

# Steina: Playback

October 26, 2024 – January 12, 2025



MIT List Visual  
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For over five decades, 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.

Unlike many of her peers working in video in its early decades, Steina did not consider US television culture a central force against which her creative media and video activity was defined. Instead, human perception is a key site of confrontation and subversion in her work. Seeking to transcend the limits of conventional vision, Steina aimed to channel the energetic forces of the world through her work: the flux of water, wind, and, above all, the electronic signal itself.

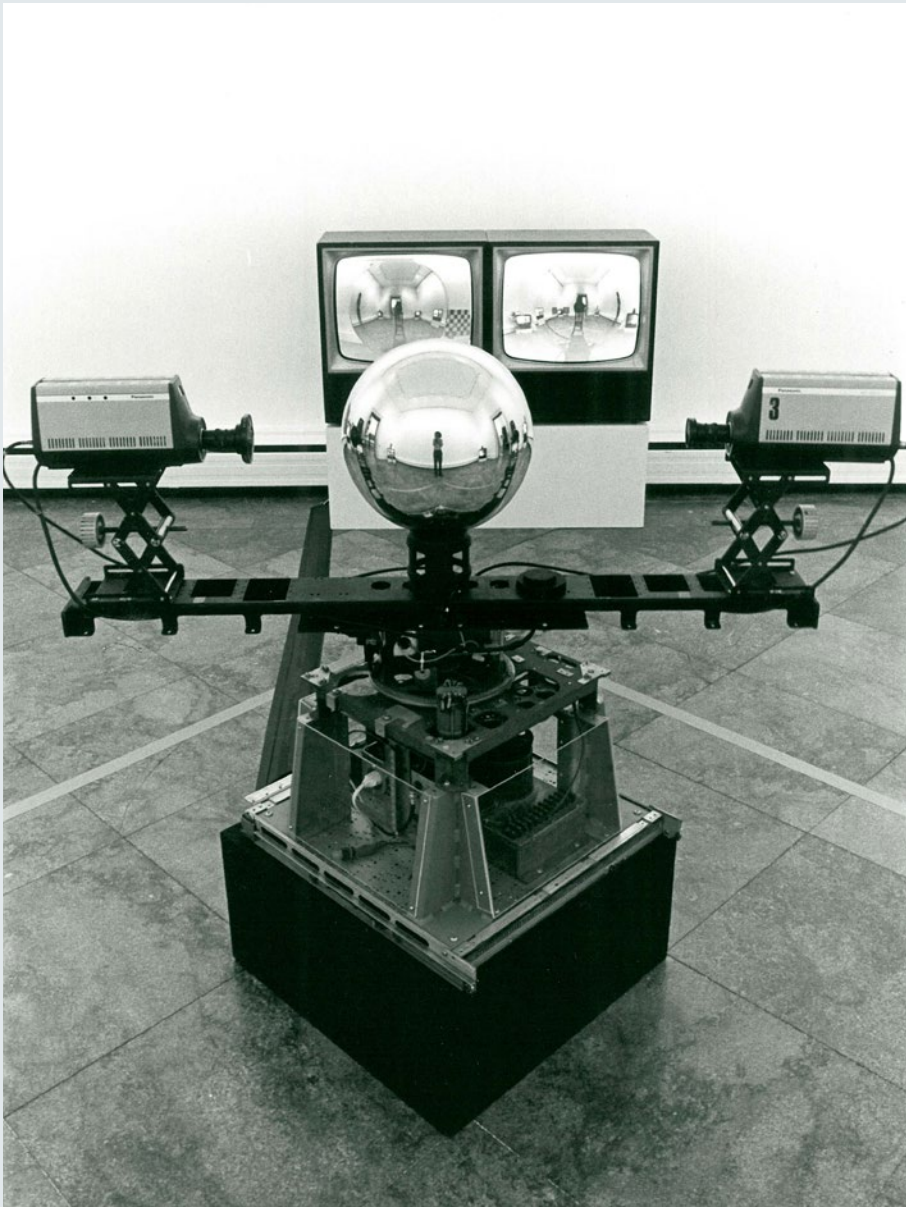
Born and raised in Iceland, Steina studied music and composition in Reykjavik and followed her studies to the Music Conservatory in Prague, the city where she met her life partner, Woody Vasulka. After graduating, Steina joined the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, and when she and Woody moved to New York City in 1965, she found work as a freelance musician. However, Steina quickly became disillusioned, and her departure from professional music coincided with her first encounter with the electronic signal in 1970—an experience she likened to falling in love. "Boy, was I glad to get rid of that violin," she said.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, she brought to this new medium an unusual attention to synchrony, polyphony, and real-time

creation—or, in her words, the "majestic flow of time."

