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## STEINA VASULKA FOUR VIDEO INSTALLATIONS

CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS  
291 E. BARCELONA RD., SANTA FE

While Steina Vasulka's video work is obviously not "television" in the usual sense, on some level all video art is inextricably linked to the television experience. Art world terminology replaces the television set with the "video monitor," but whether the programming comes beaming down from a satellite or from a VCR sitting in the corner, a shared dynamic remains. Video art is a focal point for the unresolved relationship between mass media and fine art—a tension which can invest the form with an almost subversive energy. Given the ready accessibility and relative economy of video technology, this energy is all too easily squandered by lesser talents. Such is not the case with Steina Vasulka's *Four Video Installations* at the Center for Contemporary Arts (CCA).

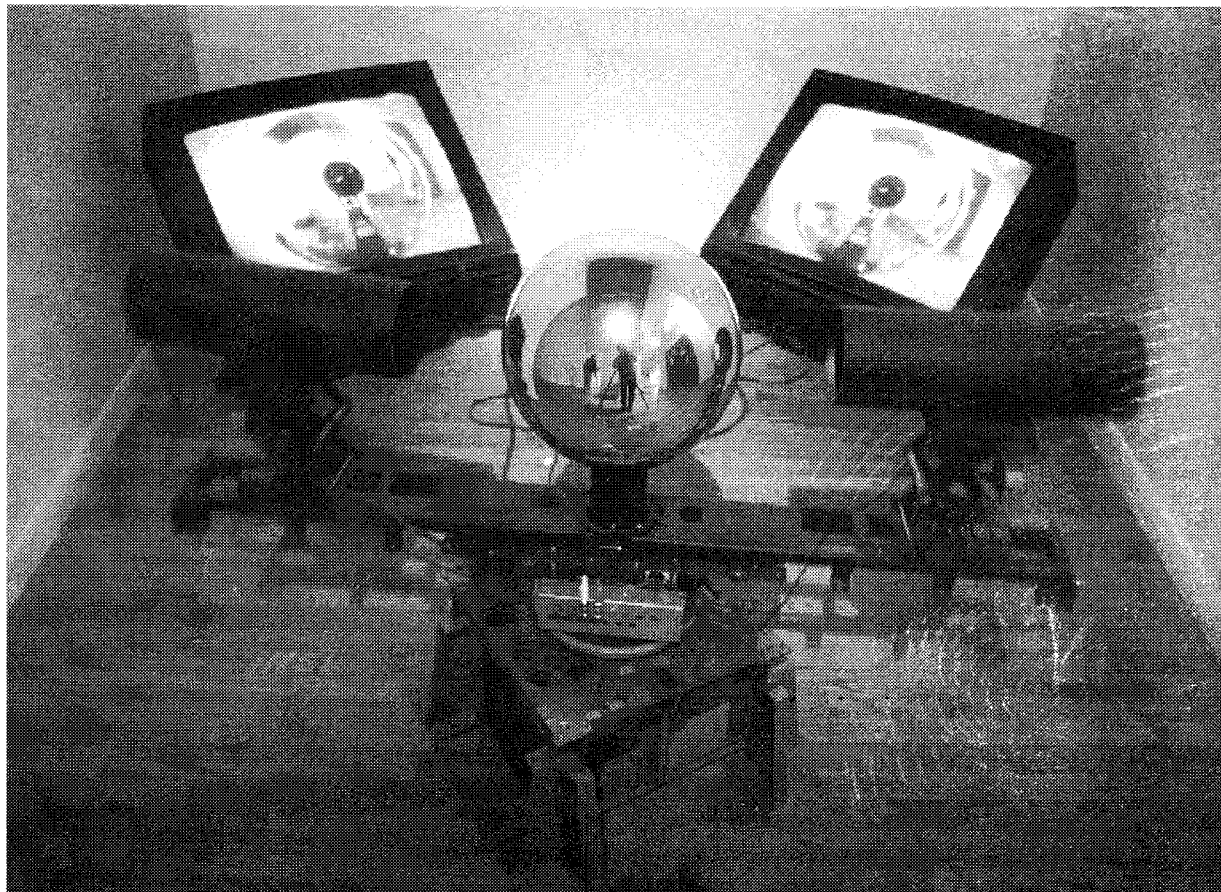
One first encounters *Machine Vision II*, 1976 (confusingly identified as *Allvision*, 1974, in the handout essay accompanying the exhibition) installed at the bottom of the gallery stairwell. The piece consists of two video cameras mounted on either end of a rotating motorized arm with both cameras aimed at a polished silver metal sphere at the center of the arm. Each camera provides a live feed of the floor-to-ceiling reflection in the sphere to one of two monitors sitting nearby. A peripheral view of the room behind the sphere is also visible in the monitors and, as the positions of the two cameras and the sphere are fixed relative to each other, the feed to the video monitors shows the room rotating around a stationary sphere. Any observer of the piece appears simultaneously in one monitor as a reflection in the sphere, and as part of the background in the other. While exceedingly simple in its conception, the piece creates a complex grouping of views of one space in which the observer experiences his or her own presence on a variety of abstracted levels.

