

In Western culture, we commonly think of machines as antithetical to the spontaneity and originality of the creative process. With a deep ambivalence about technology, we perceive machines as either versatile, problem-solving entities and panaceas for global problems, or as potentially tyrannical systems over which we have no control. While the machine has increasingly constituted an important subject for artists since the Industrial Revolution, the rise of technological art forms has raised new questions about the act of collaboration with the machine. The mechanical machine was modelled after the human body, its various components assigned roles as specific organs and limbs in an effort to mimic the efficiency of the human model. Yet the electronic machine, specifically the computer, is modelled on the human thought process.

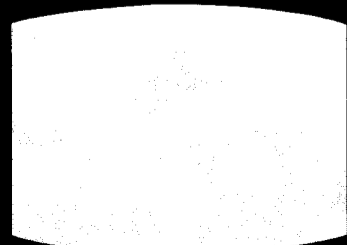
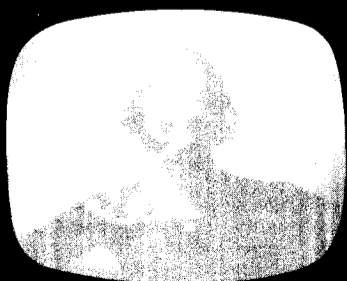
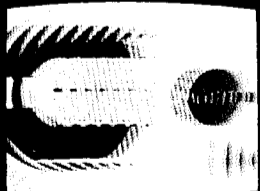
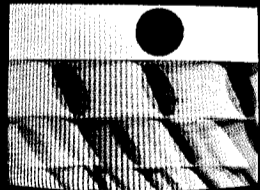
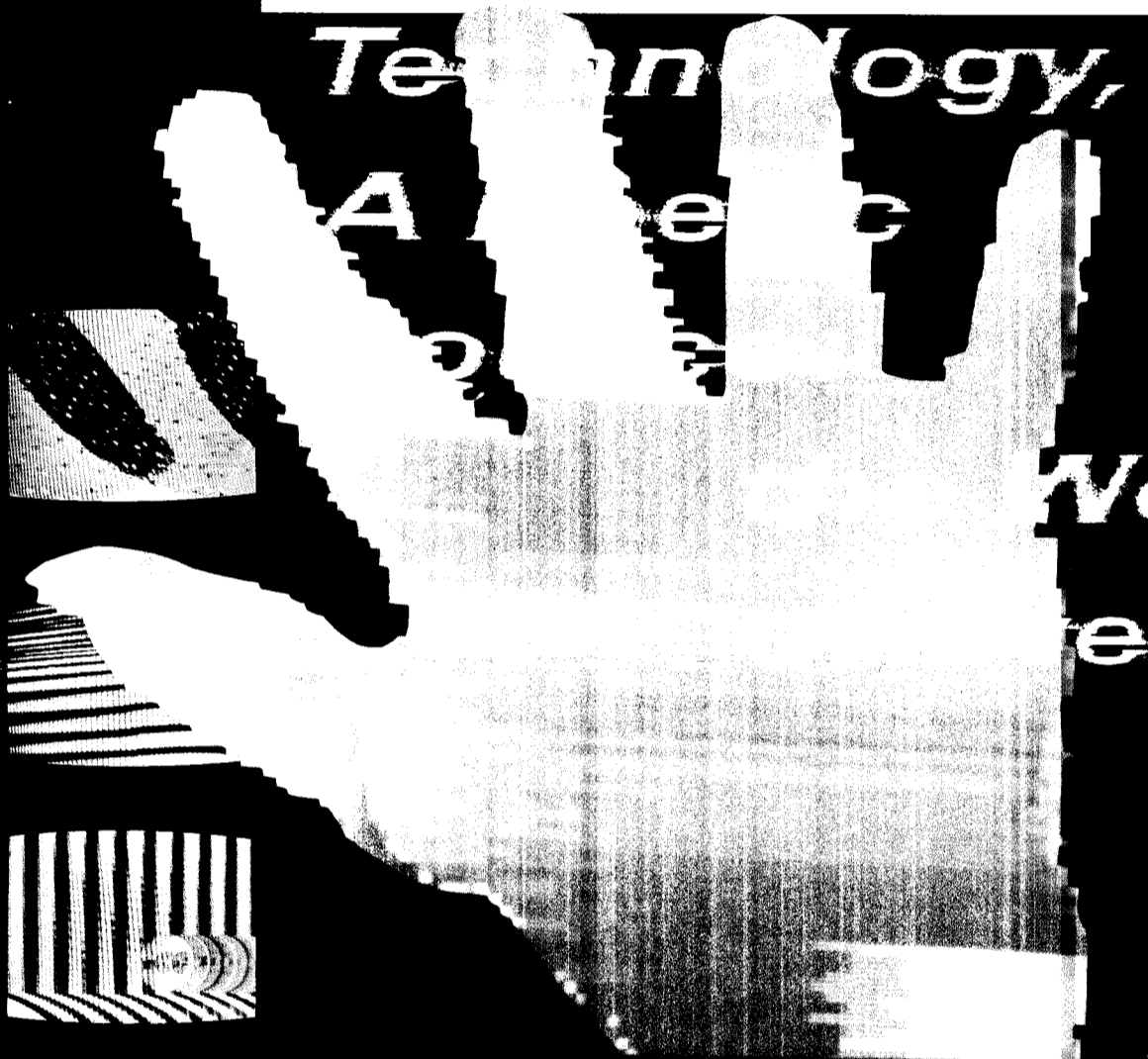
Video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka have been working at the cutting edge of electronic imaging for twenty years. This comprehensive exhibition of their multimonitor installations and single-channel videotapes presents a set of unique sensibilities in conceptualizing the electronic image and the means by which it can expand our perceptions of the world. For the Vasulkas, the creative process represents a "dialogue with the machine," in which they are not masters of a tool but receptors of its capabilities. Woody has said, "I have to share the creative process with the machine. It is responsible for too many elements in this work." It is at the rupture between the mechanical and the electronic in the evolution of the



