

## STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA

---

The work of Steina and Woody Vasulka has been instrumental in shaping video art and defining the potential of electronic imaging. The materiality of the electronic image itself is the central concern articulated in the Vasulkas' work. Since the late 1960s, they have pursued, collaboratively and individually, a phenomenological project of systematically examining the properties of the video medium. As such, their work provides a map of the principles that distinguish the electronic image from the legacy of film. The tenacity with which they have pursued their project and the scope of the body of work they have produced gives them a unique status in the field of video art, although they resist all attempts to historicize them as "pioneers."

The Vasulka's early collaborative work methodically explored the material relationship of electronic audio and video and the myriad ways the electronic signal can be manipulated. With an informal network of artist/engineers, they designed and acquired machines that worked as open-ended boxes, freed of the limitation inherent in most industrial machines. These machines, the Rutt/Etra scan processor (designed by Steve Rutt and Bill Etra), the Digital Image Articulator (designed by Woody with Jeffrey Schier), among others, are seen by the Vasulkas as their collaborators, with whom they work in dialogue.

Woody has been primarily concerned with the potential for a vocabulary of electronic imaging, and with deconstructing the relationship of the image to narrative. Thus, in *The Commission*, he uses analog and digital imaging techniques to produce images that are meaningful in both their structure and narrative content, in a story of two artists—the tragic Paganini and the arrogant Berlioz—and the tainted act of art-making. In *The Art of Memory*, Woody constructs three-dimensional image objects—removed from any representation of the "real"—into which he inserts filmic images of the upheaval of the 20th century—World War II, the Spanish Civil War, the nuclear bomb. For Woody, history is symbolized in the black-and-white filmic image, yet the potential for revolutionary image-making lies with electronic imaging.

For Steina, history is inscribed not in cinematic images but within nature. Steina's work is a conscious mapping of the moving camera's relationship to the space and landscape before the lens. In her early series *Machine Vision*, she constructed mechanical devices with rotating cameras, mirrored spheres, and other optical devices to create a "vision" beyond human vision. Taking her camera throughout the Southwest, and to Iceland and Japan, Steina reorchestrates landscapes in *The West*, *Summer Salt* and *Scapes* to create terrains that exist only within the realm of the electronic: waves crash in a desert, Native American ruins merge with satellite dishes, viewers see their own images transformed in a rotating electronic space.

In their determination to never lose sight of the role of the electronic signal in creating images and sound, and their refusal to use video as a medium through which to merely look at the world, the Vasulkas have created works that constantly ask us to rethink our relationship to the image and the cultural baggage we bring to it, and to reflect on the ways that electronic imagery redefines our relationship to the space around us and to each other.—Marita Sturken, University of California, Santa Cruz.