

STEAM WORKS

The socio-ecological potential of the artistic works made of steam by Joan Brigham

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Joan Brigham (*1935, Tulsa, Oklahoma) has worked primarily with one material in her more than 40 years of artistic creation: steam. The artist used steam in large-scale installations, in public fountains, as a projection surface for laser and video art, and in kinetic steam-powered objects.

From 1975 Brigham was a fellow at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), founded in 1967 by the Hungarian artist Geörgy Kepes. CAVS encouraged collaboration between artists, scientists and engineers and served as a creative laboratory for experimenting with the use of new technologies to combine the fields of art and technology. In some cases, long-term working relationships were formed between artists, engineers and scientists, resulting in multi-faceted collaborative projects. For example, Brigham collaborated on several occasions with engineer Bill Cadogan, artist Stan VanDerBeek, experimental musician Christopher Janney, laser artist and musician Paul Earls, and German artist Otto Piene, who took over as director of the CAVS in 1974. A highlight of their collaboration was the almost 40-metre-long collaborative sculpture *Centerbeam*, which was exhibited at documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977. *Centerbeam* was the result of an equal collaboration between 14 artists from the CAVS and engineers, scientists and students from MIT. Although or precisely because *Centerbeam* eluded a capitalist logic of exploitation due to its enormous size and mediality, it was enthusiastically received by the public. *Centerbeam* thus corresponded to the ideological claim of the CAVS Fellows to create art outside the art world (cf. Piene 1980: 10). The Fellows' attitude is often dismissed as a form of outdated avant-gardism (cf. Schmidt 2011: 113). However, this misjudges the potential of alternative production contexts that do not focus on (male) artistic genius, but are based on solidarity and interdisciplinary action.

This research project is the first in-depth analysis of Joan Brigham's complete oeuvre. It focuses on the material qualities of steam as an artistic medium and attempts to place the work in an art historical context by comparing it to other fog and dry ice works by artists Fujiko Nakaya and Judy Chicago. Using a feminist methodology, it aims to highlight the achievements of women artists in the field of art and technology.