

Steina Vasulka: The Electronic Sublime

by Gene Youngblood

Steina Vasulka grew up in primordial Iceland surrounded by that terrible beauty which philosophers call the Sublime. The Aurora Borealis haunted the heavens above her family home. Through her window she could see erupting volcanoes. She could walk up to rivers of flowing lava. She could climb above raging cataracts, stand before sulphurous geysers, gaze into the turbulent coves of Iceland's fractal coast. This exhibition in multiscreen video, an artform Steina pioneered a quarter of a century ago, is informed by her attraction to the fevered landscape, her fascination with the fearsome majesty of fire.

Pyroglyphs (1995) was recorded at the Santa Fe foundry of metalsmith Tom Joyce, with whom Steina shares "a fascination with fire - as a phenomenon and as a medium that transforms other materials. Tom and I understand fire in an alchemical way," she told me, "as a medium of transmutation." Steina videotaped, mostly in closeup, the activities of blacksmithing (hammering, filing, welding, manipulating fire), the phenomenology of fire (flames, sparks, combustions, glowing metals), and various improvised scenes - a vise crushing a timber, a stack of books burning, paper and wood being scorched.

Editing this material into three complementary image tracks was relatively easy (the visuals were similar or dissimilar in compatible ways) but the sounds of these images were often too similar or strident, competing for attention. So the sounds determined the editing. Steina processed them through digital devices like harmonizers, which couldn't turn the random noises into harmonics but produced interesting sounds anyway; pitch shifters that move a sound to the octave immediately above or below; and reverb circuits to create echo effects. The sounds and rhythms are rendered *allegro con brio, pianoforte, or pianissimo*: there's a lot of percussive hammering, say, then all is quiet and we hear only crackling flame or the hollow whisper of the blowtorch.

This installation of *Pyroglyphs* consists of three image channels and six projections, with the sound mixed down to two channels and two speakers. Three video projection beams are each split into two, casting six "letterboxed" images onto four large freestanding translucent screens, arranged semi-randomly, with the image visible on both sides of each screen (the remaining two images are cast onto the south wall of the space). This setting and the power of its imagery makes *Pyroglyphs* a spectacular meditation on fire. Steina has created a Sublime landscape illumined by the many-hued glow of fevered metals and shows of sparkling scintilla. She makes us feel the hypnotic pull of lambent flames even as our breath is caught by the preemptive ignition of the torch, our hearts quickened by the violence of the forge.

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