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MARY F. CALVERT — Staff

"Borealis," an installation by Steina Vasulka, is part of "Machine Media" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Of media and men

Woody and Steina Vasulka use video art and war technology to explore the environment

TICKETS

- > "Machine Media," featuring video art by Woody and Steina Vasulka
- > Through March 31
- > San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St. (between Mission and Howard streets)
- > 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, until 9 p.m. Thursday
- > \$7, \$3.50 for seniors and students, free for children under age 13. Admission is half-price 6 to 9 p.m. Thursdays, free the first Tuesday of the month
- > (415) 357-4000

By Jolene Thym
STAFF WRITER

SINCE artists Woody and Steina Vasulka discovered the video camera three decades ago, the two have strapped it to their waists and done gymnastics, bolted it to the hood of a car, attached it to a robot and stationed it over a bridge.

But capturing some of the most bizarre video images in the world was only the beginning.

Combining their technical expertise, ingenuity and love of adventure, the two have created dozens of unique installa-

tions that reinterpret the environment and question the meaning of war, the parameters of space, and the impact of media on memory and perception.

Last week, the two plugged in eight of their installations, creating a heaping, blasting, rotating, pulsating display of video motion and sound at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for the exhibition "Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media," on display through March 31.

Curated by Bob Riley, the installations fill a maze-like configuration of small galleries on the third floor. The two artists work independently, using

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Media: Seeing it all and then some

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vastly different approaches to explore different questions with the same media.

Steina's work includes several multi-monitor arrangements that flash moving, abstract images that continually drift horizontally, appearing to move from one screen to the next. Those images, produced during the 1970s, were inspired by "a bad cable connection," she said.

More current work incorporates her ideas about visual perception. By placing a mirrored sphere in a specific environment, then rotating cameras around the ball, viewers can experience 360-degree vision.

"I want to see something that I cannot, as a human, see," Steina said. To make sure people understand this concept, she has set up a demonstration of what she calls "Allvision" in the central atrium of the SFMOMA. A sphere set in the center of the atrium captures the bright light pouring through its massive skylight, and the reflections of stairways encircling the center of the building and a portion of the third floor, where the sphere is installed.

Two video cameras focused on the ball rotate at the same speed, gathering and transcribing multi-angle images on two television monitors.

Steina builds on this see-it-all

concept in her installation "The West," a series of monitors that feature video images of various environments in the Southwest, as reflected in the mirrored sphere. Richly colored slides contrast with textured rock formations, telescopic images of the land and brick ruins.

"This is about mythology and religion. It is about man trying to understand the cosmos. But of course you cannot compete with God," Steina explained.

Another strong — and more accessible — installation by Steina is a room hung with four transparent screens. Working with mirrors, sound and video, images from nature, such as fog and mist and rushing water, fill the screens on both sides. The installation is titled "Borealis."

Woody's work, which is much more dependent on complex machines, utilizes military hardware, including devices called "intercept plotting tables," tracking devices and gyroscopic missile heads. The hardware is coupled with images made with a Digital Image Articulator, a tool Woody built in the 1970s that foreshadowed today's digital image software. Like today's computers, the articulator translates numbers into pictures, resulting in a digitally produced image. He also uses a scan processor that reduces an image to its component scan lines.

The result is a series of complex

mechanical installations that allude to the machinery of war as much as the reality of space and time.

One of his major installations, "Art of Memory," consists of four rectangular projection screens mounted around a table with a built-in slide projector. An additional screen is mounted on the ceiling. Images of war are projected on the screens as the room is filled with the sounds of politicians speaking about war and bombs, and battle-related topics. The images and sounds are layered so that they are hardly discernible.

Woody's most curious installation looks like a robot. Constructed from recycled parts from war machines, it twists and rotates about the room. As Woody describes it, "Theater of the Hybrid Automata" is about "contextualizing virtual space in the history of measurement and mapping," and "the impossibility of mapping."

The Vasulkas, who met in Prague in the early 1960s, have been at the forefront of video art exploration since 1971, when they founded "The Kitchen," an electronic laboratory for artists in New York. In 1980, the Vasulkas moved to Santa Fe, N.M., where they currently live and work. Their work has been shown all over the world and has been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Guggenheim Foundation.