

Video Exhibit Shows Artists' Paths Diverging

In 1972 on a trip to New York, I happened to drop by The Kitchen in lower Manhattan during the evening news. Steina and Woody Vasulka, the video artists whose current exhibition is running at the Museum of Fine Arts, had opened The Kitchen in 1971. The name, taken from its former use as a hotel kitchen, was an apt metaphor to describe a place known for cooking up 1960s radical culture.

I remember coming off the cold, windy street into a dark flickering chamber. There was a wall of glowing video screens tuned to nothing more exciting than a newscaster, a so-called talking head. Yet, this encounter remains a personal marker for me.

Every little movement of the announcer, such as the lifting of a pencil, the tilt of a head, the shuffle of papers, became a monumental field disturbance as it was multiplied and amplified across this grid of black-and-white miniature theaters.

Like most Americans of my generation I had grown up with TV, that busy little box in the living room around which the family gathered. What I saw at The Kitchen a short 25 years ago was something entirely different: It was a new medium, a palpable environment with a language and syntax all its own. Here was video used in what felt like a grand, public, aesthetic display. Yet, The Kitchen itself had no pretensions to grandeur or the elegance of a gallery space: It was not bright, nor white, but dim and funky, a cluttered laboratory, a dark labyrinth of possibilities, something that required alertness to navigate.

On the same trip, I also visited a loft with a dancer who lay in a trance all day, suspended in a maze of timber. It was the era of minimalist art and performance where the viewer became the prime actor, and the Vasulka grid of monitors felt completely hip.

With the benefit of hindsight, they rearticulated what had been a seamless banal member of the

About Art



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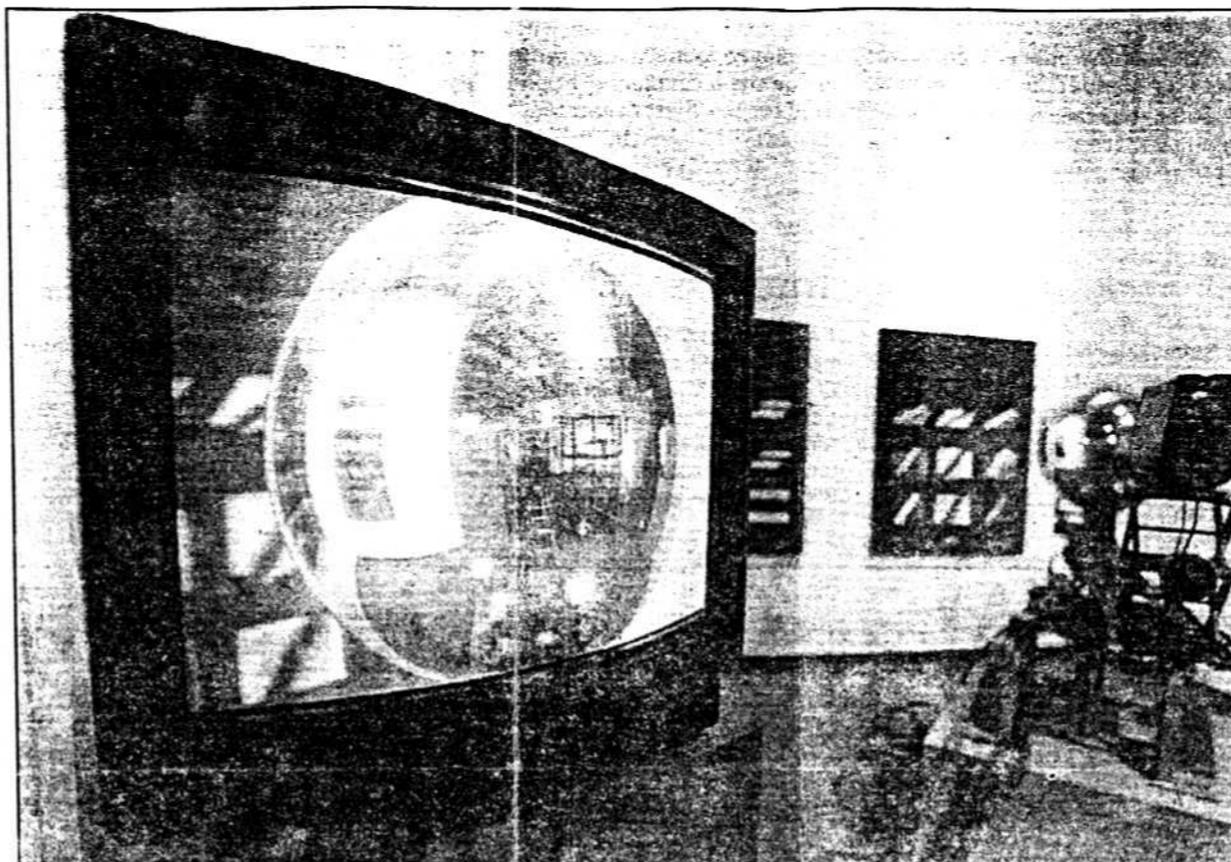
household into an arena of aesthetic importance. And they had done it in a knowing, pioneering and playful manner. As I have come to know more of their work, it has always been underpinned by a European intellectual rigor blended with 1960s irreverence, and it is often surprisingly humorous.

