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**Venice Biennale 1997**  
**The Video Art of Steina Vasulka**  
**The Work “ORKA”**  
**By: Audur Olafsdottir, Art Historian**  
**(Catalog from Biennial)**

*All the citations in this article are from the author's private interview with Steina Vasulka.*

“It all begins with sound. And the sound leads me into image. Every image has its own sound,” [1] says video artist Steina Vasulka, whose works have been compared to symphonies of images, visual operas and musical polyphony.

Steina Vasulka was born in Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, in 1940. She trained as a musician, went to Prague for advanced violin studies in 1959 and started her artistic career as a violinist with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra before becoming, together with her husband Woody Vasulka, one of the pioneers of video art in the USA at the end of the 1960s. Today she lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

One of the main points of departure of her first works was to explore and expand the visual language possibilities of video art and define the separate nature of this new medium within the visual arts. “Compared to the mechanism of film, video is almost organic. It's flexible, so much softer than film. But the same principle applies to the technique of video art and playing the violin: you have to practice.”

The basic concept underlying Steina Vasulka's works has always involved the interaction of sound and image: how to create image from sound and sounds from image, how to translate a video image into sound and vice versa. The artist works exclusively with her own recordings, and the sound is a dominant factor in the structure. Every single frame is handled with a view to sound. “It may be the fact that I have a musical background but never went to art college which means that I never think of an image as a static surface but rather as motion. Arid motion is time. My videos primarily hinge upon time and attempts to capture something flowing and living.”

Her work ORKA (Icelandic = “Force”) juxtaposes two of the archetypal forces of transformation, water and fire. It is scarcely possible to imagine a more appropriate subject for the artist's contemplation upon the flux of time than the two forces which are virtually synonymous with the unbridled flow of natural energy in Iceland: water and fire, sub-glacial eruptions, glacier bursts cascading over black sands, waterfalls, glacial rivers.

Steina Vasulka has collected video recordings of Iceland on her travels around the country over the past twenty years. She tends to stand with her video camera on bridges, above waterfalls or on top of sheer cliffs, pointing it down into the swirling waters. Her angle of vision is the bird's eye view. Among the simple, but effective camera techniques which she uses are turning the camera upside down, shooting with a moving camera, or using two cameras simultaneously.

The fruits of such “video hunting trips” are the raw material which the artist works from in her Santa Fe studio. Almost every single frame in ORKA is manipulated in one way or another, by increasing or decreasing the recording speed, flipping images, shifting colors, changing direction. By playing images in reverse, the artist breaks up the linear progress of time.

So time is inherent not only in the subjects of Steina Vasulka's works of video art, but no less in their forms and presentation. One of her main technical characteristics is soft edge keying, which involves creating a rich or soft texture in merging the images, so that it is impossible to say where one ends and another begins. The continuous loop ORKA therefore has no definite end and no beginning.

Steina Vasulka's works are never dubbed with external sounds. The sounds are processed from what the microphone picks up at the same time as the video image is recorded, and even though the soundtrack is processed no less than the image, each image still has its own "natural" sound or cadence.

When image and tone have been "purified" and processed, which includes removing all kind of temporal and topographical references and even the erasure of the horizon itself, the spectator, stands face to face with a sublimated still life in motion, multi-channeled nature.

The creation of Steina Vasulka's video art works can be divided into three phases: recording, processing and installation; the artist herself prefers to identify her work as "environment" not "installation" art. The presentation, the framework around her audiovisual world, makes a major contribution to the effectiveness of her work.

To a certain extent ORKA is a kind of integration of all preceding technical inventions, and although her works are complex in composition and production, the presentation deftly conceals its hi-tech background. The spectator is led into a mysterious, darkened space where laser projectors throw images of the archetypal forces of nature onto large screens. In order to expand the space and multiply and intensify the visual experience, the artist uses mirrors. Personally, she is opposed to her work being identified with orchestration. In this way, the interplay of sounds in the multi-track sound system in the exhibition space may be compared to that of instruments playing a piece of music together. An example is when one sound/instrument backs down in order to give other sounds/instruments more prominence.

Steina Vasulka's works surround the exhibition visitor in a multiscreen interaction of image and sound: to some extent the experience may be said to resemble the pretrial dream of walking into a work of art and becoming one with it. For Steina Vasulka is in one sense a romantic artist. "Many of my favorite artists are romantics. Like Beethoven."

Most people, in fact, revisit Steina Vasulka's works, to experience their diversity. As the artist herself says: "you can't insist that people watch and listen at one and the same time. In general I can never do both things simultaneously myself."

Time in its barest form is not only an irrevocable transformation, but also a continuous flux, like water which floats in constant search of its origin. And like the water flowing backwards or uphill, Steina Vasulka is in absolute control of the time content of her creations:

"I think I have a duty to show what can't be seen, like water flowing uphill or sideways and an upside-down sea. By putting people in a mental world where they have never lived, you can hypnotize them."

*End*