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Machine Vision

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STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA:

Machine Media

February 2 to March 31

In an era when advances in electronic communications technology are having a global impact socially and culturally, *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media*, a retrospective of two of the most influential figures in the development of video art, explores the role of the machine in the creative process, both summarizing the evolution of electronic art and anticipating new directions.

Organized chronologically, the exhibition presents eight large-scale installations and three, sixty-minute programs of videotape. These works include some of the artists' earliest explorations with video technology, such as the use of "horizontal drift" in *Matrix*, 1970-72, a collaborative work that demonstrates the fluidity of the electronic signal as it expands to fill a multi-monitor picture field. Recent works, created by the artists individually, show two very different veins of investigation, in Steina's, a preoccupation with landscape and organic forms; in Woody's, an avid interest in the inherent creative (and destructive) potential of the machine. Steina's large-scale, two channel installation *Borealis*, 1993, presents sounds and images recorded by the artist in Iceland on four large translucent screens (where the image is visible from both sides of the screen) and engulfs the viewer with vast crashing waves, rivers, Cliffs, steam, and spray, evoking the magnitude of nature. By contrast *The Brotherhood, Table III*, 1994, an interactive installation by Woody, is made up of video projection apparatus and surplus materials from military sites (such as Los Alamos) and explores, with its underlying theme of violence, the paradox of the use of electronic media in both art and military and scientific arenas.

The Vasulkas are well known for their inventive contributions to video technology. *Artifacts*, 1980 for example, documents the capacity of the Digital Image Articulator, a tool designed by Woody Vasulka and Jeffrey Schier in the late 1970s that foreshadowed digital imaging tools of the present. This work shows the particular ways in which digital imaging can reconfigure an object, in this case, the artist's hand. Reflecting what he calls his "dialogue with the machine," Woody explains the title of this work in the videotape: "I mean I have to share the creative process with the machine. It is responsible for too many elements in this work. These images come to you as they came to me—in a spirit of exploration." Similarly Steina's early explorations of video-imaging devices led her to create the series "Machine Vision." *Allvision*, 1976, a work from this series on view in the exhibition, consists of a mechanical video device that views the Museum space through a mirrored sphere. Museum viewers see themselves on a video monitor as recorded by the camera through the sphere's reflection, providing them with a new experience of electronic space.

A musician by training, Steina was born in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1940. She met Woody Vasulka (born 1937 in Brno, Czechoslovakia), a filmmaker in Prague, in the early 1960s. The couple married and moved to New York in 1965, where through Woody's film contacts, they discovered video. "It was like falling in love," said Steina, "I never looked back." Together they attracted an ever-expanding circle of artists who gathered in their loft to see their works in progress.

In search of a larger space, they founded the Kitchen (literally an abandoned kitchen in the old Broadway Central Hotel) in 1971, a "Live Audience Test Laboratory" for artists. The Vasulkas continued to collaborate on projects until 1974 when their interests diverged. Woody focused on a project of examining the vocabulary of electronic images, while Steina began building image machines that could explore the autonomous imaging potential of the camera. In 1980, the Vasulkas moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they currently live and work. Their achievements include exhibitions internationally. They have been the recipients of funding from, among other sources, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Guggenheim

Foundation; and numerous awards including the American Film Institute Maya Deren Award and the Siemens Media Art Prize.

Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media is co-organized by Robert Riley, SFMOMA curator of media arts, and Marita Sturken, independent curator and assistant professor, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California. The exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

The catalogue *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media* includes essays by the exhibition curators, by Woody Vasulka, and by Maureen Turim and Scott Nygren. *Available at the Museum Store.*

In conjunction with this exhibition, the Museum will present *System Aesthetics: Works from the Permanent Collection* in the fourth floor galleries January 24 to March 31.

Woody Vasulka
Didactic Video, 1975
Video stills

Steina Vasulka
Lilith, 1987
Video still

Woody Vasulka
The Commission, 1983
Video stills

OPENING EXHIBITION

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