

Rewiring reality

The Vasulkas master the machine with the jolting 'Electronic Image'



Iceland's Steina Vasulka, a visual artist and classically trained violinist, appears at Wood Street Galleries.

By Tony Norman
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Vasulkas aren't particularly interested in television as we know it.

But if you were to give them both big screen Toshiba's with all the latest bells and whistles, they'd thank you and smile at their good fortune.

Once you were out of sight, the husband and wife team would probably strip their presents like expert car thieves, taking care to label all the parts for easy reassembly after a period of heavy experimentation.

Woody Vasulka, who studied hydraulic mechanics and metal technology in his native Czechoslovakia, would engineer novel ways of interfacing the scraps of the television set with industrial and military detritus he's stumbled upon in his travels.

Steina [pronounced *Stay-na*], a classically trained violinist from Reykjavik, Iceland, will have figured out a less intrusive solution. She'd be more concerned with shaping the stream of electrons emitted by the big screen's cathode ray gun into something beautiful.

Eventually, Steina will have introduced cameras into the mix, coolly exploring her own creative process from as many angles as possible.

Before long, the Vasulkas will have rewired, or at least recontextualized their gifts in ways that fit their sensibilities.

But in the end, the legendary video pioneers are concerned with one thing: exploring the language of electronic images.

Like the late media theorist and '60s visionary Marshall McLuhan, the Vasulkas are obsessed with the

implications of living in a media- and image-drenched world

Because their mission is so vast — some might even say quixotic — the husband-wife team are happy their interests have taken them down separate paths.

Fortunately, both roads converge in the high concept but very accessible double exhibit "The Electronic Image," opening today at the Wood Street Galleries

Steina's "Borealis" and Woody's "The Brotherhood: Table III" are opposite ends of the avant-garde multi-disciplinary video/machine media street.

"Borealis" is a series of five suspended translucent screens, reminiscent of the monoliths in Arthur C. Clarke's "2001: A Space Odyssey."

"The Brotherhood: Table III" is, as the catalogue "Machine Media" describes, "an arsenal of film and video machines, cameras, optical and electronic devices, with original command and control programs of the computer, an expression of congested, concrete space ..."

It's heavy; it's been culled from the scraps of things that were once deadly, like a navigation table that was once part of an anti-aircraft system on a Vietnam-era B-52.

Many of the pieces that comprise "The Brotherhood: Table III" come from the bomb factories of Los Alamos, N.M., where Woody buys once-prohibitively expensive war machines at auction for pennies on the dollar.

"The Brotherhood: Table III" consists of four standing screens that circle the perimeter of the International Business Machine table. There's also a screen on the ceiling.

Images of fire and "smart bombs" zooming into various Iraqi



Steina and Woody Vasulka: New Mexico couple engineers marvels.

targets flash across the screens as the sound of computer-processed explosions and military technobabble fill the gallery.

But the most disturbing element of Woody's investigation of hair-trigger technology is the playing out of a real-life "friendly fire" Gulf War incident, captured in all of its frontline terror and confusion.

The images, complete with targeting scanners, remind gallery strollers that there are no innocent bystanders in war.

Visitors are invited to regulate the images of explosions by tapping rhythmically on a Roland drum pad in the corner of the room. Suddenly, the illusion of distance from modern battlefield chaos is revealed to be only that — an illusion.

The Vasulkas have always been interested in shrinking the distance between images and events, but in different ways.

"Our pictorial interests are different," Woody says in a joint phone interview with his wife from their home in New Mexico.

Their accents are charming and impart a sense of humanity to their

"He turns to me for the images he can't get from God."

— Steina Vasulka

very serious ideas. Both speak with a European ease about concepts that would sound like jargon coming from an American.

"Steina uses the camera as an instrument; I've departed from using the camera as an instrument," he adds, teasing the sometime collaborator he knows is listening on the other phone.

"I'm more interested in trying to find the synthetic or human-made image *without* the help of God."

"Yes," Steina chimes in. "And then he turns to me for the images he can't get from God."

Woody describes his work as a synthesis of mechanical, optical and robotic construction.

He speaks carefully and methodically of his fascination with the technology behind the image-creating process.

"Exploring unknown, untapped areas of video, sound and computers makes sense to someone like me," Woody says. "I come at it from a background of film and video."

Curiously, Woody doesn't mention his deep engineering background — a base of knowledge that makes emulating his work too difficult for those lacking his background.

"I don't make art that are 'pieces,'" Woody says. "I take it as a progression, a process. I have a systematic interest in boundaries,

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LASTING 'IMAGE'

The opening reception for "The Electronic Image" is tonight from 5:30 to 8:30 at the Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., Downtown.

Steina Vasulka will perform "Violin Power," an interactive violin and video piece at 7:30 at Wood Street's Third Floor Gallery.

The exhibition runs through May 17. Call 471-5605.

ON THE COVER

Detail from Steina Vasulka's "The Borealis," a series of five suspended translucent screens.

Machine heads

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where technology appears and other structures disappear. My work is not that complicated, though it has lots of parts."

Like "The Brotherhood: Table III," "Borealis" is an engineering marvel that perfectly displays its creator's particular aesthetic.

Five large screens float in a pitch black room awash in the sound of crashing waves. Five two-channel video projectors illuminate both sides of all five screens with the flowing image of water-

falls from Steina's native Iceland

Once again, "Machine Media" describes the artist's intention as well as anyone ever has: "The natural sounds and images . . . overwhelm the environment in which they are placed, emphasizing the magnitude of nature.

"The viewer, swept into a meditation on the patterns of natural processes, is led to question the static ways in which landscape is usually represented."

Despite the soothing, meditative power of her work, Steina insists she's hunting bigger game than beauty with a capital "B."

"I'm mostly after vision. Or af-

ter perception in the sense of when perceptual organs are working at their fullest as when we're in a very happy state," Steina says.

"That's when we feel closest to ourselves, to the *soul* you mentioned earlier. But I can't accept it that simply, so what I do — even if Woody says I pull a trick in order to get the images — I always have to alter them."

A close inspection of "Borealis" reveals what Steina means.

The waterfall isn't exactly like one found in nature, even though it was lifted verbatim from one of Steina's favorite places.

"With me, it becomes this funny play of never having the image just

right, yet never altering them to such a degree that you cannot believe them," she says.

"So I do a lot of turning images upside-down. Like, when I turn water upside-down, your eyes adjust to it and accept it as a weird image."

One of Steina's favorite tricks is to move images backward in time. She calls it "playing with temporal realities."

"If it's a river flowing from right to left, it goes from left to right," Steina says.

"You don't know anything's wrong with it except [when] you notice that droplets come before the break instead of after it. These

kind of puzzlements I like very much to play with because it puts your brain into a busy mode.

"You ask 'what is that, is it really right, or is it not?'" she says.

Asked if she has any idea of what she wants before she begins a work like "Borealis," Steina agrees that she does, but doesn't feel bound by it in any way.

"All of that can go out the window," she says. "I can only work with what the machine gives me and tells me. If the original idea wasn't so hot, there are plenty of other ideas."