

Video art pioneers stuck on pause

SFMOMA exhibit long on pretension, short on potential

By David Bonetti
EXAMINER ART CRITIC

THE OLD FEAR that video art was inherently boring, technologically absorbed, slow-witted and slow-moving, even ugly, has been put to rest in recent years. Such artists as Bill Viola, Thierry Kunstler, Chantal Akerman, Mary Lucier, Gary Hill and Doug Hall, among others, have demonstrated that video art can be as thrilling, beautiful and emotionally and intellectually satisfying as painting, sculpture and photography — in ways unique to the medium that the traditional arts are incapable of.

The work of Steina and Woody Vasulka gives fresh ammunition to old prejudices. ("Machine Media," an exhibition of their work organized by media arts curator Robert R. Riley, continues through March 31 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.) It must be hard work to make the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and nuclear warfare dull, but, dammit, Woody Vasulka does just that in his 1987 videotape, "Art of Memory," and he also manages to stretch time, a goal of much advanced art, in making a 36-minute work seem to last a small eternity.

Long live the avant-garde!

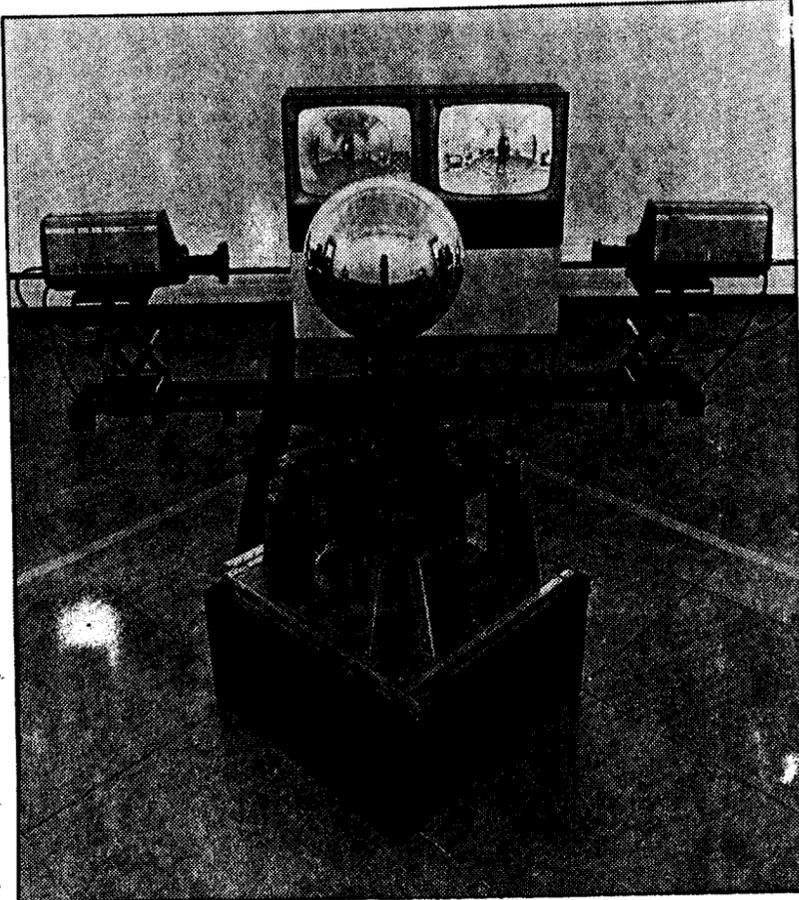
The Vasulkas are charter members of that part of the post-war avant-garde interested in and absorbed by technology. Woody, who was born in Czechoslovakia in 1937, and Steina, who was born in Iceland in 1940, together came to New York City in 1965, where they settled into the downtown scene. (Their first shows were at Max's Kansas City and on Warhol drag star Jackie Curtis' television special.) In 1971, the Vasulkas founded The Kitchen, still a New York City showcase for advanced media arts. (They decamped for Buffalo in 1974 and have lived in Santa Fe since 1980.)

Their early work established the way they have continued working, even as new technological developments have expanded their possibilities. From the start, their work was marked by late '60s attitudes. It is experimental, experiential, definition-blurring and boundary-bursting. They tend to be more interested in exploring the nature of the medium than in using the medium as a vehicle for communication of ideas outside its own boundaries.

(For SFMOMA's continued record-breaking attendance, let's hope that a convention of technoworks with a historical consciousness is booked at Moscone during the show's run.)

The Vasulkas demonstrate an understanding of the mesmerizing potential of video in early works like "Matrix" (1970-72), in which banks of television sets are programmed with pulsating images. (Perhaps it would be best to visit the exhibition stoned. I make it a practice, however, never to smoke while working.)

"Matrix" was a groundbreaking work when conceived, but today, when phalanxes of video monitors appear everywhere from bank lobbies to airport terminals to



Steina Vasulka's "Allvision," from the 1976 "Machine Vision" series

cocktail lounges, it's hard to get excited about the Vasulkas' early prototypes, especially since today's versions usually offer more intoxicating imagery. The problem with groundbreaking art is that it often pales when compared to later work it made possible.

