BLACK PANTHER PARTY

International Section

B. P. 118 · GRANDE POSTE   ALGER · ALGERIA

TELEPHONE 76-21-05

16 March 1971

Woody and Steina Vasulka
111 East 14th Street
New York, New York
U.S.A.

Woody and Steina Vasulka:

The International Section of the Black Panther Party has
initiated a video tape program to be directed to the United States
and Europe on a regular basis to cover the spectrum of the
international anti-imperialist revolutionary movement. We need
much more equipment and material than we have accumulated so
far, in order to make the best use of this revolutionary communi-
cations medium. Now we are in the process of building up a tape
library for information, research, and distribution purposes. We
would sincerely appreciate having some of the tapes you have
announced in the RADICAL SOFTWARE paper.

Specifically, we would like to use this tape:
Nixon's Speech   five min. approx.

We don't know what kind of arrangements have to be made
in order for us to receive these tapes, but we really need
them and you can be sure that they will be put to fantastic
use once we receive them. The best thing would be for you to
send them to us immediately, and we can then send you copies
of our tapes in exchange. So far, we have produced all of
six tapes here and we are already getting political repercussions.
Time is of the essence, the faster we get them the faster
we can make more powerful propaganda for the people's revolution
around the world.

In order to contact us or send us any tapes, please
use the following name and address:

Carole P. Roussoupolos
18, rue de l'Odeon
Paris, 6e
FRANCE

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Eldridge Cleaver
Minister of Information

Steina and Woody Vasulka:

MACHINE MEDIA

Steina and Woody Vasulka:

and

MACHINE MEDIA
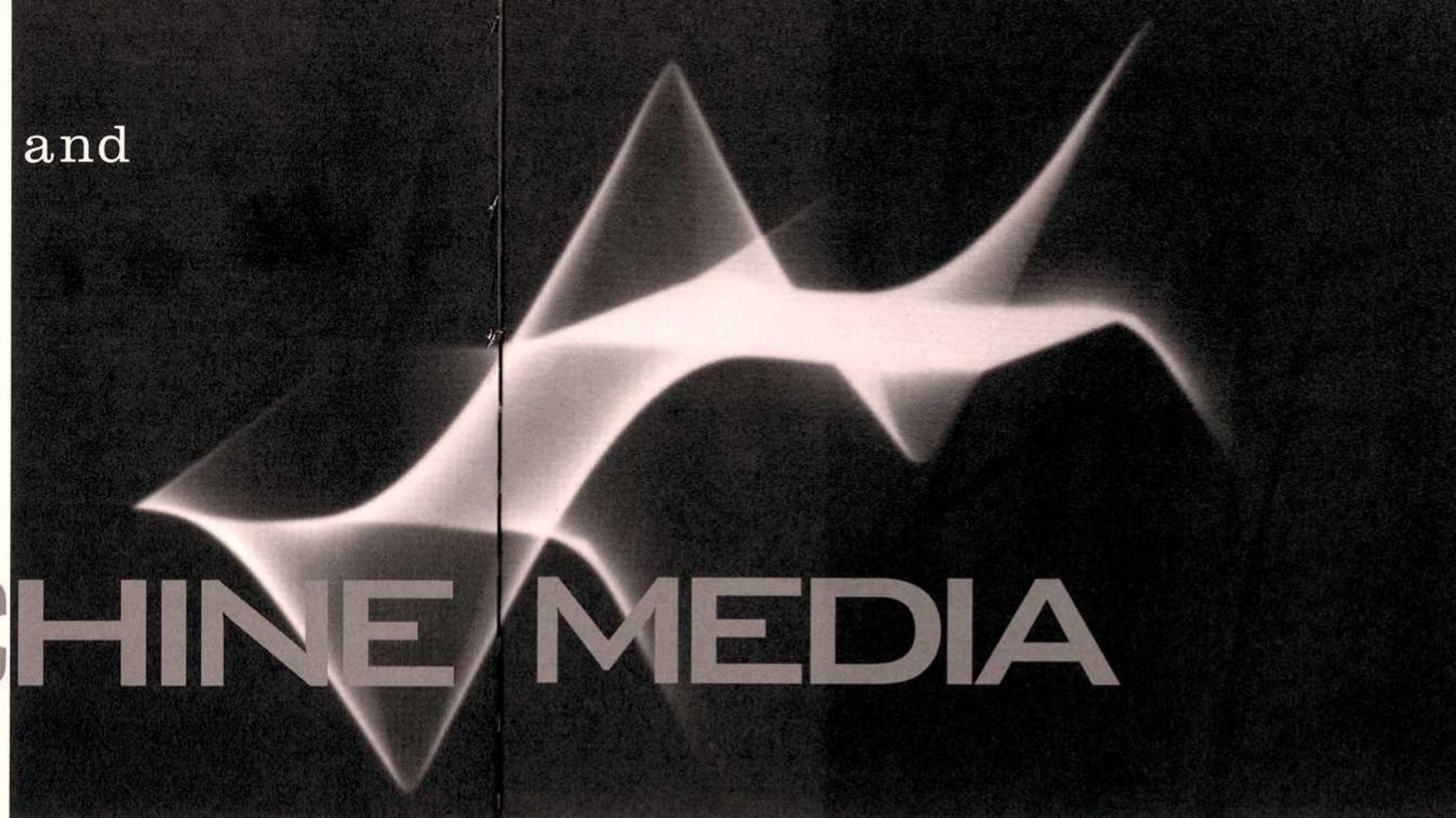
Steina and Woody Vasulka are
Europeans who have lived and
worked in New Mexico since 1980.
From their artistic beginnings as,
respectively, violinist and filmmaker, they have used new technology
as artistic media. Starting with hand-held video cameras in the late
1960s and continuing to interactive computer technology, the
Vasulkas have consistently moved in counterpoint to the more
"traditional" avant-garde.[1]

