

Image Medusas

Steina and Woody Vasulka
at LACE

BY LANE BARDEN

*Art must never be
anything other
than fantastic or
it is not art.*

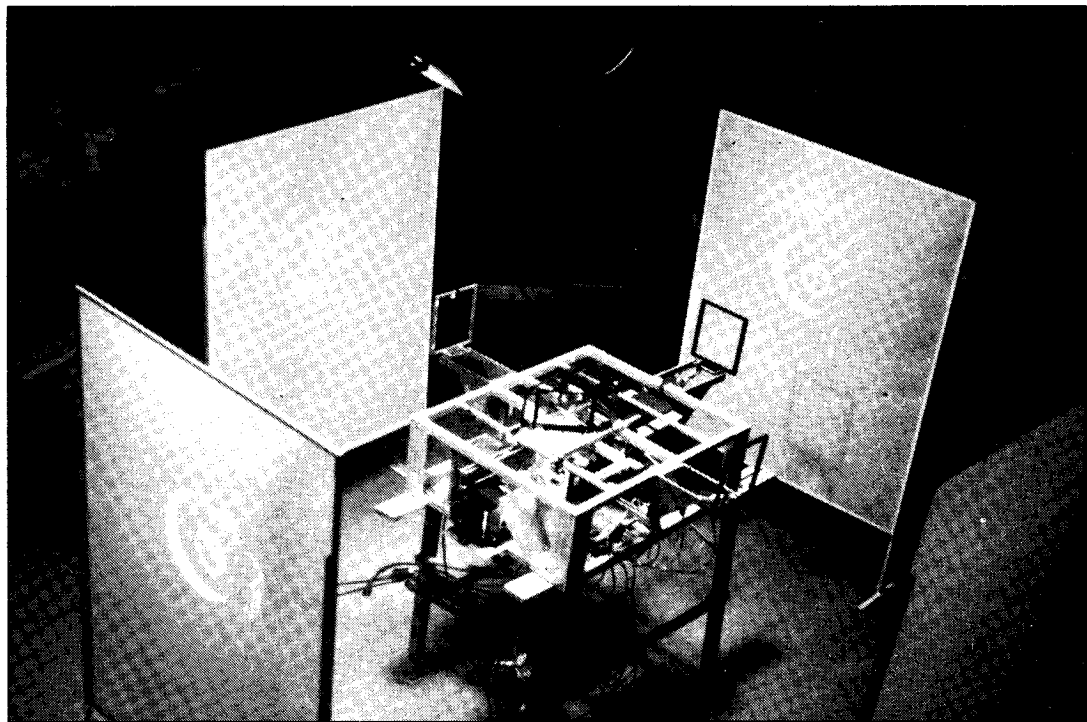
—Raoul Hausmann

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of curator JoAnn Hanley, the new Hollywood LACE has solidified its credibility in Hollywood by exhibiting the American premier of video installations by Steina and Woody Vasulka. They do not disappoint. Surrounded by a steady white noise in a large dark space, the two installations distinguish themselves with their efficiency of conceptual means. There is a simmering presence about the work that

has something to do with the way in which it focuses upon its subject and then sticks with it, allowing all attendant issues and questions to emerge as tangents to visual specificity.

This also is an extremely mature project tempered with a depth of knowledge and instinct about what works and what doesn't work in the incipient realm of manipulated experimental video. Having used video for more than a decade before it entered consumer culture, the Vasulkas are pioneers from the medium's nascent period. They have seen video emerge from its position as a limited narrative trapped in a small box, into a fully realized projected environment capable of producing a single-minded interrogation into the predicaments of culture at the close of the century.

Woody grew up in Prague, playing in the refuse of World



Woody Vasulka, *Brotherhood, Table III*, installation, at LACE, Hollywood.

War II. By that time, however, the horrific image of a mutant machine-man conceived by Berlin Dada already was several decades old, and the prescient threat of the war machine had been reiterated in a conflict more devastating than Dada players Raoul Hausmann or Hannah Höch could have imagined. Woody's piece at

LACE centers around the Table, an engineered variant of a device previously used at Los Alamos for the navigation of bombs. In its mid-twentieth century clumsiness, it has the look of a mechanical contraption. On six monitors and still screens, images of war and industry rush out of a moving vanishing point which serves as

a metaphorical time line that seems to move backward and forward simultaneously.

This image medusa may be modulated by speaking into a microphone or tapping an electronic drum, but "interaction" with the video is inconsequential. The piece speaks more clearly when left to its own devices. This is the fin de siècle

apotheosis of Dada's machine-man, an image/war machine operating like Stanley Kubrick's Hal in *2001*—so thoroughly programmed that it detaches itself from its makers and sets its own agenda.

Steina's means are simple. She takes stunningly beautiful yet turbulent clips of nature in her native Iceland, enlarges them, then turns them on end, literally and figuratively, so that they may be experienced as living abstractions on a scale equal to that of the human body. The effect is to tear them from their entrenchment in the cliché so they may be perceived free from the drag of representational history. Nature, having somehow survived the twentieth century onslaught of archaic industrial insults, speaks in the only way it can, through stormy electronic images made by an artist with roots both in urban culture and in a remote land still precariously preserved in ice. As Steina herself remarked of this work, "Nature got the best of me. I'm not urban anymore and I'm quite happy about it."

This exhibition amounts to more than the sum of its two parts. This is nature and culture, the great twentieth century arch-rivals playing out their drama through the gendered subject. Man, having made his move for the ultimate Faustian power grab, is left to wander amid the detritus of an ill-advised gambit, assembling and re-assembling his war machine. With a sense of irony, he ad libs, one hideous version after the other, while reflecting on his own absurdities. Woman, having finally broken her unchosen, tacitly compliant assistantship in man's enterprise and liberated herself in urban culture, returns quietly to nature having lost her innocence and retrieved her wisdom.

There the two of them wait at the turn of the millennium, in an active, knowing state, for the arrival of the only possible solution to the dilemma of their histories—when the indexes of nature and culture merge into a unified phenomenon and reality makes its return from a bizarre journey into the mediated space of the image. There we all wait with them. ■■■

Two installations by Steina and Woody Vasulka closed September 4 at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Hollywood.

Lane Barden is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.