As émigrés to the US, the Vasulkas' first years in New York City's counterculture, from 1965–73, were deeply formative for them—but they also left their mark on the city as cofounders, in 1971, of the media and performance space The Kitchen (originally The Electronic Kitchen). They referred to the space as a "live audience test laboratory," attesting to its experimental and improvisational spirit. The Kitchen was a favored venue for the era's robust musical avant-garde as well as its raucous groups of early electronic and video artists, whose references ranged from early ecological theory to DIY theories of cultural change. "There is no reason to entertain minds anymore, because that has been done and did not help," the Vasulkas wrote in their opening statement for the space. "There is just surrender, the way you surrender to the Atlantic Ocean, the way you listen to the wind, or the way you watch the sunset."<sup>2</sup>

Many of Steina's earliest videotapes and installations were coauthored with Woody (who passed away in 2019) and date from 1970 to 1974, when the pair investigated

1 Steina Vasulka, quoted in MaLin Wilson and Jackie Melega, "Woody and Steina Vasulka: From Feedback to Paganini," *ArtLines* (Taos, NM, May 1981): 10, [https://www.vasulka.org/archive/4-20a/Artlines\(5056\).pdf](https://www.vasulka.org/archive/4-20a/Artlines(5056).pdf).  
2 Steina and Woody Vasulka, text from the opening of *The Electronic Kitchen*, June 15, 1971, see <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KOP/KOP002.pdf>.



Steina, *Allvision*, 1976. Live electro/opto/mechanical environment. Instrumentation: Josef Krames, Woody Vasulka, and Bruce Hamilton. Installation view: *The VASULKAS / Steina: Machine Vision, Woody: Descriptions*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1978. Courtesy Buffalo AKG Art Museum. Photo: Kevin Noble

Front cover:

Steina, *Geomania*, 1986 (still). Two-channel multi-monitor video installation, with sound; 13:26 min. Courtesy the artist and BERG Contemporary, Reykjavik

video through their mutual obsession with its signal and the custom-designed tools that could distort and manipulate it. When they used video footage (rather than just randomly generated signals), it was processed and transformed using colorizers, keyers, oscillators, and processors.<sup>3</sup> The Vasulkas' early works created abstract electronic landscapes of light and sound that were as influenced by cutting-edge consumer technology as by psychedelic counterculture. Among their iconic early works is *Matrix I* (1970–72), a multi-monitor video array in which they used early synthesizing tools to explore “the essence of image and sound—the signal.”<sup>4</sup> The Vasulkas were fascinated by video's electronic signal, in part because it was interchangeable with audio. To create their *Matrix* works, for example, they experimented with recording video feedback and then feeding their recorded video signals into an audio synthesizer.

*Matrix I* also marks their early exploration of the spatial nature of video's signal: abstract electronic images are made to skip and roll across a field of CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors, creating the impression of synchronized horizontal drift—a technical breakthrough that their peers dubbed the “Vasulka effect.” Offering what they called “a performance of energies,” the Vasulkas paid equal attention to the signal's magic and plasticity: “For the first time I understood the speed of light as not just

a part of a formula by Einstein. I suddenly could see how the signal struggles through the wires, how it gets mangled, how matter and energy combat each other,” Woody commented.<sup>5</sup> Steina, for her part, attested to their conversion and devotion: “We had a Media God, and it was called the Signal.”<sup>6</sup>

Other early works by the Vasulkas, such as *Distant Activities* (1972), *Noisefields*, *Soundgated Images*, and *Telč* (all 1974), highlight early artist-developed processors that could interface audio and video signals (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). For the Vasulkas, these tools were not simply instruments but also partners in an ever-evolving dialogue—and, most often, the Vasulkas worked directly with their makers to adapt or customize tools to their purposes. “We didn't want multipurpose tools,” Steina reflected, “we wanted to have a free run of boxes from various sources that we could combine and rearrange.”<sup>7</sup>

