

MACHINE MEDIA

steina e's woody vasulka

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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
San Francisco

Video pioneers Woody and Steina Vasulka have been at the forefront of video from the very beginning; having moved to New York City from Prague in the 1960s, they documented Living Theater performances and the counter-cultural, sexual revolution on 1/2" open reel Portapak equipment, co-founded The Kitchen in 1971, and began their life-long work designing and using video imaging tools. Designed as a retrospective, Machine Media at SF MoMA showcases eight installations and a program of single-channel tapes in an ambitious and fresh display of the Vasulkas' long video career.

As tool-designers and video-makers, both artists assemble elaborate technological systems with an easy facility that is delightful. Their work is characterized by a deep fascination with the syntax of the video image, its construction and alteration. Steina's work tends to hover around landscape and horizontal drift. She has made a series of works entitled *Machine Vision* which include landscapes and cityscapes reflected in a mirrored globe and recorded by two small video cameras orbiting the globe. Here, in a piece entitled *Allvision*, the cameras and globe sit atop the museum's atrium and treat viewers to a meditation on post-modern architectural form.

Strongly influenced by early cybernetic communications system theory, Woody Vasulka has been an inventor and video tool designer. In the 1970s, he designed and built the Digital Image Articulator with Jeffrey Schier. His tape *Artifacts* demonstrates the aesthetic capabilities of the Digital Image Articulator and gives a short history of its development. Woody's newer work involves the construction of matrixes of machines which interact with each other. These "optical-sensory intelligence matrixes" have an ominous tone when one realizes that much of this research-and-development technology is borrowed from mil-

itary surplus a la Los Alamos. It is apparent that these are the tools of post-modern war, science and business.

One of the most breathtaking and physically disorienting installations in the show is Steina's *Borealis* which consists of four translucent, rear-projection screens floating in a darkened space. The images come from Steina's native Iceland and show crashing waves, steam and spray playing across the screens which seem to waver, probably literally do, with viewers walking past. The space is unworldly, a vortex of energy and light. It is a very perfect marriage of image and form.

The one and a half hour videotape program of single channel works presents an overview of the Vasulkas' work, with tapes ranging back to the early 1970s. An important idea to keep in mind in viewing the tapes is that, in the Vasulkas' view, the tapes act as "artifacts" of the dialogue carried on by the videomakers with their experimental tools. The images reveal the process of their own construction. While all the tapes do have a mild narrative energy and work as videotapes, the real focus is on the tools.

Amidst this machinery, I am struck by how the body appears in the Vasulkas' work; even when not physically present, the body is always implied, always there as a reference point. The idea of the body that comes

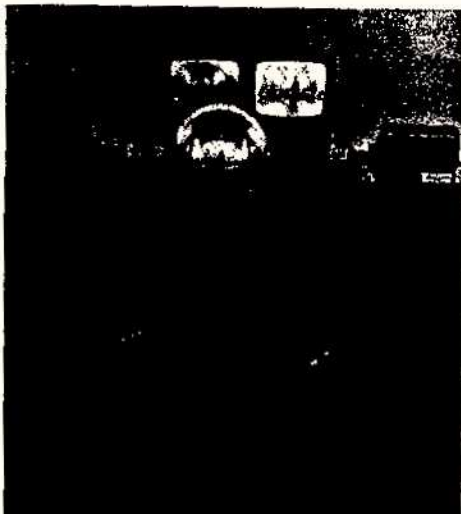
across is a body fused with technology, a body that mirrors technology; like Woody's mechanical bodies, our bodies are composed of levers and hydraulic fluids, processors and sensors, and tiny on-off switches. That mechanical and corporeal bodies have become indistinguishable is evident in the videotape *Lullaby*, where the processes of degeneration and drift are drawn across the aged face of painter Doris Cross with an image synthesizer that reenacts the passage of time (biological life). Cross' face is raked by peaks and valleys, transformed into a landscape rocked by seismic change.

A performance by Steina demonstrating a violin-controlled, pre-recorded laser disk further illustrates the merger of man and machine. Performing the violin live in front of a video projection screen, Steina explains that positions (and the images at those positions) on a laserdisk are keyed to positions on the strings of the violin; i.e. a note struck at a certain location, for example, on the C string, locates and plays a particular image and sound on the disk, or goes fast forward or reverse at another location. The laserdisk is a storage device, like the brain, and the violin picks and chooses its way through it, recalling this, skipping that. This machine-mind interface is Proust's madeleine: tickle that nerve and you remember that day in the park, etc.

It is not only that the representations of bodies undergo digital processes, but the very way we understand our bodies, namely Western medical practice, espouses a technological explanation of the microcosmic exchanges which keep the body running. The same computer-generated graphics in Woody's *The Brotherhood*, *Table III*, are picked up by medicine to image our bodies back to us; we have all seen on the evening news the twin strands of DNA that spiral like a perpetual carousel in an inky black vacuum. There is no dividing line between man and machine: our bodies are fully technologized. And while this vision may be disturbing to some, I think it is safe to say the Vasulkas are right at home with their technology. ●

MARIA TROY

Maria Troy lives in Oakland and is the project coordinator of the forthcoming *Surveying the First Decade: Video Art and Alternative Media in the US*.



Allvision, 1976, installation; photo by Kevin Noble