Video Art Review — Anthology Film Archives/Electronic Arts Intermix
AN INTERVIEW WITH STEINA
By Robert A. Haller

RH You and Woody have been involved in video for...

SV Ten years.

RH In that time you have made three major moves, from the Kitchen in New York, to Buffalo, and now to Santa Fe, New Mexico. What are you looking for, or escaping from, or trying to find?

SV We have never lived permanently anywhere. I have been on the move since I was seventeen. When I lived in New York that was the longest stable period in my life. I was here [in New York] seven years; Buffalo was six years—it was admirable! It was time to move. I think people do that regularly. It doesn't directly have to do with the making, but—to go from place to place—it certainly changes it.

RH In New York you created your environment at the Kitchen; in Buffalo there was already a supportive structure at the University; and now in Santa Fe you are creating from scratch again.

SV I guess we have to create our own [environment] but this time we are interested in creating a more private environment. Although we are already being approached by different elements in the city to coproduce and work on projects.

RH What you and Woody work in is called "video." What that word means is not the same thing to many people. What does it mean to you?

SV Video has a common denominator: the signal of video. It is what film is to film. But otherwise, video artists have found various creative spaces within video. Let me suggest a few categories where I think most video is being practiced. Some artists work with space that is given in front of the camera (obscura), where the creative effort is in the arrangement of space, and the main concern of the artist who works in this area could be a performance, conceptual thought or an installation. Then there is another concern; the use of the extended eye through camera, and as you know, that principle has been thoroughly explored in film. If you go the other way, you get to people who modify or modulate images, either gathered through camera or generated internally without

any optical or external input. If you think about image generation and manipulation, you get very involved in the control part. In analog video it consists of waveform controls, and is almost never repeatable. It is like a musical improvisation. At first, the motivation to get a computer was to program the waveforms ....

RH But you still wanted—

SV No. After we got the computer the concerns became totally different. Before we could even perfect the control of analog tools, we plunged into digital ones, where in fact everything is a product of control. It is in "interactive real time" where I feel video becomes a category apart from the others (film on one side and computer graphics on the other). Everybody who works in video insists on it. In fact, there is no other, let us say, "time lapse mode" of video—unless you go beyond personal gear. Film "real time," as real as it can be, can never be interactive in sense of its feedback loop to its image forming process, and and in this context it has always its lapse. I would terribly miss this exciting control mode ....

RH But all video artists don't work in real time.

SV They do.

RH Well ... Nam June Paik, for instance, edits.

SV We can say that editing as inherited from film may analyze, or rather, criticize the "real time" of a scene, but in our context where video and computer are side by side, we must discuss a quite different aspect of "real time." The tools we use, video tape recorders, cameras, etc., operate in "real time" as a time in which signals propagate from input to output. You must realize that this term is the technological one, yet it is placed in the competitive context with our momentary perception as a tool of single frame composition. One result of real time system performance is that you can continuously modify the sequence, which in a process resembles [the] playing of a musical instrument, which also gives you a great amount of variations and immense capacity to discard unnecessary themes. So "real time" in our context does not mean the "infinite take," but the observation of image forming processes, which look to us as perceptually continuous, yet interactive in all modes, including the image forming.

RH Many people have problems with the lower levels of information content in video. For you this is not an issue ?

SV The aesthetic and the industrial drive is toward higher and higher resolution. Obviously, video wants to get even with film to begin with. Our personal need tends to be the opposite—we have to break down the video image to much less elements than a television camera offers. We must take this road to work with our digital tools meaningfully. We must sacrifice the resolution for speed (necessary in ditital imaging). We are working with [the] moving image, and the pressure of time is immense. It is hard to imagine, but in microprogramming our device, a range of nano-seconds is the area of our practical work.

RH The low field rate, and low resolution then, aren't crucial to video aesthetics ?

SV There are two ways to answer the topic of "field" or "frame" in television. The usual and most complete descriptive terminology is purely technological, referring to elements of television frame as a succession of two video fields, each containing ½ of the information in relationship to each other, called "interlace." However, no aesthetic account of the technologies we use has

been accomplished—not even attempted. So before we get into a discussion about the performance of the medium on the level of its elements, we would have to devise a specific language for it. I guess film had to do the same.

RH Recently you have discussed making your own "chips," which are miniature electronic circuits.

SV In our system, we have encountered chip manufacturing on one level in a device called "Field Programmable Logic Array" which is a programmable multipurpose circuit. You open particular pathways within the chip to achieve a particular function of that circuit. But now we could get together, say, ten individuals with very different needs. All our needs could be designed on just one chip. It can then be sent for photo reduction and on to the chip manufacturers. You can have your own custom-designed chip, operating at far greater speed than the industry is interested in at the moment.

RH You have made an installation, Machine Vision, with cameras rotating around a sphere, taking images reflected on the metal sphere. Is it—

SV All my installation pieces have involved rotating cameras, explorations of space/time. I do not like to arrange my spaces. If there happens to be a chair, even a knocked-over chair in the room, it stays that way. My pieces are an analysis of a space, or even a surveillance of a space.

RH Machine Vision was very elusive and involving.

SV Habitually, by looking, we keep selecting, subjectively "zooming" and "framing" the space around us. I wanted to create a vision that can see the whole space all the time. It took two cameras looking into the sphere. I have done more variations with more moving elements surveiling space by tilt, pan, zoom and rotation.

RH In Machine Vision there is no tape (the work is "live"); but you have also made a tape called Switch! Monitor! Drift! (1976) where the camera is also rotating, but pointed outwards. Is that work another form of "machine-vision?"

SV Yes. And it too derived from my watching so many videotapes, watching an individual behind a camera "delivering you" space. You are not in charge of the space; it is not your choice—it is somebody else's. It was a challenge to me to create a space that would not deal with the idiosyncracies of human vision.