*Soundgated Images*, in which the same signal is channeled to both image and sound, features semi-abstract visual sequences—rotating cuboids, arcing scan lines, flickering rhombuses made of points of light—that move in concert with an evolving electronic soundtrack. In *Distant Activities*, biomorphic forms take shape and dissolve in regular patterns, an effect created with video feedback, processed



Steina and Woody Vasulka, *Matrix I*, 1970–72. Installation view: Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de la Ville de Strasbourg, 2002. Courtesy Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg. Photo: Musées de Strasbourg, N. Fussler

through a video keyer (Dual Colorizer). These works are decidedly abstract: unlike many works of early video art, they do not appropriate imagery from mass media, nor do they embody an activist or documentary spirit.

Steina and Woody's aesthetic interests diverged in the mid-1970s during their time in Buffalo, where they taught in the Center for Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo, alongside the era's leading experimental and structural filmmakers (Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, and Tony Conrad, among others). Here, Steina began to explore the exuberant and even utopian possibilities of an “intelligent, yet not human vision” with *Machine Vision* (1975–)—an experimental series of installations and videotapes that incorporate what she called “motorized gizmos” (moving cameras, turntables, and reflective orbs). “I wanted to have moving images that were moved not by the

musculature of the hands of an artist, but moved in some kind of mechanical way,” she said of its genesis. “I was also after a vision that was not a human vision, that was not something that we conventionally see. Why repeat [our] normal, average vision?”<sup>8</sup>

The series is represented in the exhibition by *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. Steina has described the sphere as: the most perfect form on earth, or in the universe maybe. There's so much of it. It's everywhere—in us, in our bodies, and outside us. You're always dealing with it—galaxies, or flowers. ... A ring is already a very magical form, but when the ring turns three-dimensional, begins to rotate, becomes an orbit—I can't think of anything more beautiful.<sup>9</sup>

3 An important early text on the Vasulkas, John Minkowsky's “Some Notes on Vasulka Video,” explains the function of these tools. See also Lenka Dolanová's book-length treatment of this theme in the Vasulkas' work, *A Dialogue with the Demons of the Tools* (Vašulka Kitchen Brno, 2021), and research compiled by Yvonne Spielmann and Vincent Bonin for Fondation Daniel Langlois (fondation-langlois.org).

4 Marita Sturken, cited in “Matrix 1970–72 (six loops of horizontal movement) Steina and Woody Vasulka” (description and technical data sheet of the video installation *Matrix*, January 9, 1995), Vasulka website, <https://www.vasulka.org/archive/Vasulkas3/Video/Matrix/Specifications.pdf>.

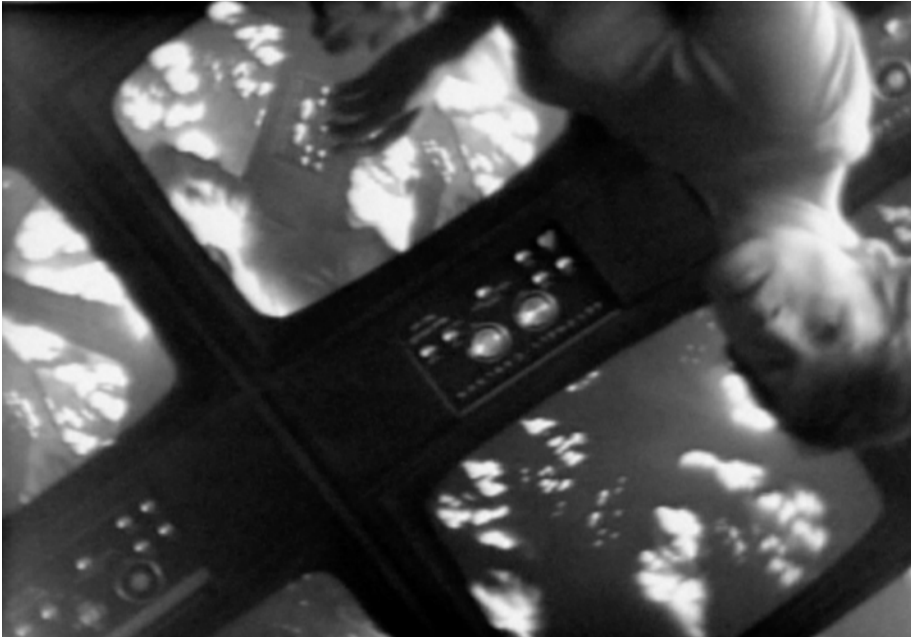
5 Woody Vasulka, “Woody and Steina Vasulka, Don Foresta, Christiane Carlut: A Conversation, Paris, Saturday 5, December 1992,” Vasulka website, [https://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/essays/K\\_CarlutConversation\\_01.html](https://www.vasulka.org/Kitchen/essays/K_CarlutConversation_01.html).

