

STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA

Interactive video/computer/sound installation.
Courtesy of the artist.

BY DAVID MATHER

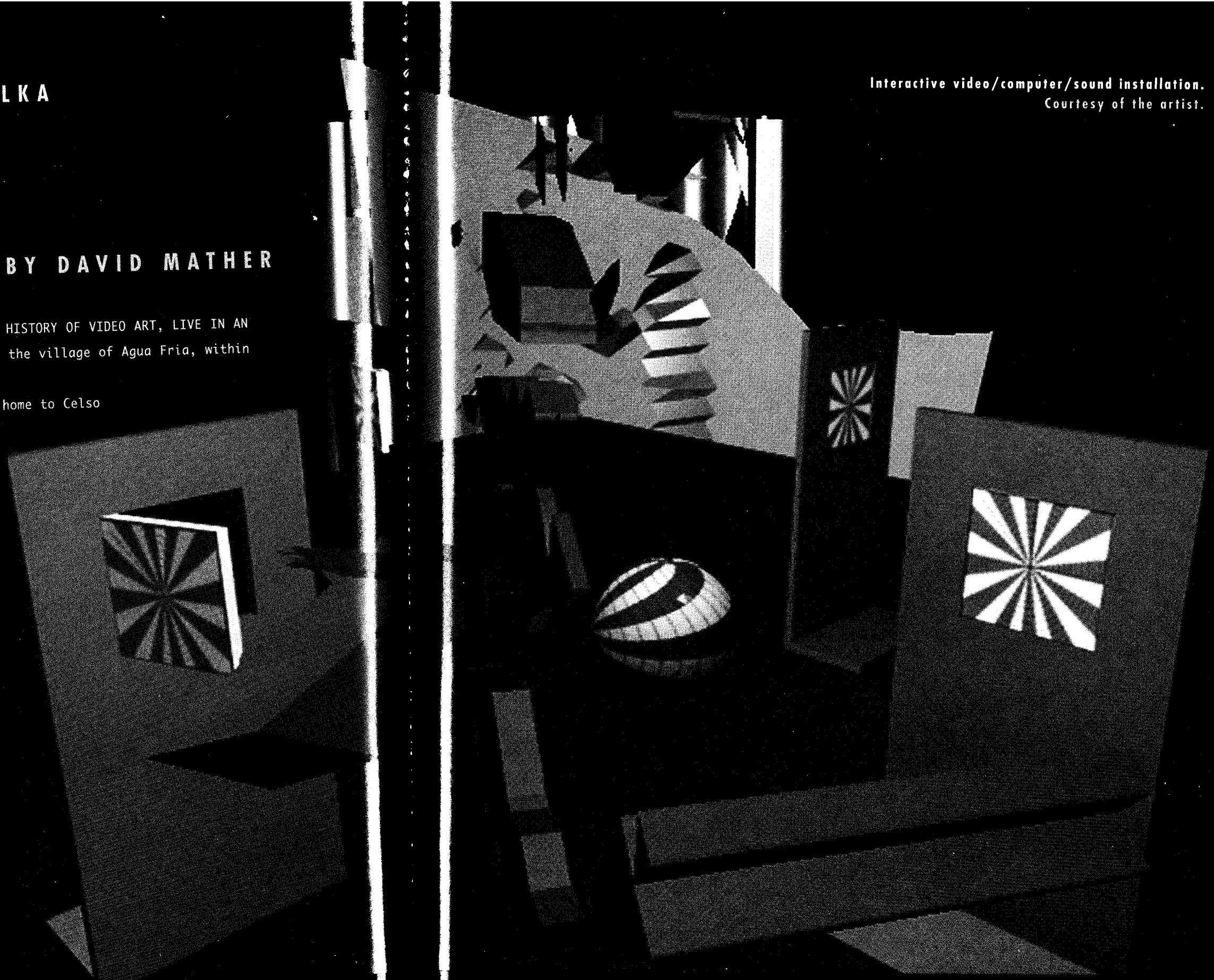
STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA, PRIMARY FIGURES IN THE HISTORY OF VIDEO ART, LIVE IN AN adobe house next to the Church of San Isidro in the village of Agua Fria, within the city of Santa Fe.