To date the Vasulkas' work has been discussed almost entirely in
terms of the technological effects and processes which characterize
its internal semantic and syntactic systems. This strategy, or critical
focus, tends to be written in the language of information theory—an

idiom that concentrates on the syntactic aspects of communication,
leaving content to be "just stuff" and in which materiality is largely
bracketed from the equation. While this has been a productive
direction and indeed one encouraged by the artists, it is not the only
aspect of the Vasulkas' work. As their art has evolved over almost
thirty years, the "return of the repressed," of its connections with
other artistic media and aesthetic questions, can now be considered.

The machines themselves are objects, and Woody has emphasized
this quiddity in his works of the last few years, of which *The
Brotherhood (Table III)* (1994) is an example. Created in part from
Los Alamos surplus, it is a tragic accep-
tance of narrative and history. Woody
grew up in Moravia among the wreckage

(above)
Woody Vasulka
TIME/ENERGY OBJECTS 1975
Video still of scan processor effects

and junk-piles of matériel from World War II. Vasulka credits this environment with his interest in machines and, to return to the true meaning of the term, *bricolage*.[2]

"I guess the war had an overpowering experience. I don't think, except video, I've had any other overpowering experience since.... Europe was a junkyard, where we would find great dumps full of war equipment... we could go through them and find the whole anthropology of war."[3]
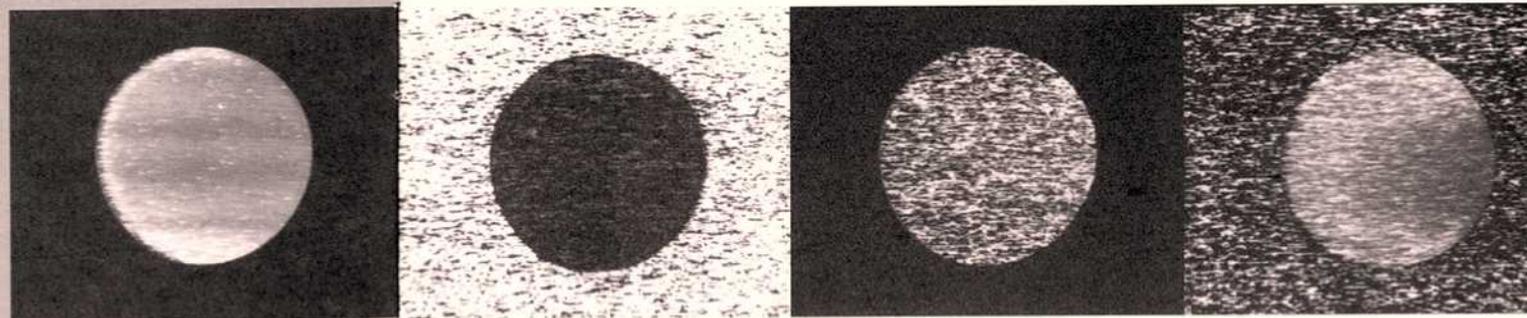
In her catalogue essay Marita Sturken aptly invokes Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" with its inability to leave the despair of the lived world.