6 Steina Vasulka, “‘We Had a Media God, And It Was Called the Signal’: Interview with Steina and Woody Vasulka” (2015), interview by François Bovier and Tristan Lavoyer, in *Early Video Art and Experimental Film Networks: French-Speaking Switzerland in 1974: A Case for “Minor History,”* ed. François Bovier (Renens, Switzerland: ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne, 2017).

7 Steina, “Interview with Steina,” interview by Yvonne Spielmann, Fondation Daniel Langlois, 2003, <https://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=416>.

8 Steina Vasulka, “Interview with Steina Vasulka,” interview by Greg Weiss and Melody Sumner, *Crosswinds* (Santa Fe, 1992), <https://www.vasulka.org/archive/RightsIntrvwlnsttMediaPolicies/IntrvwlnsttKaldron/6/WeissSumnerSteina.pdf>.

9 Steina, “Orbits of Fortune: Steina in Conversation with Gene Youngblood, Santa Fe, New Mexico, October 2007,” in *Steina: 1970–2000*, ed. Joanne Lefrak and Karia Zavistovski (Santa Fe, NM: SITE Santa Fe, 2008), 42.



Steina, *Orbital Obsessions*, 1975–77 (still). Single-channel video, with sound; 24:24 min. Courtesy the artist and BERG Contemporary, Reykjavik



Steina and Joan La Barbara, *Voice Windows*, 1986 (still). Single-channel video with sound, 8:19 min. Courtesy the artist and BERG Contemporary, Reykjavik

Steina's 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, layered portrait of the artist in her Buffalo studio. Steina herself adopts the behavior of a turntable as multiple cameras circle the artist, and the video image switches, rotates, and zooms to disorienting effect. Time-based adjustments give the appearance of horizontal drift, while feeds from multiple cameras are keyed into the same frame. *Orbital Obsessions* advances her concept of the “constantly moving image” and heightens her efforts to move beyond the human eye as the essential subject position and perspective from which images can be generated.

As a former musician, Steina brought qualities of play and performance to her

use of tools and instruments that could process video in real time. *Violin Power* (1970–78), her “demo tape on how to play video on the violin,”<sup>10</sup> uses the audio frequencies from her violin to disrupt and displace the video footage of her playing it. The tape opens with a staidly dressed, studious-looking Steina playing the violin. It suddenly cuts to Steina pantomiming with her bow to The Beatles’ track “Let It Be.” After the song fades out, the tape cuts to a juddering sequence: as Steina drags her bow across the strings, her image is glitched, distorted, and generated. In one sequence, the violin controls the frequency of oscillation between two cameras, one in front of Steina and one behind her; in another, the violin bow seems to twist itself into a helix with the force of its own sound. By the end, both Steina and her instrument have dissolved into lines of pure electronic force, jumping and dancing with every note. The signal allowed Steina to keep using

10 Steina, quoted in *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970–75* (New York: Independent Curators International, 1993), 86.