machine where the importance of the Vasulkas' work can be positioned. Their work poses crucial questions not only about the role of the machine but also about what constitutes the electronic image, and how electronic space, with its level of abstraction and spatio-temporal dimensions, is redefining our concepts of space and time. For the Vasulkas, the electronic imaging machine is one that has inherited certain traditions from film, photography, literature and music, yet which embodies its own set of principles.

The Vasulkas came to the United States in 1965 with diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds. Woody, who was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, had studied engineering and film. Steina was a classical violinist from Reykjavik, Iceland. Their backgrounds have influenced how each has proceeded to examine different aspects of video as a moving image medium. Woody has been concerned primarily with the construction of a new visual code that is distinct from the cinematic code of representing the "real." Like semioticians of the cinematic image before him, Woody is concerned with mapping the intrinsic meanings embedded in specific image forms, yet he is interested in applying those codes as a means of reinventing narrative and anti-narrative structures. Steina has concentrated on the mechanisms of the camera itself, systematically setting up complex mechanical systems which, in effect, imitate the basic movements of the camera—pan, tilt, zoom—in order to redefine space.

In the work that they have produced collaboratively and as individual artists over twenty years, the Vasulkas have systematically pursued a phenomenological project of deconstructing the properties of the video medium. Their work reveals an ongoing questioning of what constitutes the *process* of electronic imaging. As such it



Work Steina and Woody Vasulka

An Exhibition
April 7–
September 7, 1989

Single-Channel Videotapes
Warner Communications Screening Room.
Programs will be screened regularly during the course of the exhibition.

- 54 Early Documentary**
Participation (1969-70, 60 mins.)
Early vignettes of the 1960s counterculture in New York include gay and street theater, Jimi Hendrix at the Fillmore East, and Andy Warhol's gang arguing on the David Susskind Show.
- 55 Time/Journey**
Evolution (1970, 16 mins.)
Golden Voyage (1973, 28 mins.)
In Search of the Castle (1981, 12 mins.)
Total: 56 mins.
Technically releasing the image so that it can drift horizontally across the screen, the Vasulkas examine metaphors of time and travel. **Evolution** playfully explores images of the passage of time, and **Golden Voyage** is a surreal working of Magritte.
- 56 Sound/Image**
Soundgated Images (1974, 10 mins.)
Noisefields (1974, 13 mins.)
Violin Power By Steina. (1970-78, 10 mins.)
Bad By Steina. (1979, 2 mins.)
Voice Windows In collaboration with Joan La Barbara. (1986, 8 mins.)
Total: 43 mins.
This program of tapes on the relationship of sound and image includes Steina's "demo tape on how to play video on the violin," and culminates with a dynamic visual interplay with singer Joan La Barbara's scat voice.
- 57 Machine Vision**
Signifying Nothing By Steina. (1975, 15 mins.)
Snowed Tapes By Steina. (1977, 15 mins.)
Urban Episodes By Steina. (1980, 9 mins.)
Total: 39 mins.
Steina constructs imaging machines with mirrored spheres, prisms, cameras, and mechanical arms which rotate, spin and redefine space. In **Urban Episodes**, she sets up her device in downtown Minneapolis to create a portrait of urban space.
- 58 Digital Language**
Vocabulary (1973, 6 mins.)
Cantaloup By Steina. (1980, 28 mins.)
Artifacts By Woody Vasulka. (1980, 22 mins.)
Total: 56 mins.
These three tapes offer casual explanations and informal documentation of the Vasulkas' construction of their Digital Image Articulator, a complex device for manipulating digital computer images.
- 59 Space/Landscape**
Flux By Steina. (1977, 8 mins.)
Stasto By Steina. (1977, 7 mins.)
Selected Treecuts By Steina. (1980, 8 mins.)
Summer Salt By Steina. (1982, 18 mins.)
Lilith With Doris Cross. By Steina. (9 mins., color)
Total: 50 mins.



provides a mapping of the principles that distinguish the electronic image from its legacy of film and photography. Theirs is, in many ways, a modernist project—to define the aesthetic language of a particular medium and to distinguish the properties of that medium in relationship to other systems of visual representation. One could see their work as offering a primer on the possibilities of image manipulation in video; indeed, their work is often read as merely systematic and didactic. Yet any strictly formalist reading of this work offers a reduction of its complexity. Each reveals a journey into the phenomenology of electronic imaging, one in which we as viewers follow the Vasulkas as makers.

