

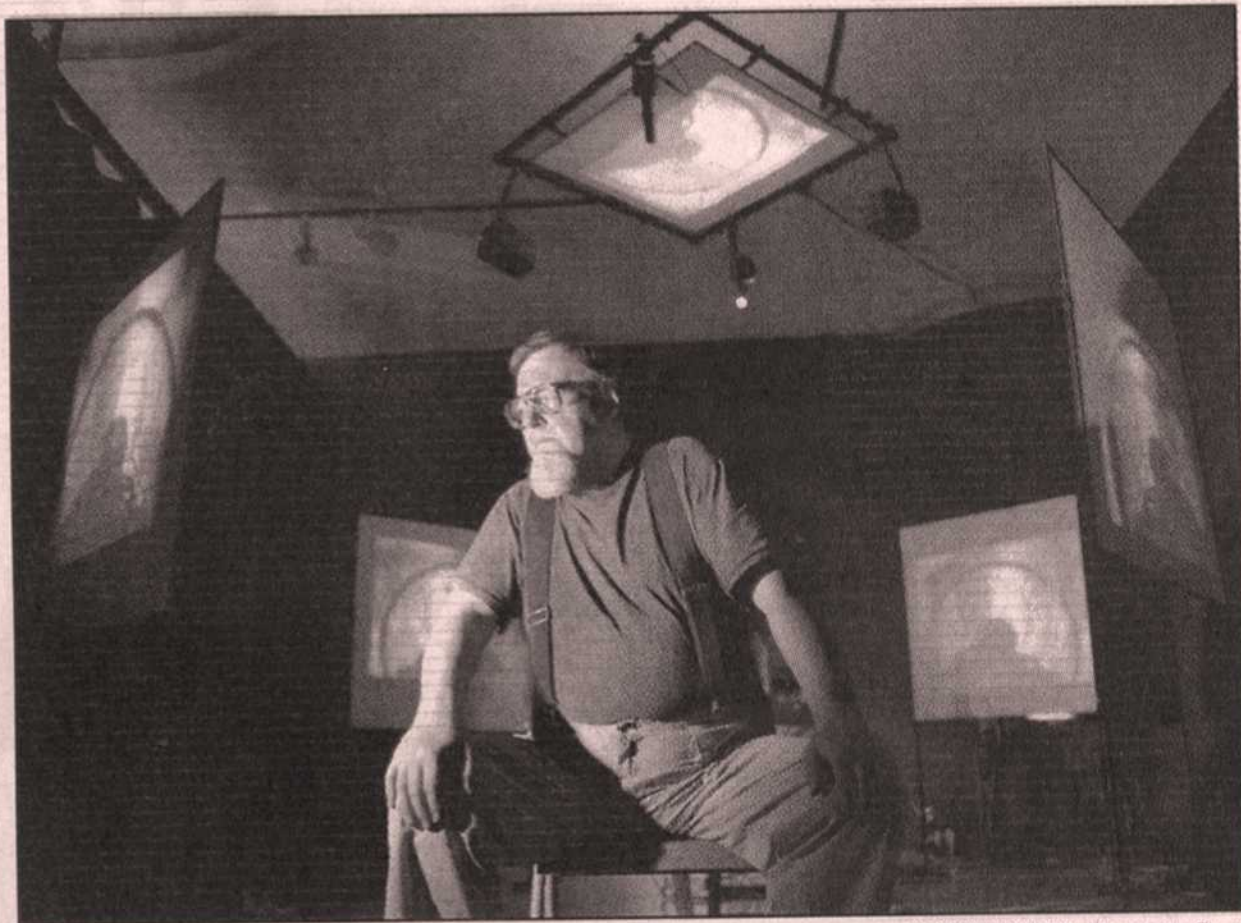
CALENDAR

Los Angeles Times

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HIGHLIGHTS

ART MARRIAGE: Video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka invite visitors to stroll around images of Icelandic seascapes or participate in an interactive work about violence and the military-industrial complex in their separate installations at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. **F1**



ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Woody Vasulka with his "Brotherhood, Table III": "I want to evoke the dilemma of using a killing machine."

A Visit With First Couple of Video Art

Steina and Woody Vasulka Have Diverse Takes on Power at LACE

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
TIMES ART WRITER

If your idea of video art is pulling up a chair to watch moving pictures on a single monitor, you may not be ready for the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka. In their installations—which opened Thursday night at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions' new space in Hollywood—Steina invites visitors to stroll around images of Icelandic seascapes projected on translucent screens, while Woody asks his audience to tap on a drum and speak into a microphone in an interactive work about violence and the military-industrial complex.

None of this will surprise the Vasulkas' fans, however. The emigré couple—Steina is a native of Iceland and Woody was born in Czechoslovakia—have been at the forefront of video art for 25 years. They met as students in Prague, emigrated in 1965 to the United States and in 1971 founded the Kitchen, an alternative exhibition and media arts center in New York.

"When we first became involved in video, we worked in collaboration because the medium was so complicated," Steina says. Now the Vasulkas serve each other as assistants and critics, but they have long since developed individual bodies of work.

In their show at LACE, the artists pursue entirely

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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Steina Vasulka: "Nature got the best of me and I'm quite happy about it. I'm not urban anymore."

VASULKAS

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different themes in separate spaces. Steina's piece, "Borealis," is an environment of illuminated imagery that portrays nature as an all-powerful force. Pictures appear on both sides of 6-by-4½-foot screens, so that viewers are surrounded by vast images of crashing waves, undulating seas and craggy cliffs.