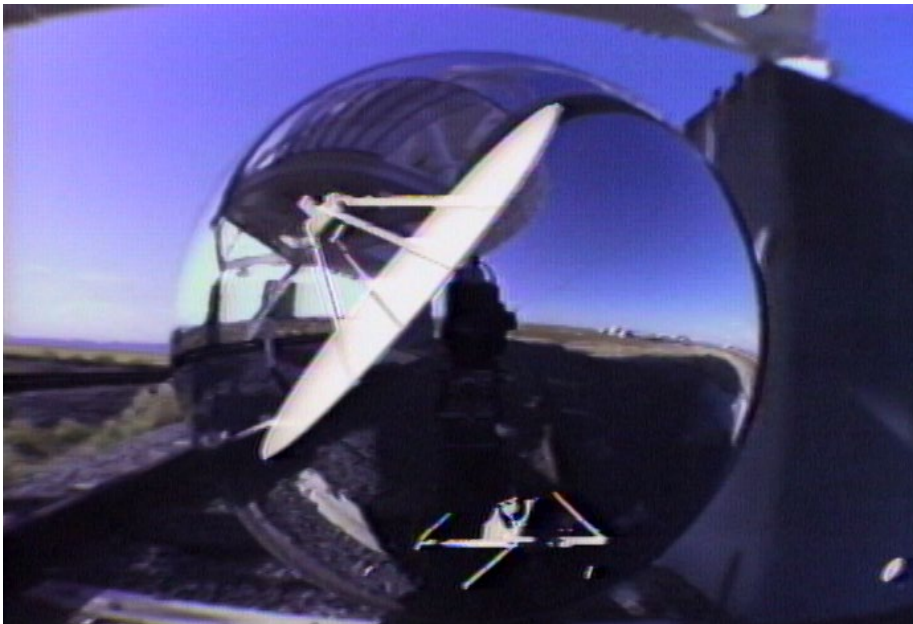
her violin as a creative tool but also, for the first time, as a deformative, destructive one. “I could use my violin to steer a bulldozer down the road ... my dream is to demolish a whole building by playing the violin,” she once quipped.<sup>11</sup> Sound, for Steina, had the power to figure and disfigure, to make and unmake images.

In later decades, Steina continued these lines of inquiry in collaboration with other musicians and friends. In *Voice Windows* (1984), made with Joan La Barbara, glimpses of landscapes bleed through one another, modulated by the singer’s voice. In *Trevor* (1999–2000), the face of composer Trevor Wishart is wildly distorted by his own vocalizations—his face sometimes comes unhinged from his skull, which is interrupted by a vertical line of symmetry, blooming and collapsing on itself. Across these works, the visuals are both the source and product of the sound, and audio, video,

and performers become instruments of one another.

When the Vasulkas moved to New Mexico in 1980, 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 reoriented the human relationship to the natural environment and expanded how we can access natural phenomena. 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. 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 are cut with drifts, sweeps, and layers and set to a

11 Steina, quoted in Paul Weideman, “Fantasizing About Destroying Buildings with Violin,” *Pasatiempo*, [https://www.vasulka.org/archive/4-20b/Pasa\(5040\).pdf](https://www.vasulka.org/archive/4-20b/Pasa(5040).pdf).



Steina, *The West*, 1983 (stills). Two-channel multi-monitor video installation with sound; 30 min. 72 × 144 × 144 in. (182.88 × 365.76 × 365.76 cm) overall. Instrumentation and sound: Woody Vasulka. Courtesy the artist and BERG Contemporary, Reykjavik

haunting electronic soundscape composed by Woody. Extensive sections also deploy rotating reflective orbs as a vision device.

**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. Steina's videotape **Cantaloup** (1980) is both a work of art and an offbeat demonstration of the Digital Image Articulator, which the Vasulkas developed with engineer Jeffrey Schier. "In the summer of 1978, we decided to build a digital image tool. In the tradition of video, our work with the computer had to result in an instantly moving image, which would involve a large amount of numbers in real time," her narration begins. She shows the process of digitizing an analog camera image of a sphere that results in its display as monochrome tonal "layers" that can each be manipulated digitally—and also defines for viewers a then-novel word: "pixel."

These documentary sequences are intercut by more playful moments of experimentation with the tool: the artist's face is pixelated then multiplied to a grid of dozens; a hand grasps the video's titular melon, while different portions of the frame are frozen in succession. The Vasulkas were not content to merely appropriate commercial tools: throughout their careers, they modified and combined them, created their own, and shared knowledge of them. *Vasulka Video*, a series of self-made documentaries on their work and process, was broadcast on public television, as was *Cantaloup*. These efforts were documented in *Eigenwelt der Apparatewelt: Pioneers of Electronic Arts*, an exhibition (and publication) they organized in Linz, Austria,

in 1993, which offered a critical historical resource on the vanishing world of analog video tools. For Steina and Woody, these tools were more than machines: they represented a lifetime's worth of connection, collaboration, and sociality.