Theirs is a house with a history of art. It was home to Celso Gallegos, who left an artistic legacy that places him among the greatest santeros of twentieth-century New Mexico (El Palacio, 1994, Vol. 99, No. 3). Just as Gallegos did, the Vasulkas live where they work. Their living area is integrated into an immense studio that is surrounded by a mass of "techno-clutter." And though they've made their home here for sixteen years, their approach to video art remains European: Steina's reveals her Icelandic-Nordic matter-of-factness; Woody's comes through in Central European irony and sense of tragedy.

This conversation began at the couple's home, continued at a second meeting with Woody, and ended after a series of E-mail exchanges with Steina while she was in Prague visiting friends.

The exhibition "Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media" will be at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe through February 3, 1997.

DIGITAL PROCESSING BY
MICHAEL SUMNER





Woody Vasulka, "The Brotherhood," 1994-96.

Interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical constructions; "Table 1," 1996, illuminated plotting table, computer, video camera, stepper motors, dynamic projection/screen positioner, environment sensors. Courtesy of the artist.

DAVID MATHER: Steina, you grew up in Iceland and eventually moved to Prague, and Woody, you grew up in Czechoslovakia. I take it that you met there, so why didn't you settle there?

WOODY VASULKA: We met in 1962 in Prague where Steina was attending the Music Conservatory and where I had begun making films. We met when she asked me if I knew how to fix motorcycles. I was a graduate of the School of Industrial Engineering, but I had quite a bit of trouble fixing her bike. We married two years later.

STEINA VASULKA: After we got married, I wasn't going to live in Czechoslovakia, and Woody wasn't going to live in Iceland. How easy it was to make a decision! We only came to America for a year. We were just going to check it out. At that time, especially coming from Czechoslovakia, America was a benign place. We all wanted to investigate it, because we knew that it was a great country. We didn't come to America to "make it." We didn't come with the immigrant's dream. We just came.

WOODY: It was a curiosity. My generation severed all these loyalties to nationalism and political alliances, so I had been adrift since I was born. When as visitors we overstayed our welcome here and faced deportation, we didn't blink an eye. We had assumed no obligations, and we still don't have any.

I remember how impressed I was reading a communist propaganda pamphlet in my youth, condemning, presumably, a decadent intellectual and cosmopolitan Jewish position on migration. What did they say: "Why do we need roots when we have wings?" We both aspired to be without alliances, to be world citizens, perhaps world artists.

STEINA: Remember when the [television] series "Roots" came out? I was just incredulous: "Why do they want to know their roots? We are in America!" This is what I was running away from—those damn roots—because I know even my thirty-fourth grandfather by name. I thought, I don't want that.

And then there is all this talk about community here; that's another thing we run away from, both me and Woody. We don't

want any community. The great thing about America is that there is no community. You don't have to go down the street and say "Good morning" to your neighbors.

So we started our own community of people who were drifting over—Czechs, Eastern Europeans, some Asians, Irish, and all kinds of people who had done the same thing, who had gotten themselves to the States, and we had sort of a blast!

Then, we fall into video.



Steina, "Summer Salt," 1982.

Eighteen minutes, color, sound.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

WOODY: That's very simplified: "We fall into video."

STEINA: Well, we drifted into video. So now we were doing video, and we had our video friends. It was very interesting in the early times of video, because it stretched from coast to coast. Take the people we called "The Cosmic Messengers." They would drive buses from coast to coast, and they would come from California and tell us what the others were doing. And then we would give them our tapes to take to the other end of the galaxy.

DM: So suddenly you were in a whole new community, one of your own making, or at

least of your own choosing. Why, when you wanted nothing to do with community?

WOODY: Fortunately, America is stratified by profession and by likely interests, in contrast to the Europe we remember, where people are socialized by clannishness or traditions. After all, we do not have much to say to people here who may not have the same interests. It's a further breaking down of community, that which is set up to "love your neighbor." On the other hand, this breakdown by profession is an escape from the ultimate human obligation—the practice of unconditional love.

You know, I grew up under communism where the unofficial religion was one of community imposed from above. This notion of community became a source of unspeakable violence at times; it is easy to kill your neighbor in Bosnia because you know so much about him. Our idea was that in America there was community by choice, by desire. Not by government decree.

DM: So your beliefs are in sync. But how did you come to video?

