

Borealis
Media Scape: Guggenheim Museum
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B O R E A L I S 1 9 9 3

Steina Vasulka uses rotating cameras in her installations as instruments to explore the phenomena of time and space, recording her surroundings without any interference to create documents of given forms and sounds. In *Borealis*, Vasulka establishes a spatial relationship between the visual and acoustic elements of nature. Fragmented landscape images, which the artist recorded in her country of origin, Iceland, in 1992, appear on four freestanding, transparent screens in a darkened room. Two mirrors set up in conjunction with two projectors disseminate the images to the screens; because of the screens' translucent material, the images are visible on both sides. The viewer is surrounded by a play of recorded sounds and moving, free-floating depictions of water, rock surfaces, and soil, becoming captivated by the images of natural phenomena and experiencing a direct confrontation with the physical power of the elements.

The electronic manipulations employed by Vasulka and her husband, Woody, in both their collaborative and individual projects, produce strange effects that seem to subvert natural laws, confusing our perceptual beliefs. In *Borealis*, the video material is manipulated in such a way that we see the flow of water in reverse, returning to its source; through crossfading, minute shifts in the soil appear to swell to the size of avalanches; and precise superimpositions transform natural rock formations into complex, virtual sedimentations. The main theme of *Borealis* is the movement and flow of nature. Because of the open arrangement of the large screens, the visitor can feel entrapped by the power of nature in the gaps that are left between them. The enhanced visual and acoustic presence of the recordings allows the viewer to participate in a visual and sensual experience while being drawn closer to the textures of the natural elements.

Borealis incorporates landscape within an architectural configuration, fusing both elements to create a new, artificial genre made possible by the medium of video. The projections on the screens interact with the space around them, while the planes themselves, in their random placement and their orientation toward the projectors, create their own spaces—they act as an incidentally arranged subarchitecture, offering both fixed and changing scenes in which the viewer has no option but to react to the ceaseless movement of the images. Despite the material presence of the screens, the motion of the images suggests a purely illusionary tectonics of planes. The architecture of the floating screens seems to fade under the immateriality of the images. In contrast, the projected images fill the space with their extraordinary mass, the emphasized materiality of their content superceding their virtual character. Close-ups of small sections of landscape and enlargements of detailed surface textures grow in the video projections into towering formations. Concentrated fragments of nature can turn into mountain ranges and landscape panoramas. Their monumentality

represents their ability to withstand the forces of time, climate, and evolution. As architecture and landscape interact, each simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the other.

Since her move to New Mexico in 1980, Vasulka has drawn on the landscape as a recurring theme in her work. It is not the romantic implication of this traditional artistic motif that interests her, but the influence of machines on geographical and geological conditions. Unimpeded by the art-historical associations of the landscape genre, Vasulka views the scenery she encounters in the Southwest quite pragmatically, as an extension of spatial dimensions and perspectives that allows her to expand her artistic configurations. The whole of the Southwest, she has said, now serves as her studio.¹ This impulse to move the studio outside, into nature, evokes a long succession of plein-air movements with widely varying artistic intentions, from Impressionism in the nineteenth century to the earthworks of the -1960s and 1970s. Vasulka's manipulations of nature are most closely related to Robert Smithson's large-scale landscape interventions, some of which were only accessible through the mediums of film and photography. Like Smithson, who called himself a "site-seer," Vasulka uses her camera to penetrate deep into the geological and physical structures of earth, stone, and water. Works such as *Summer Salt* (1982), *The West* (1983), and *Geomania* (1989), which are based on an optically deconstructed approximation of detailed landscape textures, bring to mind Smithson's approach to natural realities. While Smithson used heavy machinery to move large amounts of earth, in Vasulka's work this feat is accomplished by her use of video. Like Smithson's earthworks, *Borealis* is composed of a number of precisely choreographed pieces of nature that reorganize geological processes; in Vasulka's work, this is accomplished by means of depth adjustments, optical echoes and reversal effects, superimpositions, and other electronic manipulations. *Borealis* seems to tell the history of the earth in a fragmented text composed of the sediments of time. The viewer's experience is that of a traveler, who, via the real-time projections, develops a sense of the duration of an observation. While Process and performance art of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought real time into the galleries and museums, *Borealis* employs geological and paleontological measures of time, which leave little space for human intervention. The pixellated structure of Vasulka's medium—the digital image—relates to the geological and archeological structures of the subject of her recordings. Like a cartographer, she documents the graphic and structural elements of natural sites, her digitalized projections forming "maps" of the landscape.

Smithson did not consider his inclination toward earthworks as biographically predetermined, and Vasulka, also, though her work is concerned with the landscape of her birthplace and immediate surroundings, resists a mythical/female or purely aesthetic interpretation. Her landscape adaptations underscore the phenomenological interest of a place where pre-and post-historical aspects meet in one material formation. Vasulka leaves behind painting, sculpture, and architecture, using video to enter a timeless world of ideas where she transposes history and entropy, material and erosion into the transparency of a visual language:

1. Steina Vasulka, quoted in Marita Sturken, "Steina and Woody Vasulka: In Dialogue with the Machine:" in *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996), P. 46.

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