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.... But a storm is blowing from Paradise.... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.[4]

Woody's work has focused increasingly on the gap between the bracketed and auto-referential experiment of discovering the nature and implication of digital imagery, and the materiality of the machines

that enable that research. As objects, they too operate in several discursive realms, from the laying bare of the device to the inevitable web of industrial production, surveillance and patriarchy. *The Brotherhood* is watching you, and you participate with it as a continually re-constituting mutual subject. Woody Vasulka's work participates in the modernist desire for the auto-referential, the laying bare, and the search for an axiomatic and foundational structure, while constantly acknowledging the messiness of the lived world.
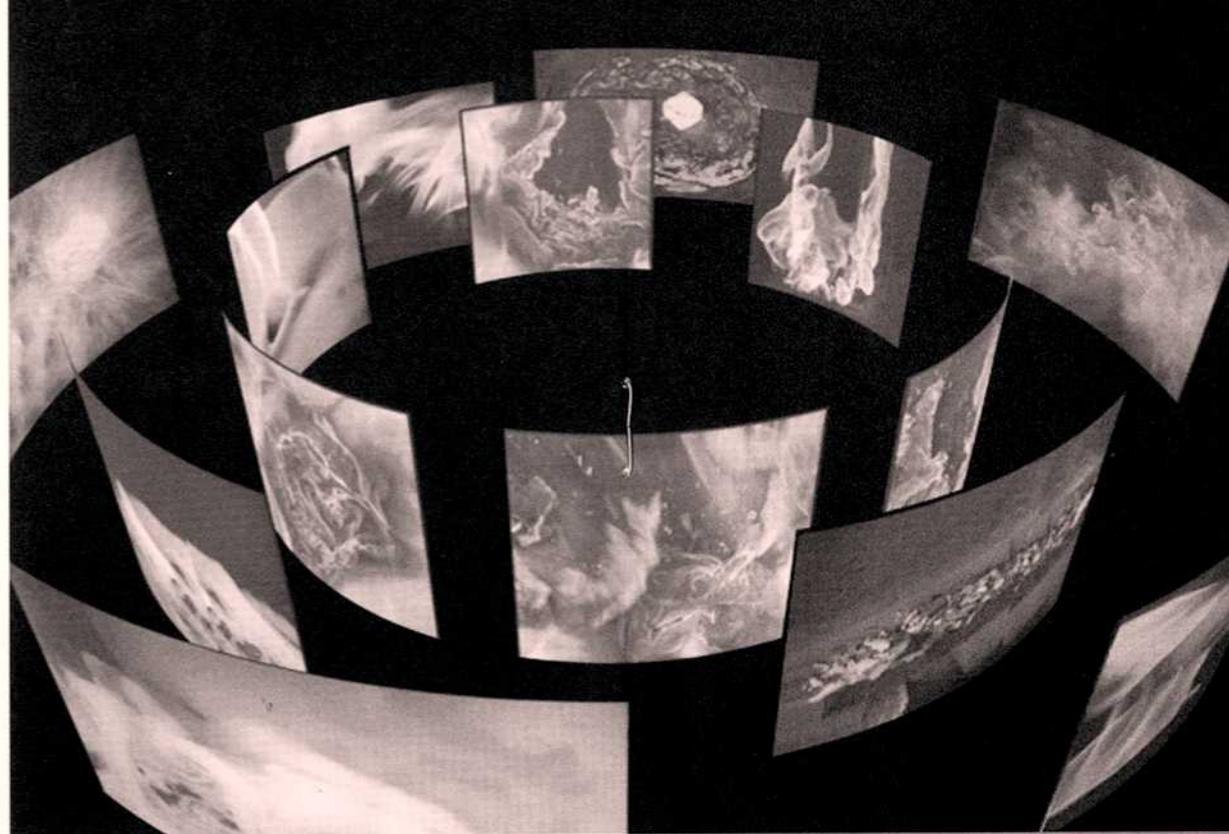
Steina's *Allvision* (1976) participates in a different way with the machine-person interaction. During the mid-1970s, the artist began to explore the mechanical eye, and the ways in which a machine can see and manipulate its surrounding space. This, too, is a classical modern concern, developing from the discovery of photography and later, film. Dziga Vertov named his newsreels *Kino-pravda* or film-truth, both to reinforce the political veracity and the ostensible objectivity of the mechanical representation.[5] *Allvision* allows this mechanical eye to be semi-autonomous and, of course, digital. The viewer/participant engages in a perceptual shift with the artwork whose proper vision emphasizes the partiality of human vision.