Although the Vasulkas are usually packaged as a team, they work separately. Their work is different, especially as it reflects their attitudes toward the audience. Steina, for instance, understands that the exploration of technology is not an end in itself, that art is potentially a medium of communication and that beauty is a traditional component of art that allows it to make its appeal to an indifferent public.

Not that she is an aesthete. In terms of beauty, Steina has only taken baby steps, but she does offer something seductive to look at. In-

deed, the most engaging work in the show is hers. "Borealis" (1993) is a room-sized installation of four large panels on which images of surging water (shot in her native Iceland) are projected. The technology that in other Vasulka works tends to absorb attention before content here falls into the background before the power of the visual experience. You inhabit a world of water and energy and you become swept up in the experience before you ask how it is achieved.

Steina is less successful in "The West" (1983), her other major work in the exhibition, a piece owned by SFMOMA. A semi-circle of 22 double-stacked television monitors, "The West" is a recreation of the Southwestern landscape with images constantly washing across the screens. The

imagery, which ranges from ruins of the Anasazi Indians to radio telescope towers, stresses that as long as humans have inhabited the landscape, they have made interventions in it.

Steina's images, however, have little inherent appeal, and you are reminded of other video artists like Lucier or photographers such as Richard Misrach or John Pfahl who have dealt with similar issues with greater image-making ability.

Steina's juxtaposition of multiple images on a single screen, washing across the entire bank of monitors, reveals a frustration with the medium as she exploits it to the max. The use of a single, changing image for each screen (as Chantal Akerman demonstrated so brilliantly in "D'Est," in SFMOMA's inaugural show) is more formally consistent with the video medium. Steina's forced juxtapositions of images reminded me of Jean Metzinger's half-baked cubism, in which he painted juxtaposed stripes of different realities on a single canvas rather than represent a single object from multiple viewpoints on a flat surface.

But Steina's work is at least about something other than video technics. Woody, in comparison, seems to be in love with technology for its own sake. In his two room-sized installations from "The Brotherhood" series (1994-96), he has made beautiful, useless machines that flash lights and suddenly move in abrupt but plotted patterns.

His enormous, ego-drenched installations left no entry point for me — nor, I suspect, from what I witnessed at SFMOMA Sunday afternoon, for many others. But for Woody, such work exists for itself. The work pretends to be an allegory of masculinity and the male's drive to destruction, raised to a high art by machinery. In fact, it seems to be about the boy's love of gadgets, with no apologies given. If that's what it is, no problema, but at least admit that it's the machine that you love and not humanity.

◆ PHILHARMONIA from C-5

Philharmonia's brilliant concert

No. 9, "Jeunehomme," with the flair of a visiting virtuoso and the care of a devoted family member. Performing on McGegan's own piano, a replica of a Schantz Viennese fortepiano built by Thomas and Barbara Wolf (and probably the finest such instrument in the area), Carlin approached both the concerto and his fellow musicians with equal parts daring, accommodation and musical imagination.

The purveyor of one of the best keyboard trills since the late Rudolf Serkin, Carlin more importantly evinced interpretive proclivities ideal for this still-undervalued concerto. His sturdy sense of the

music's underlying pulse afforded him appreciable rhythmic elasticity, and his shrewd sense of tempo relationships — the concluding Presto was fleet but also spacious — permitted a persuasive formulation of the music's rhetoric.

The wonder of the performance was the concerto's central Andantino, where orchestra and soloist conspired to create some unforgettable chiaroscuro effects. McGegan brought out the chafing qualities of the string sonorities in the instrumental opening to spellbinding effect, and Carlin pursued the keyboard's sinuous line with a sure yet adventurous sense of its outcome.

Throughout the performance, but particularly in this movement, Carlin achieved a "big" sound — on an instrument of significantly restricted dynamic range — through the sheer intensity of his

playing. Stylistically impeccable as it was, this wasn't "proper" Mozart, it was music of genius in the fever of inspiration.

After intermission, Philharmonia violinists Elizabeth Blumentock and Anthony Martin played the spots off the dazzling, antiphonal solos that inform Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante in E-Flat, K. 320d. The two had at this thrilling, daredevil music with a kind of hunger that was the easier to appreciate in that they played the remainder of the concert from the back rows of their respective sections — with, one discerned, no less relish. In the Sinfonia Concertante, their colleagues matched them thrill for chill.

The concert will be repeated Thursday at Walnut Creek's Regional Center for the Arts, Friday at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre, and Saturday at First Methodist Church in Palo Alto.

CRYPTOQUIP

N D J D Z R U K C R N C K Q
"N L E Q H U O U V V S Z C K K"
J W M E H U W V H S W
V L K W J W S O U M R M U H H U V .

Today's Cryptoquip clue: O equals B

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN YOU PAY FOR REUPHOLSTERING A SOFA, WILL YOU GET A REPEAT?

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES PUZZLE

ACROSS

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for his future, his mother

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to compensate him for
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d fence."

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ix

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A 6-year-old is awfully young
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nders ©
Creators Syndicate Inc.

IMANS by Buddy Hickerson

'T's see... PUSHING AGE 40
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WRITE YOU OUT A SUBSCRIP-
O COSMO."



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