Steina lived in Japan from November 1987 to May 1988 on a fellowship from the US/Japan Friendship Commission. There she recorded sixty hours of video with a camcorder. She let the tapes sit for a year, then began working on them in May 1989.

Now, more than two years later, there is Tokyo Four, her sixth multiscreen composition. It is organized around five categories of imagery: Shinto priests meticulously grooming their Zen garden on New Year’s Eve; train conductors monitoring rush hour crowds, reminding passengers to watch their umbrellas and not to forget their children; elevator girls bringing a superfluity, but charming. High Touch to the high tech world of the shopping malls; a segment about food, beginning with the vertiginous fisheye lens in a supermarket; and an emotionally charged meta-choreography of a dance troupe’s performance and curtain call.

No form of moving-image art comes as close to musical composition as multiscreen video, where the different channels of image and sound are equivalent to musical polyphony, each functioning like a voice in a musical ensemble. And no multiscreen work is as spectacularly musical as Steina’s. She works as a composer would, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture, and tone. Tokyo Four is the audiovisual equivalent of a string quartet. The movies, photos, and book segments are organized into six major movements—an introduction/European theater, the atomic era, the Spanish civil war; historian Frances Yates’s book The Art of Memory and the engravings of the 19th century Romantic illustrator Gustave Doré; Vasulka took from Yates not only the title of his videotape but also one of the tape’s two organizing principles, that of “putting thoughts into a landscape.” Yates writes in The Art of Memory about mnemonic devices used by classical Greeks and Romans. In preparation for his long orations, Cicero would walk through a temple noting the number and positions of the columns, assigning to each column one of the topics of his speech. By visualizing his temple walk when he debated, he could recall the points of his speech with a perfection that left his opponents defenseless.

The mnemonic architectures in Vasulka’s tape are newreels, photographs, and texts—"memories" of major conflicts of the 20th century, World War II primarily, but also the Russian revolution and the Spanish civil war. The movies, photos, and book pages ("leading through history") do not fill the screen, but instead are mapped onto shapes or objects that float above the landscape of the American Southwest or are continuations of it.

The second organizing principle was to display these image-objects in brief segments with openings and closings. Each segment is composed of three elements: the image-object that is to disappear, the image-object that will replace it, and a wipe that performs a syntactical operation of replacement or succession by masking one while revealing the other. The wipes constitute a vocabulary of visual syntaxes divided into nine different shapes with varying durations of opening and closing. They allow Vasulka to replace the direct cuts of conventional montage with complex translations or transmutations of imagery. Into these structures Vasulka inserts the newsreels as what he calls "tones" with no narrative function. He "performs" the images as one performs notes in a musical composition. The resulting visual drama is one of discontinuity rather than causal linearity. The segments are demarcated by a sound like the door of a great vault slamming shut as a black wipe closes down over the segment’s final image.

The one direct cut in Art of Memory occurs when a winged figure inspired by an image from Gustave Doré’s Paradise Lost flies over the man Vasulka calls "the witness," the artist’s alter-ego. The winged figure could be interpreted as Icarus or an Angel of Death, but for Vasulka he simply represents the metaphysical world, which must share the burden of responsibility for the violence and cruelty of human nature. The epilogue represents for Vasulka a catharsis of the inner conflict that manifests itself in the outer conflict of war.

Vasulka used a variety of sophisticated electronic instruments to create Art of Memory’s spectacular images and sounds, which have been so heavily processed that their original form is often unrecognizable. It will interest the viewer to know that the four faces in the lower right of the epilogue, the convulsive dancer confined in a box, and the witness who earlier scoffed at Destiny in the form of the winged figure are all the same person, performance artist Daniel Nagrin. And most of the haunting soundtrack was also derived from a single source, the voice of Santa Fe artist and poet Doris Cross reading her poetry.
STEINA & WOODY VASULKA

For nearly a quarter of a century, Steina and Woody Vasulka have remained at the forefront of exploration into the formal and interactive possibilities of the electronic moving image. Founders of the Kitchen in New York in 1971, they were among the first to establish multiscreen video as an art form. As a concert violinist who was the first to integrate live interactive video into her musical performances, Steina has inspired a generation of high-tech performance artists. Woody is world renowned as a visionary pioneer of electronic image processing, and today, having moved into digital image synthesis and interactive multimedia, he remains on the leading edge.

—Gene Youngblood

Internationally known critic and theorist Gene Youngblood is the author of Expanded Cinema (1970), the first book about video as an art medium. He teaches in the Department of Moving Image Arts at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico.

Close Range Gallery exhibitions are devoted entirely to the representation of works by artists living in Colorado and neighboring states.

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