"I hope people flip out because it's so beautiful," Steina says. "I want people to see and feel what I experience when I make something like this. That's all an artist can ask."

What Steina experienced while creating "Borealis" was a return to her roots. "Nature is a heavy trip in Iceland," she says. "You have to be very careful or you die." As a child she accepted nature's overwhelming presence as normal. "But when I went to Europe I found a world that was incredibly benign, with blue skies everywhere," she says.

Moving to New York turned her into an urban artist, further estranged from nature. But visits to her homeland sparked an intense awareness of her native environment and inspired her to use landscape as a theme.

She and Woody moved to Santa Fe, N.M., in 1980. "I was determined not to get seduced by nature," Steina says. "That lasted about a year. Nature got the best of me and I'm quite happy about it. I'm not urban anymore."

She taped the footage for "Borealis" in 1993. Trying to convey the magnitude and force of nature, she shot mountains and grand vistas, but decided to use close-ups to convey her feelings about human vulnerability and nature's power. "You can't compete with God," she says. "He has done it all, and he has done it much better."

Nonetheless, she professes that the point of art is "to really see God." It's a quaint, old-fashioned notion, completely out of sync with the art world's fixation on politics, Steina says, but no matter. "My interest in video is not the art world's interest in video," she says.

In striking contrast to Steina's concern with superhuman forces, Woody explores man-made power as he considers the specter of warfare and violent behavior. Where her work portrays organic forms, Woody's deals with hard-edged mechanical devices and im-

ages of cast-off military equipment.

His exhibition, "Brotherhood, Table III," is the third portion of an ongoing project, which will consist of six tables largely constructed of surplus materials from the atomic energy facility in Los Alamos, N.M. The metal table on view at LACE is made of a computer that was developed to set off bombs in Cambodia and Vietnam. A slide projector encased in the table projects images of Los Alamos detritus, such as circuit boards and hardware. These vaguely threatening pictures are relayed onto mirrors attached to the table and out into the room, on a group of free-standing and suspended screens.

"I want to evoke the dilemma of using a killing machine," Woody says. But getting the message depends upon viewers' recognition and interpretation of the work's components and ambience. More inclined to pose questions than deliver judgments, Woody speaks of his work in terms of dialogues and philosophical conundrums, while allowing for a degree of ambiguity.

The theme isn't the only complicated aspect of his work. In "Table IIF" he has constructed a multimedia apparatus that allows visitors to participate in directing how the images are conveyed. This is an outgrowth of his longstanding effort to subvert what he calls "the absolute idea of a single frame," which is fundamental to film and video. He bombards viewers with images, in both enclosed and expansive spaces, enticing them to move around the installation. Those who strike an electronic drum or speak into a microphone will find that their action affects the pictures.

Woody prefers revelations to prescribed experiences in his art, but this presents another dilemma, he says. Interactivity—which is all the rage in the commercial world of electronic products—allows outside players to replace artists as authors or at least to obscure the artists' identity. That may be a logical conclusion of modernism, which was bent on destroying authorship, he says, but it's a question he continues to ponder.

■ "Borealis" and "Brotherhood, Table III," installations by Steina and Woody Vasulka, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 6522 Hollywood Blvd. (213) 957-1777. Wed.-Sun., noon-6 p.m. Free. Ends Sept. 4. The artists will talk about their work at LACE today at 3 p.m.

Vasulkas' Installations a One-Two Punch

ART REVIEWS

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Steina and Woody Vasulka's tandem video installations at LACE are engaging, his-and-her meditations on the slippery relationships among technology, nature, men and women. Greater than the sum of their parts, the two single-room displays of shifting, electronically generated images work in concert with one another to create a solid, one-two punch whose collective power builds as it echoes off its partner's strengths.

On its own, Woody Vasulka's "Brotherhood, Table III," made up

of war machines scavenged from Los Alamos, would seem to settle for rehashing tired stereotypes about connections between male alienation and technological violence. But next to Steina's simultaneously seductive and daunting "Borealis," his high-tech spectacle appears to be almost as soothing as it is destructive.

Your eyes take a while to adjust to the engulfing darkness when you step off the street into Steina's immediately disorienting piece. Projected onto three, see-through screens suspended from the ceiling of the darkened main gallery, her looped videotape and soundtrack of crashing surf and other scenes from nature intensify the sense that you've lost your bearings.

The Iceland-born, Czechoslova-

nia-educated and U.S.-based artist's 10-minute piece of video theater seems to stop time from passing in its usual manner. It also turns your experience of space inside-out. Nearly all its images are tipped on their side: Sunsets over the ocean become pulsating, vertical abstractions as cascading waves defy gravity and flow across (rather than down) your field of vision.

The most mesmerizing component results from a single video projection that the artist has duplicated and reversed, by projecting it through a translucent mirror, to produce an identical pair of images that move at perfectly synchronized cross-purposes.

In this richly confounding work,
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GALLERIES

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it's often impossible to determine whether images are coming at you or drifting away. It's also difficult to know whether scenes are following a natural progression from past to present, or being manipulatively replayed in reverse.

Woody Vasulka's more compressed installation consists of a mechanized table that multiplies video and slide projections, sending them in six directions at once: onto four screens, the floor and ceiling. His imagery resembles the pixilated, computer-generated representations of high-tech war games, in which death and destruction appear as colorful yet bloodless abstractions.

Together, the Vasulkas' installations undermine oppositions between culture and nature as they dispose of distinctions between men and women. By linking their distinct, mutually supporting pieces, they refute the idea that technology is masculine and intrinsically aggressive, and that nature is feminine and essentially nurturing.