When you visit the Vasulkas, you step into an electronic jungle: dozens of cables crisscross the floor, a headless life-size robot floats overhead. Stacks of video monitors climb the walls, spilling into the connecting room where more components and monitors stretch toward the ceiling. Another room electronics with names like "field flip/flop switches" and "digital image articulator." Some lie gutted: circuitry exposed, collecting dust. A Mac sits idly on a desk, daisy-chained to a three-wheeled robot, its head a voice-activated video camera. An adjacent office holds scads of 3/4" videotapes chronicling decades of video experiments. What you're witnesses to are the tools of the Vasulkas' unending work-in-progress: a two-decade-old conversation with the machine.

Articulate tinkering is the day-to-day work of the Vasulkas whose accomplishments are equalized by their indifference to the accompanied anxiety. Vast urban artist, Woody, with differing backgrounds cross-pollinated to create the Vasulka, whose influence is demonstrably historical. In 1971, five years after arriving in New York from Czechoslovakia, they co-founded the West, Geomania, Vocalizations, Ptolemy, and Tokyo Four(filmed during a recent fellowship commission in Japan). In their creation, these multi-screen installations engage a technique that comes closest to musical composition. And the effect on the viewer too is musical - one sits in front of a curved bank of monitors from which enveloping waves saturate one physically with sensation and sound. Steina and Woody seem to be acting in unison to compose and conduct the work. The West has been widely praised as "ecstatic," on "exhilarating sheer-force." The work traces the efforts of human to alter and map the land-from cliff dwelling to radio telescope systems, and it was an evocative technique in which the image shifts from screen to screen untouched by the discrete boundaries of the forty-eight monitors.

With characteristic wit and ingenuity, Steina says of her recent works: "I moved here from New York because I wanted to experience what it is to live in the beauty. I did not want to think it was going to be affecting my images as much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it. First of all, the beauty of the West is so seductive. Secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take on God?"

WHAT DID YOU DO BETWEEN THE TIME YOU ARRIVED IN NEW YORK FROM PRAGUE AND WHEN YOU STARTED THE KITCHEN?

It was about five years, and five gorgeous years because to be in New York in this period, in the late sixties, was absolutely fantastic. We would just party a lot and drink and drug and all those things and suddenly the flower revolution was upon us and it meant going to Central Park and seeing sit-ins and be-ins and smoke-ins and all those things. At that time we bought a magnetic audio reel-to-reel recorder that had sound-on-sound capacity so you could record first one track and then the other and then it had an echo between the two tracks. We would take microphones and speakers and investigate feedback and stuff, to see how controllable audio feedback was and then by mid-1969 we rambled into the first video.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER "MACHINE VISION"?

Then we moved to Santa Fe. We didn't have any studio here to speak of, so I moved outside and said, "Okay, this is now my studio and it has an infinite high ceiling and it is blue with nice white clouds on it and the walls are invisible and it's all for the better." And that's when I started doing my landscape pieces. I did an installation called "The West." Since then, I've become more and more drawn into making installations, having multiple channels.

SHOW WHAT ITWAS YOU DIDN'T REALLY KNOW?

Yeah, in my religion of this I could never change anything. If I was in my house and was doing the turntable idea and had forgotten to remove the chair...it was really stupid to have the chair there but at that point, religiously, I couldn't move the chair because that would be altering the scene.

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STEINA

Born in Iceland in 1940, Steina attended the Music Conservatory in Iceland. She fell in with Woody, a fellow student, which is where she met Woody. Steina's relationship to her long-time partner is cooperative, but they have taken independent paths. Steina's relationship to her machines is both cerebral and highly sensual, evidencing her interest in a synthesis of spontaneity and control. Since the early seventies, images formed on mirrored spheres have played a significant part in her work and constitute one of her most significant innovations. These installations titled "Machine Vision" or "Air Vision" involve two cameras moving in a circle around a spherical mirror which captures images of the viewers, the surrounding machinery, and the entire room including the playback of the machine's "vision" itself as displayed live on monitors.

Since moving to the southwest in 1980, Steina has produced The West, Geomania, Vocalizations, Porcelain, and Tokyo Four(filmed during a recent fellowship commission in Japan). In their creation, these multi-screen installations engage a technique that comes closest to musical composition. And the effect on the viewer too is musical - one sits in front of a curved bank of monitors from which enveloping waves saturate one physically with sensation and sound. Steina and Woody seem to be acting in unison to compose and conduct the work. The West has been widely praised as "ecstatic," on "exhilarating sheer-force." The work traces the efforts of human to alter and map the land-from cliff dwelling to radio telescope systems, and it was an evocative technique in which the image shifts from screen to screen untouched by the discrete boundaries of the forty-eight monitors.