WOODY: When I was a teen-ager I was in a dead-end job in a communist factory, and I had to fight, I felt literally for my life, to get out. I finally managed by following the rules of the system and aspiring to higher education, which could get me out. Eventually I graduated from the famous Academy of Film in Prague but then was faced with a rather embarrassing realization: I had nothing to add to film. But video was quite different. With video it was love on the first sight.

My first encounter with video came at the Howard Wise Gallery. I knew how sound feedback sounded, but suddenly I understood video feedback. This decided my future by making me realize what I was about. It was that simple.

Video has an immediacy and an element of time-manipulation. It also has colorization, keying, and feedback. Through our experiments during the seventies, we deconstructed the electronic image, rather than synthesizing it. We analyzed the properties of the video signal. It has always been the motive of our work to look into other domains, to identify them, and to learn how to inhabit them.

DM: In order to peer into those other domains, do you need to develop new ways to communicate? New technical languages?

STEINA: I speak seven different languages, because speaking Icelandic doesn't get you anywhere in the world. So, in this sense, I am a linguist. But when it comes to syntax, the conventions bore me—I'm against them. I fall back on another convention, which is music, because I studied violin and music theory during my school days in Iceland, then Denmark, then Germany, then Czechoslovakia. That was when I went to Prague in 1959 to study at the Music Conservatory.

I know something about phrasing, about highs and lows, about the architecture of sounds. So I fall back on that when I'm doing my work. That was the big seduction of doing multiple channels [as for example, she did in *The West* in 1983], because music is also composed of different channels.



Steina, "The West," 1983

Two-channel video and four-channel sound installation; thirty minutes, color, sound; twenty-two video monitors, two video tapes, two video tapedecks, synchronizer. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

I don't have the gift of knowing what images should follow other images, but I know what sounds should follow other sounds. Like the case of *Pyroglyphs* [1994], it wasn't until I had the sound together that I understood how to edit it. I was totally guided by the sound and by the rules of sound. Woody always laughs at my edits, and the only feedback I get is that it's wrong, so I go back and I try again. At a certain point, Woody says, "This is okay," and I trust that it's okay. He gives me a funny kind of feedback, because he doesn't tell me how to do it.

This is where we're most different—Woody understands the visual and I the aural.

WOODY: I was extraordinarily lucky to come to this new way of doing things electronically. There is a bit of history about it. I was a radio telegraphist in the [Czech] Air Force. In those endless, half-conscious nights, I finally understood what I later called the "materiality of the electronic signal." I knew that it bounced around the ionosphere and stratosphere being changed, transformed into an endless variation of spectacular sound textures.



Steina, *Violin Power*, 1970–78.

Video still from Steina's "demo tape on how to play video on the violin."

Through this particular experience I was able to realize the connection between the instrument, the signal, and sound composition, and its place in electronic music-making.

We both were dedicated simply to looking at the technology. We were not interested in the making of art, though our only reading of the technology was aesthetic. Watching the behavior of the signal, a "professing" of the signal, became almost religious. To us,

observing time, energy, and the change of the signal's dynamic states was the religious rite.

This became a major period of practice for us and for a few others who were interested in these matters.

STEINA: It also was a time when we had access to video equipment from various sources, but when we started we had no signal-generating equipment. So, the first thing we bought was an audio synthesizer, because you have to have a signal generator, and we bought it as much to generate audio as to generate video. I always think that this is important: that when we first laid our money down, we put it on a *synthesizer!*

DM: I have heard you say many times that video can escape the narrative restrictions of film, those imposed by the director as author? Do you mean that video has the capacity to be interactive in a way film doesn't? And in your video work have you managed to kill the author?

WOODY: I have a rather short and abstract version of this: the author is being killed, not by the instrument but by the concept of participation or interactive space. There the narrative no longer is driven by the author. Finally, most of the investigation of such systems of telling is being given to the observers, and the syntactical relationships so important to authorship in literature, poetry, music, and film, suddenly become the domain of the observer, who still is probably completely unprepared for it. We call it the "total degradation of authorship by participation," and it is an integral part of this new strategy of engagement. A new set of syntactic relations has emerged in which both the author and the viewer have been plunged into new and unknown participatory experiences.