On the mezzanine level, *Borealis*, 1994, is composed of twin towers of four video monitors each. The towers play a black-and-white 10-minute video of water in motion: frothing over rapids, flowing over a dam, rippling out from behind the stern of a boat, beading on the camera lens as it is pushed through damp foliage. In one section of footage, surf washes up on a shoreline oriented vertically in the monitor, and other sections of the video are reversed so that the water in one tower rushes toward the viewer while in the other it sucks back into itself. In another sequence, filmed in what seems to be a thick mist rising from a frozen river, the shadow of the artist emerges and dematerializes as sunlight projects her ghostly image into the shifting vapors. The overall effect is vertigo-inducing and strangely hypnotic, unbalancing both one's sense of time and spatial orientation.

On the upper level of the gallery is *Drifts*, 1970-1995 (identified alternatively as *Matrix* in the exhibition essay), in which two arched constructions of monitors display images that drift horizontally from one monitor to the next. There is engagingly deadpan footage of the Vasulkas in their studio (Steina wanders in and out of frame; Woody stands about chewing gum), plus electronically-generated video and images of Keith Haring-like designs that appear to be painted on asphalt or gravel, to the accompaniment of a throbbing low-frequency noise soundtrack.

Installed in the CCA's darkened main exhibition room, is *Pyroglyphs*, 1995, a 15-minute collaborative effort by Vasulka and Santa Fe artist/blacksmith Tom Joyce. Six large translucent screens serve as the support for images originating from three video projectors. Reflectors allow the projectors to beam their images onto two screens at once, and a mirrored wall at the back of the room extends the murky space, making it difficult to discern the actual number of screens and the origins of the multiple video images. Slow motion close-ups of dancing fire, glowing metal pounded by a hammer, flying sparks, and the flames of a blowtorch are accompanied by the heavily amplified and processed sounds of Joyce and his tools at work. At once spectacular, violent, and beautiful, *Pyroglyphs* evokes the elemental forces at work in Joyce's workshop: Flames erupt from the forge like a volcano, and a pneumatic press crushes a pile of wood into pulp with the grinding intensity of a seismic cataclysm.

Vasulka's installations are typically described in terms of video, but the artist's command of sculptural idioms and her considerable skill as a sound technician—arranging and orchestrating noise with a deft musical sensibility—deserve equal billing. Grounded in over 20 years of carefully considered experimentation and investigation, Vasulka's installations have an authenticity and authority profoundly lacking in much video art. She creates environments, not just videotapes, and while the difference may seem elusive it is distinctly tangible: You just know when it's the real thing.



Steina Vasulka, *Machine Vision II*, installation, 1995