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DO YOU SEE THE VIDEOS AS MUSICAL COMPOSITIONS?

Yes, but I usually compose it from the visual. I find visual material that matches or counterpoints, and then I work with soundtracks, rather than having the soundtracks ready and then put the video over it, although I have done that too.

SO THE IDEA IS THAT MUSIC HAS TWO FORMS, ONE THAT YOU HEAR AND ONE THAT YOU SEE?

Yes, I have no relationship to still images personally. I love them as a consumer, as a viewer but for me a painting and photography lack movement. I have my camera and I snapshot but it doesn’t mean anything to me because it doesn’t relate to the previous and the one after. It is of great importance to me to have the flow, the movement and that comes directly from music because music doesn’t exist in a still. It’s always the progression.

YOUR WORK REVOLVES AROUND COOPERATING, MAKING, BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOU, THE MACHINE AND THE IMAGE. WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE MACHINE THAT FASCINATES YOU?

I think it is the Black Hole orbits of the universe that everything works in streams, in orbits. Everything repeats in cycles and a way, it is time-driven. So it is rather than the machine per se as a result. I don’t know where I get this fascination for machines. I didn’t have it in my childhood. I’m not one of those who had that workshop in the basement, but I remember discovering those things like gears and DC motors as some kind of a great mystery and a miraculous thing and I find it very close to life. A mechanistic replication of the biological mystery.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE PROCESS YOU GO THROUGH TO CREATE?

It’s a very interesting question because I wake up in the middle of the night and ask myself what I’m going to do and why I think that this is of interest even to me, much less to anybody else. Of course, you know in moments of self doubt you have absolutely no idea what you are doing. But then once you start doing it, you have this conviction that this is completely the right thing to do. Everybody must see it that way. You’re put into this hysteria that if you tape something in Japan and put it up in four screens that the whole world is going to just be at your feet. It’s so important that you do it and you fall into this particular state of mind, this kind of creative contemplative state where time flies and you feel very good about yourself. Then comes the moment of truth when you show it to all the people and they say, “Yeah, you’re actually right. So what.” That’s how you compensate for this disappointment and then you look at it again a little later and then you say, “but it is still a good work. I still do like it.” You like the work and it doesn’t matter that the world doesn’t. It has nothing to do with it. And I think that a lot of artists work this way. From one work to the next. And every time they are absolutely convinced that now they’ve got the masterpiece.

WHEN YOU REVIEW A PIECE OF YOUR WORK AND DECIDE YOU LIKE IT, WHAT QUALITIES DOES IT HAVE?

I don’t suffer looking at it. I don’t NEED WORKING. I put it together. I know you what you are after and then you have the audience with you, looking at the work and you see it through their eyes instead of your own and you suffer tremendously but you say, “Now, they are thinking this is too long and they are looking at that part and saying ‘if only I had...’. And so you edit in front of the audience. Then I go back, I review the work and look at it again with the audience and I like it. That’s the criteria. Look at it as though it was somebody else’s. Basically, you take the ego out of it but then once you take the ego out of it, it either stands or it doesn’t. And if it doesn’t then you revise it.

WHAT ROLE DOES FUN PLAY IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS FOR YOU?

A great role. A big role. It’s all play and people accuse me of that. They say, “But you are just playing” as though it were bad and I’m very proud of that because I think that is a primary function of human beings. You see in children; they don’t know any better than to play and eventually you unlearn the playing. A lot of adults unlearn it and stop playing and then they even think that there is something wrong with playing. That is sin or something. I can’t remember any art that doesn’t have that sense of play however serious its mission is.

WOODY

WOODY Vasulka seemed destined to spend his life as a tradesman machinist - the craft he inherited from his father. But instead of construction steel behemoths he found himself writing poetry and cooking elaborate meals for the crew. Stepping him one day on the streets of Prague (1963), Steina asked him if he her motorcycle. They went to New York City and he found work as a multi-screen film editor. Now known as a leader in the development of video as an art form, Woody has also been instrumental in the creation of advanced digital and robotic instruments working closely with inventors and designers over the years. A "practical philosopher" he describes his work as a form of play. The machine was never his raison d'être but in the machine he finds artistic inspiration: The poet-machinist says, "I like metal - I have passion for it which is very physical. It's the touch. I can communicate with it. I prefer metal over men."

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1936, Woody emigrated to the United States in 1964. Since his move to Santa Fe in 1980, he has completed three major works, The Communion, Art of Memory, and The Theater of Hybrid Automata. His Art of Memory must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely exhibited works in the history of video art. This fall, Woody displays at Artetices Two in Paris his latest incarnation of an ongoing investigation, The Theater of Hybrid Automata which includes in its early stages collaborative multimedia works with other local artists: Steina, composer David Dunn, vocalist John La Barbara, and actor Tim Thompson.