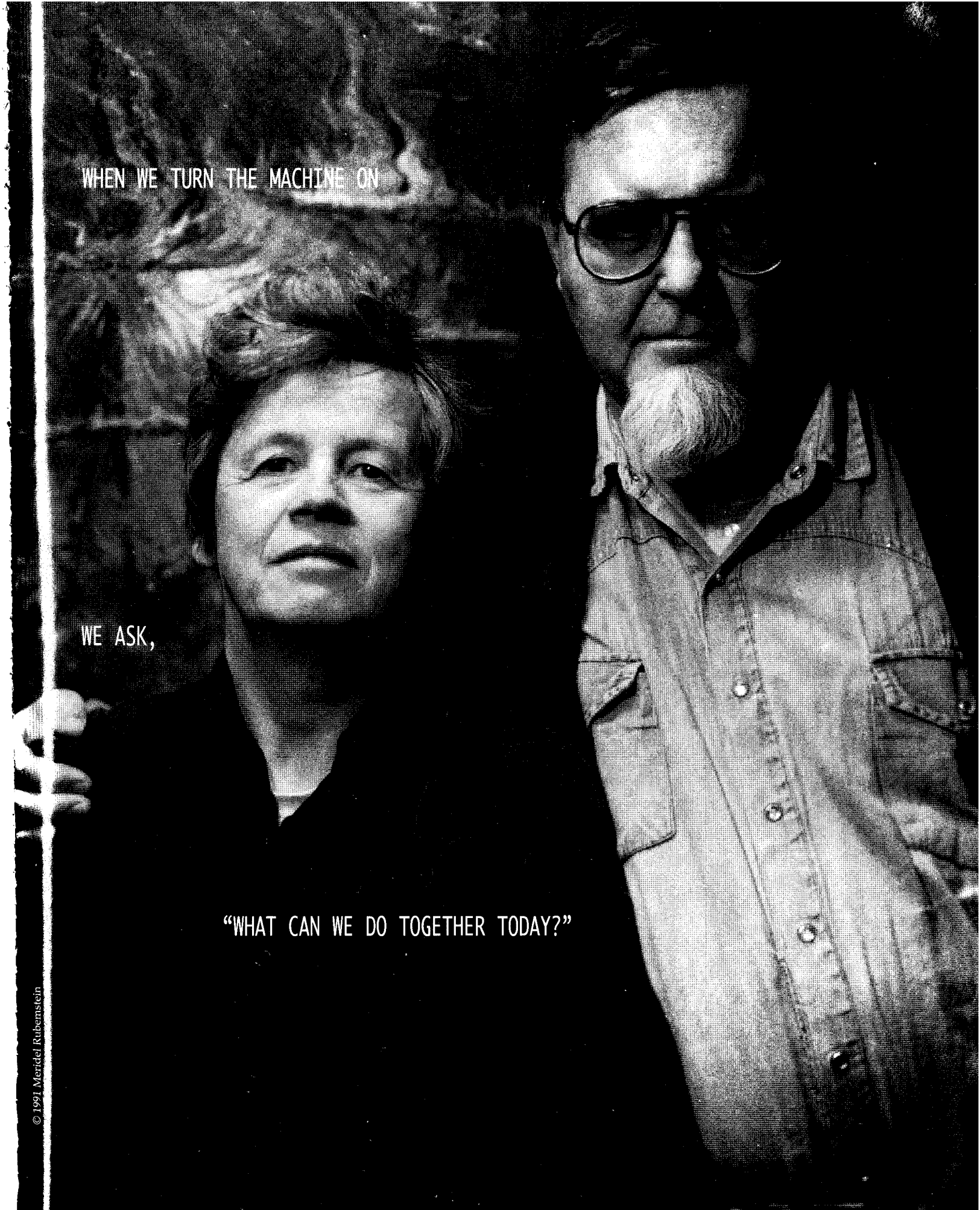
And this all is to take place in Virtual Reality.

DM: Hasn't some of your work been devoted to machine-machine interaction, as well as the human-machine interaction you've just described?

STEINA: One of our early turns was to systems-performance because we realized that there would be a dialogue, and that whatever the system was—mechanical, electronic, or human—we would have that dialogue. So we pointed the camera into the monitor and the system started performing before our eyes. Or we pointed the camera into the monitor and then we could leave to do some shopping. But when we came back, the machine was on, still performing for itself, for its own sake. Is there a sound of the falling tree when no one is watching?

The system had performed! So, we learned very early to not take an active role. The system is always there, and at a certain

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WHEN WE TURN THE MACHINE ON

WE ASK,

"WHAT CAN WE DO TOGETHER TODAY?"