This phenomenological interest is very much at the center of Steina's subsequent work. While Woody's preoccupations stem from the worlds of engineering and film, Steina's spring from her training as a classical violinist. Much of her earlier work, such as *Violin Power* (1970-78) explores the interaction of audio and video tracks, a phenomenon proper to electronic media. In works like *The West* (1983)

(above)
Steina
ALLVISION 1976
Installation view detail

(at right)
Steina and Woody Vasulka
NOISEFIELDS 1974
Video still sequence

Steina
PYROGLYPHS 1994
Simulated installation view

the machine vision (of *Allvision*) turned outward (versus inwards like so much of Woody's work) scans the landscape of New Mexico and incorporates horizontal drift, a process by which parts of images float across different monitors in sequence. Horizontal drift has been one of the techniques with which Steina has incorporated musical structures — or music-like structures — into electronic media. She can layer information moving at different speeds through the image, much in the way that an orchestra incorporates many instruments playing different notes into a coherent whole.

Steina's work engages with certain tropes in other media, as does Woody's. The phenomenological aspect of Steina's work is stronger, due to her engagement with the external visual field. This fosters confusion between the viewer and the art, not as mutual subject but as an interdependent perceptual system. Steina has said repeatedly of her work that its purpose is to shift the consciousness of the observer, to unsettle received notions of perception. This notion of changing mindset, then, takes us back to the roots of the video "movement" of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which digital imagery was to be the tool of revolution — decentering political structures, at one and the same time giving the power of the gaze to all and eradicating its ontological status as the reigning point of view. The controlling single vantage point was thought to be naturalized and continually validated by visual training in the conventions of narrative cinema.

Woody, Steina, and Andres Mannik founded The Kitchen-LATL (Live Audience Test Laboratory) in 1971 in this spirit. It was to be "an electronic arts action center" where electronic artists and musicians could produce, collaborate, and discuss their work in "real time." Woody describes the atmosphere there:

"We could do avant-garde plays and we could do average trash. But we had a collective of people…who were willing to risk a lot. So…we carried unorthodox approaches as well. To the purists we were very unpure. At the same time…the true established orthodox avant-garde also found it…. So, I must confess, we were very interested in certain decadent aspects of America at that time — including homosexual theater, rock and roll, and beyond all that.
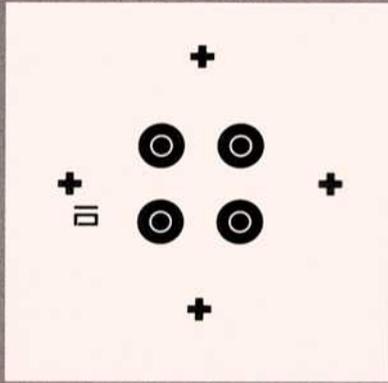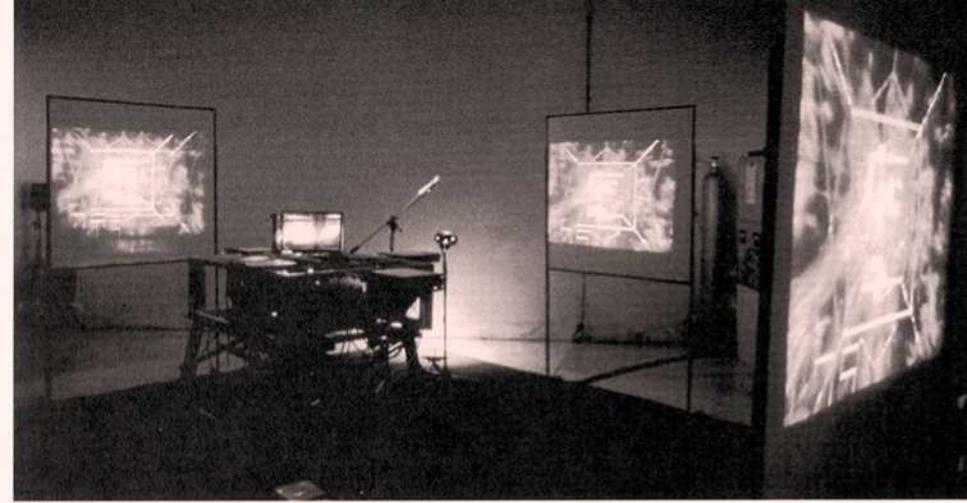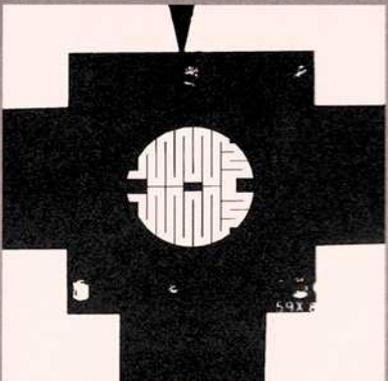
"We, in fact, enjoyed certain things that were forbidden to the true radicals in the sense of purity of thinking of Buckminster Fuller and McLuhan. We would be very involved in the phenomenon of time. And we could incorporate all those things: we took a certain interest in that particular aspect. We motivated (in a way) an undefined creative milieu. As you know, it was purely participatory; people did not pay— they advertised themselves."[6]

Even in 1971, therefore, purity was not seen as the only arm of the utopian revolution in which electronic media were to play a part. The messiness of "just stuff" had its own rules and apparent chaos which played counterpoint to the developing research into the characteristics of machine language and vision. The action lay between the anthropomorphizing of machines and the mechanical and electronic evaluation of the human being. The cybernetic model for these artists and scientists was about interaction; the utopia was to be developed as well as discovered by man-machine relations described in digital code.

The Vasulkas' refusal to accept simple explanations and views of the world harks back to their European roots, and to the tragic view of the "angel of history." There may be no way out of the world, but exploration into many dimensions with clear description is a way to learn, and a great comfort.

Just as Woody has recently confronted the specter of narrativity in his work, Steina has unabashedly embraced visual pleasure, that other demon of narrative cinema, in pieces such as *Borealis* (1993) and *Pyroglyphs* (1994). Both tendencies have been considered intrinsic to narrative cinema, and were to have been rooted out in objects created with electronic media.

What electronic media in the hands of the Vasulkas have been able to do to disrupt the power of the cinematographic image is to eradicate dominance of the frame through continual point-by-point modification. The concept of the frame, once again, was at the center of controversy in the wider art world at the same time that it was being contested by the new video workers. During the 1960s minimalist artists like Robert Morris attacked the notions of visual self-sufficiency and the spatial limitations of the modernist artwork as defined by critics like Clement Greenberg. Michael Fried, arguing against minimalism, nonetheless accurately defined the terms of the debate in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[7] Both groups of artists argued in terms of the subjective response to a given work of art, but for the modernist, the mark of quality was the immediate apprehension of the painting (usually) while for the minimalist, the alternative mark of interest was the kinesthetic as well as visual responses over time to the (usually) sculpture. With cries of "theatricality" Fried attacked the minimalist artists with destroying the autonomy of the art object as well as with anti-transcendent aesthetics. The ideal modernist work should, according to him, be transcendent, summed up in the article's final

Woody Vasulka
THE BROTHERHOOD 1994–96
TABLE III 1994
Installation view (above)
Details of found circuitry (below & opposite)

phrase, "Presentness is grace." The Vasulkas and their contemporaries explored similar terrain in electronic media, but without denying—in fact celebrating—the technical apparatus and its *own* phenomenological limitations.