For example, in an early videotape demonstrating the tendency of images to drift horizontally, a chart showing the development of Homo sapiens drifts backward, and in Steina's "Summersaults" tape she literally does somersaults around the backyard with her camera in summer.

Steina and Woody moved to Santa Fe in 1980, but their alliance and orientation were forged in Prague during the 1960s. Steina, a native of Iceland, met Woody while she was studying violin. Woody, born Bohuslav Vasulka in Brno (the second-largest city in what is now the Czech Republic), was an engineer and jazz critic who had come to Prague to study film. Woody said of their move to New York City in 1965: "I figured the most exotic and interesting practiced system of modernism was the American system."

Video was their avenue out of an emigré community and into world of the Filmore East, the Village jazz scene, homosexual theater and proto-punk garage hackers.

In the current exhibition at the museum, the visitor is greeted by "Matrix I," 1970-72, one of their early collaborative multiple monitor arrays. Here, wave forms generated by an electronic signal



EDDIE MOORE/FOR THE JOURNAL

OPTICAL EXPERIMENT: A display at the video installation "Machine Media" by Steina and Woody Vasulka at the Museum of Fine Arts.

are both sound and image, and as they appear to drift from one monitor to the next, seeming to multiply perpetually beyond the frame, there is a suggestion that we are all permeable and exist in a blizzard of penetrating, invisible signals.

For the last quarter-century the Vasulkas have flourished in an international matrix of video artists, a group that in the 1960s Jonas Mekas called "the tribe that worship electricity." In the early years, the tribe mailed tapes to each other, shared inventions and met at arcane conferences in Germany, Austria and France; but, now, they and their contemporaries Bill Viola and Gary Hill are the subjects of major museum exhibitions.

This Vasulka exhibition was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and cannot

be called a retrospective. Their output has been prodigious, and this selection is primarily given over to seven installations that emphasize the divergent directions each pursued after approximately five years of early collaborations, when they mastered their craft. Steina would practice running with the first heavy cameras; Woody made didactic comparisons of wave forms. They've always lived in a jumble of equipment so that their discoveries and their daily life came into being with a familiar, even a family sensibility.

Over the decades they have moved from analog technology to digital, from real-time interactions to computer manipulations and animation, from editing tapes to custom-built laser disc sequencing. Throughout, Steina remains a musician and performer, and today she is booked around the world to do cross-continental and

interactive violin performances. Woody, who was first intrigued by film editing, has spent the 1990s engineering elaborate interactive pieces from the Cold War junk pile of Los Alamos.

Of the three major installations by Steina on view, "Allvision" from 1976 demonstrates one of their key concerns and the title of this exhibition: Machine Media. This revolving apparatus of two cameras looking at a mirrored ball comes from the tradition of 18th century enlightenment optical experiments. What can a machine see that humans can't?

Since moving to New Mexico in 1980, Steina has taken her camera out of the studio and into the world. "The West" (1983) extends the smooth horizontal movement of the camera, weaving images of Chaco Canyon and the Very Large Array across two arching banks of

'Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media'

WHEN: Through Feb. 3, 1997. Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

WHERE: Museum of Fine Arts, 107 E. Palace Ave., 827-4455.

monitors. "Borealis" (1993) uses free-standing translucent screens and it is almost Baroque in its flourish. Torrents of sound and water are choreographed to rush, foam, reverse and gently sweep through a 10-minute cycle in this extravagant audio-video composition.

All of Woody's installations here are seeded in a piece called "The Commission" from the mid-1980s that used floating 3-D images of war. During his youth, his homeland became "a junkyard, where we would find great dumps full of war equipment ... we could go through them and see the whole anthropology of war."

In New Mexico, Woody began recycling military hardware into aesthetic investigations. The "Theatre of Hybrid Automata" (1991) is built around an amazing celestial navigator, a double cylinder with optics and sensors to keep the instrument locked to the Polar Star. The two interactive "Brotherhood" table installations use such items as optical beam splitters, an aluminum and an illuminated plotting table, projections of targets, and other opto-mechanical devices. In an essay for the SFMOMA catalog, Woody writes: "My social code is hopelessly arrested. ... Somehow I have trusted the dynamics of time, and have believed in the adventure of technology as an automatic purifying process in itself."

Although the Vasulkas have taken different aesthetic paths, with Steina's work feeling like a walk through beautiful strangers and Woody's reconfiguration of war technology feeling like a Wizard of Oz opening of the curtain, they're still cooking it up in their own kitchen.