M.S.

HOW DID YOU COME TO AN INTEREST IN MACHINES?

My father was a metal worker. Also, I grew up through the war in Czechoslovakia across from an airfield. My first interest as a kid was to take apart the most complicated machines of that era, the German fighter planes. My youth was spent in these graveyards of airplanes. You can find everything there to drive your fantasy crazy. Europe itself was a huge junkyard after the war—you could find weapons and human fingers in the dump.

The European cultural environment where I came from is so densely dependent on music and literature. What you talk about with your friends is culture. It’s impossible to grow up without knowing the heroes of literature. Virtually everything you think about is derived from another source. Culture is what I would call an accumulation. But it’s not the same way here in the States. It is much more decentralized. Every generation starts from square zero. Information is so decentralized. When I came to the States I had to divorce myself from the metaphoric language andreddinear response. A singular feature is its complete internal interactivity—any gesture can influence any other element in the system.

My interest is to make a binary model that contains physically interlocked with the virtual performance. In the computer sphere rears as the head is moving in space. When the camera stops the graphic or virtual space also stops. The spatial area is a physical environment inside a transparent cube (10" x 10" x 10") which is to be observed from outside: the cube, functioning as a "stage", provides a visual context upon which the various performing components of The Theatre are affixed. I am in the process now of constructing an extremely sensitive and articulate interface between a live performer and the machine based on a physical reading of the performer’s body.

I want to set up a series of experiments to study the voluntary and involuntary gestural and spasmatic data in order to integrate a performance into the dramatic protocol of the Theatre as a whole. IT’S AN EXPLORATION THEN; YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IS GOING TO OCCUR?

I’ll tell you what it is: it is a system to be observed. One major ritual is called calibration. The camera simply scans the space and locates itself or looks at...
The six targets which are placed precisely at north south east west and above and below. In order for the machine memory to work, and for the machine to know where to look, it has to orient itself. The representation of the space is aligned this way because the program is written in the Cartesian six-locomotion system. That is, the machine tells us it is looking east, as far as the space is concerned. It speaks the truth about itself and in real time. A certain procedure for the audience is simply to watch the way this machine calibrates itself—puts itself in the space—how it comes to know what and where it is. This particular ritual is not going to produce a complex narrative system. But all together, the ritual is highly narrative. Some communication procedures are so telling... it is a self-explanatory narrative system.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HUMAN IMAGINATION?

Basically, it provides a critique of psychological drama as presented in film and theatre. The traditional genre of drama is a psychologically supported system. I would like to find something that appeals to human perception from rather a different angle. Something that is not concretized by an emotional relationship between protagonists, but still represents a certain order or pattern that can be discerned.

I think by now we are all in search of new structuring. Music has gone through centuries of exploration of particular structures, since the Renaissance up to the nineteenth century, which allowed it to become very perfect and precise. Minute emotional changes can be expressed mapped through centuries of exploration of particular structures, since the most familiar scale of reinforced success is measured on the same time, it is a closed system where success is measured on the most elaborate control-system ever devised—the codes of communication are so complex and refined, so elegantly crafted and executed with such a divinity of talent that we may refer to it as perfect, unequivocally. At the same time, it is a closed system where success is measured on the most familiar scale of reinforcement.

The new technology in general offers the possibility for decision to be made by the participant. As we know film is a prescribed medium you cannot alter the story. A book is more alterable, you can stop, go back and reread. But film in particular is a totally totalitarian mode of perception. You can see it only as the author proscribed it. Music is also proscribed because of the notation; however, there are ways of interpreting so there is a little room for interaction. Virtual reality is the view in which you as a participant are inside the mind of the computer. (What I do is not virtual reality: I'm involved in controlling actual space.) In some ways the perfectly constructed new digital narrative space could provide for the viewer a completely personalized tour. What does this mean? To me the most interesting thing about art is the prescription by the artist—that kind of unique guidance. But it could be that the audience now might begin to have a more creative involvement in the art.

However, whatever we do really depends on the intelligent involvement of the viewer. Sometimes someone constructs an interesting work which is engaging and important at a certain moment but if the viewer misses that moment then the thing seems very primitive. And too, the articulation of the new tools is not as fluid as in some older forms. For example, the conductor of an orchestra moves a little stick just a little bit in a certain direction with a certain speed and a vast body of people interpret that with such minute precision that the result is stunning.

Of course, the human mind-and-body system constitutes the most elaborate control-system ever devised—the codes of communication are so complex and refined, so elegantly crafted and executed with such a divinity of talent that we may refer to it as perfect, unequivocally. At the same time, it is a closed system where success is measured on the most familiar scale of reinforcement. What is art? Is it a kind of unique guidance. But it could be that the audience now might begin to have a more creative involvement in the art.