Steina and Woody Vasulka have helped to chart the course of both art and science over the last three decades by their relentless investigations into and creations with electronic media and their material supports. They have withstood the test of time and the fashions of art by stubbornness, creativity, intelligence, and chance.

The Museum of Fine Arts of the Museum of New Mexico is delighted to be able to host our friends and neighbors, the Vasulkas.

ALINE BRANDAUER
CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART

1. For discussions of the avant-garde see, for example, Peter Bürger *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis) 1984. passim

2. Bricolage, which means literally "tinkering" in French, is used as a technical term in structuralist anthropology and literary criticism. First used in this context by Claude Lévi-Strauss, it refers to ad hoc systems of meaning and in consistent layerings of those meanings.

3. *Vasulka: Steina–Machine Vision; Woody–Descriptions* Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York 1978. Curated by Linda Cathcart.

4. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) pp. 257-258 cited in Marita Sturken, "In Dialogue with the Machine," *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media.* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996) p. 41

5. A position that he was to undo some ten years later in *Man with a Movie Camera.*

6. In Cathcart, p. 32

7. Michael Fried "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, Summer, 1967.

THIS SHOW WAS ORGANIZED BY ROBERT RILEY AND MARITA STURKEN FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Steina
ALLVISION 1976

closed-circuit video installation
color, silent
2 video cameras, 4 video monitors, mirrored sphere, turntable assembly
This work was engineered by Woody Vasulka.
Courtesy of the artist

Steina and Woody Vasulka
MATRIX I 1970–72

multimonitor video and sound installation (continuous cycle)
color, sound
12 video monitors, videotape, videotape player
Courtesy of the artists

Steina
THE WEST 1983

2-channel multimonitor video and 4-channel sound installation
color, sound (30-minute cycle)
22 video monitors, 2 videotapes, 2 videotape players, synchronizer
This work was produced using a soft-keyer designed by George Brown.
The sound was composed by Woody Vasulka.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Accessions Committee Fund: Mimi and Peter Haas, Susan and Robert Green, Mr. and Mrs. Brooks Walker, Jr., and Thomas Wiesel

Woody Vasulka
THEATER OF HYBRID AUTOMATA 1990

video/computer/sound installation
color, sound
tubular steel frame, 5 targets, computer, videodisc, videodisc player, video projector, projection screen, video camera, robotic camera head, speech box, audio sampler, video mixer, 6 audio speakers, lighting grid
This work incorporates the Lightning, a musical instrument designed by Don Buchla, and is operated with software by Russ Gritzo.
Courtesy of the artist

Woody Vasulka
THE BROTHERHOOD 1994–96

computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical constructions
Table I, 1996
Illuminated plotting table, computers, video cameras, three video projectors, three screens, stepper motors, dynamic projection/screen positioner
This work is operated with software by Russ Gritzo and was produced with the assistance of Bruce Hamilton.
Courtesy of the artist

Woody Vasulka
THE BROTHERHOOD 1994–96

computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical constructions
Table III, 1994
Aluminum table, 5 screens, computer, videodisc, videodisc player, video projector, pneumatic control system, optical beam-splitter, 2 custom lights, midi box, audio sampler, microphone and drum module, stereo amplifier, 2 audio speakers
This work is operated with software by Russ Gritzo and was produced with the assistance of Bruce Hamilton.
Courtesy of the artist

Steina
BOREALIS 1993

2-channel video and 4-channel sound installation
color, sound (10-minute cycle)
4 translucent screens, 2 video projectors, 2 videodiscs, 2 videodisc players, 2 mirror beam-splitters, synchronizer, 2 audio amplifiers, 4 audio speakers, 2 projector tables with mirror holders
Courtesy of the artist

Steina and Woody Vasulka
VIDEO PROGRAM

3 laser discs with player
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art