In the 1990s and 2000s, as video projection technology became more affordable, Steina began creating immersive multichannel video compositions that are often dizzying in their scale and turbulent motion—and with each channel operating like a melodic line in a polyphony. In **Borealis** (1993), one of Steina's first works with projection, natural imagery from a geothermal lake near Reykjavik 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 vertical screens. The installation is intentionally disorienting, and Steina has described feeling satisfied when a viewer reported a sensation of overwhelming vertigo. Landscape, here, is unhinged from perspective and distance, and the work produces a kind of electronic rapture or machine vision taken to new extremes.

In the late 1990s, Steina continued to develop image-processing tools, such as the software *Image/ine* (with Tom Demeyer), which allowed for real-time manipulation of uncompressed video. Steina employed *Image/ine* to create the stretched surfaces of her six-channel video installation **Mynd** (2000), which contains digitally processed footage of horses, the ocean, and landscapes. Across the width of the installation, each channel is projected in alternation, vertical, horizontal, furthering the work's chaotic fluidity. Both *Mynd* and **Lava and Moss** (2000) are simultaneously all-absorbing and environmental in scale while zooming in on the intimate textures of moss, rocks, ice, and water. In both works, nature is pitted against electronic manipulation—or natural and electronic energies are made to correspond. "It's a great challenge," Steina has said of *Lava and Moss*, "to get landscape, frozen and

solid for centuries, to move ... dance."<sup>12</sup> In these later works, flows of river, waves, light, and wind complement the electronic flow of video and audio signals, and the kind of mechanical ballet that emerged in Steina's machine vision works is intensified through new software and projection technologies.

Across three decades of exploration, *Playback* attests to Steina's fearless DIY approach to experimenting with

new media and pioneering synthesis of the electronic and the natural. With her enduring commitment to curiosity and play, her translation of musical modes, like polyphony, into the visual realm, and her desire to use video to show us what the human eye cannot see, Steina tunes into the vibrant invisible energies inherent to both video and the natural phenomena around us, in pursuit of her vision of an electronic sublime.

<sup>12</sup> Steina, "Works by Steina: Lava and Moss," Vasulka website, [https://www.vasulka.org/Steina/Steina\\_LavaAndMoss/LavaAndMoss.html](https://www.vasulka.org/Steina/Steina_LavaAndMoss/LavaAndMoss.html).

*Steina: Playback* is 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. It is organized by the List Visual Arts Center in collaboration with the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, where it will travel in March 2025.

## LEARN MORE

Dolanová, Lenka. *A Dialogue with the Demons of the Tools: Steina and Woody Vašulka*.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Steina** (b. Steinunn Briem Bjarnadóttir, 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. Beginning in 1970, she began to focus on video work and, in 1971, cofounded The Electronic Kitchen (later The Kitchen), the legendary alternative art space in New York City. After moving to Buffalo in 1973, Steina helped develop the production lab at the Center for Media Study at SUNY 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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## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Steina in Conversation with Chris Hill, Gloria Sutton, and Natalie Bell

Friday, October 25, 2024, 5:30 PM  
In-person program

### Graduate Student Talk: Nikhil Singh

Thursday, November 7, 2024, 5:30 PM  
Hybrid program

### Graduate Student Talk: Manaswi Mishra

Thursday, November 21, 2024, 5:30 PM  
Hybrid program

### Video/Sound Performance: Andrew Neumann

Friday, December 6, 2024, 6 PM  
In-person program

### Film Screening: *The Vasulka Effect*

Wednesday, January 8, 2025, 5:30 PM  
In-person program

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required. For a full list of programs and more information about these events, visit: [listart.mit.edu/events-programs](https://listart.mit.edu/events-programs)

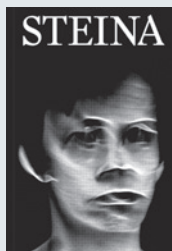
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## FORTHCOMING CATALOGUE



*Steina*, copublished with MIT Press and the Buffalo AKG Art Museum and designed by Katy Nelson, will be released in spring 2025. 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.

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