (1982); the Maya Deren Award (1992); the

Siemens Media Arts Prize from ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany (1995); as well as an honorary doctorate from the San Francisco Art Institute (1998).

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ABOUT THE MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

The [List Visual Arts Center](#) is a creative laboratory that provides artists with a space to freely experiment and push existing boundaries. As the contemporary art museum at MIT, the List Center collects, commissions, and presents rigorous, provocative, and artist-centric projects that engage MIT and the global art community. Exhibitions are accompanied by a broad range of educational programs for the public and the MIT



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community, special events, and scholarly publications. The galleries and all programs are free and open to the public.

Image:

Steina, *Borealis*, 1993. Two-channel video, four-channel sound environment; 10:28 min.
Installation view: *Sum & Differences*, House of Arts, Brno, 2024. Courtesy House of Arts, Brno. Photo: Miloš Strnad

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