The Vasulkas have pursued most of their work in the spirit of experimentation and with a respect for the importance of process. They see the commercially produced imaging machine as one in which the true capabilities for manipulating and modifying the camera image are held in check. Thus, throughout the years they have worked with engineers to design and use new imaging machines, which have allowed them to experiment with both digital and analog electronic images, to examine the relationship of the camera-generated image to the electronic signal, and to combine imagery in innovative ways. This exhibition is concerned not with the historical and technical aspects of these innovations, but with the vision produced through this work.

Four multimonitor installations will present the spectrum of the Vasulkas' image/sound environments. **Matrix** (1970–72) is a series of multimonitor grids on which abstract electronic forms and sounds create escalating movement across multiple screens. **Allvision** (1976) is a central work in Steina's project of Machine Vision, in which she examines an all-encompassing machine-derived vision which is not restricted to the human eye. Here, two cameras facing a rotating mirrored sphere generate imagery which mediates the viewer's movement within the gallery space. **Allvision** is a playful participatory work that redefines the viewer's relationship to physical and electronic space. **The West** (1983) is Steina's stunning portrait of the landscape of the American Southwest. Set across a

broad array of video monitors, processed and layered images of the desert landscape examine the effects of man's imprint and mapping of the land, from ancient Indian dwellings to complex radio-telescope systems. In Woody's elaborate and deeply evocative work, **Art of Memory** (1988), the key events in the history of the 20th century are rorchestrated across an array of video screens in a meditation on personal and cultural memory and the role of the camera in defining history. Through technical innovations, Woody creates complex image objects from archival photographs and newsreel footage to examine the violent events (World War II, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution) that ushered in the atomic age.

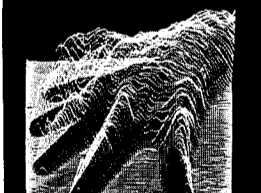
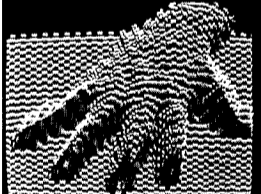
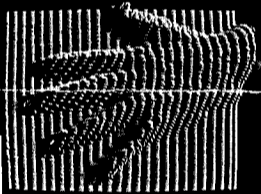
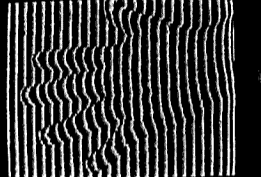
A program of 24 single-channel works completes this comprehensive exhibition. Organized through such diverse themes as Sound/Image, Memory/Narrative, Machine Vision, and Digital Language, and spanning 20 years of production, this program includes important works such as Woody's **The Commission** (1983), an electronic opera about two tragic art figures—Hector Berlioz and Niccolò Paganini; Steina's playful **Violin Power** (1970–78), a tape which traces Steina's replacement of the violin as an instrument in which she rigs up her violin to a series of increasingly complex imaging devices; and early tapes such as **Participation** (1969–71), which documents the counter art culture of the 1960s in New York.

In presenting this retrospective of the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka at a time when the Vasulkas have extended their technical experimentations with stunning results into the arenas of narrative, landscape, and a redefinition of space, the American Museum of the Moving Image situates their work at the forefront of innovations in the medium of video. The Vasulkas' work directly addresses the issue of what distinguishes the electronic image from the cinematic image, as well as what allies both media.

A comprehensive catalogue with essays by Marita Sturken, Maureen Turim and Scott Nygren, Lucinda Furlong, and Raymond Bellour will accompany the exhibition and will be available in July.

Guest Curator: Marita Sturken

Organized by JoAnn Hanley, Curator of Video and Performance.



Steina explores ways of refiguring landscape with her camera and imaging machines, playfully constructing ways of seeing not possible for the human eye. In **Summer Salt** she does gymnastics with her camera and straps it to the roof of her car, all in the spirit of finding a "machine vision."

60 Memory/Narrative

Reminiscence By Woody Vasulka. (1974, 5 mins.)

The Commission With Robert Ashley and Ernest Gusella. By Woody Vasulka, camera by Steina. (1983, 45 mins.)

Art of Memory With Daniel Nagrin. By Woody Vasulka. (1987, 36 mins.)

Total: 86 mins.

Woody addresses issues of narrative and memory in these tapes. **The Commission** is an electronic opera about two tragic art figures, composers Niccolò Paganini and Hector Berlioz. **Art of Memory** retraces the beginnings of the atomic age through the Spanish Civil War and World War II, and examines the media through which cultural memory is defined—photography, film and video.