Rewiring reality

The Vasulkas master the machine with the jolting 'Electronic Image'

By Tony Norman
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Vasulkas aren't particularly interested in television as we know it.

But if you were to give them both big screen Toshiba's with all the latest bells and whistles, they'd thank you and smile at their good fortune.

Once you were out of sight, the husband and wife team would probably strip their presents like a fortune.

Woody Vasulka, who studied hydraulic mechanics and metal technology in his native Czechoslovakia, would engineer novel ways of interfacing the scraps of the television set with industrial and military detritus he's stumbled upon in his travels.

Steina (pronounced Stay-nal, a classically trained violinist from Reykjavik, Iceland, will have figured out a less intrusive solution. She'd be more concerned with shaping the stream of electrons emitted by the big screen's cathode ray gun into something beautiful.

Eventually, Steina will have introduced cameras into the mix, coolly exploring her own creative process from so many angles as possible.

Before long, the Vasulkas will have rewired, or at least recontextualized their gifts in ways that fit their sensibilities.

But in the end, the legendary video pioneers are concerned with one thing: exploring the language of electronic images.

Like the late media theorist and '60s visionary Marshall McLuhan, the Vasulkas are obsessed with the implications of living in a media-and image-drenched world.

But in their mission is so vast—one might even say quixotic—the husband-wife team are happy with their interests have taken them down separate paths.

Fortunately, both roads converge in the high concept but very accessible double exhibit, "The Electronic Image," opening today at the Wood Street Galleries.

Steina's "Borealis" and Woody's "The Brotherhood: Table III" are opposite ends of the avant-garde multi-disciplinary video/machine media street.

"Borealis" is a series of five suspended translucent screens, reminiscent of the monoliths in Arthur C. Clarke's "2001: A Space Odyssey."

"The Brotherhood: Table III" is, as the catalogue "Machine Media" describes, "an arsenal of film and video machines, cameras, optical and electronic devices, with original command and control programs of the computer, an expression of congested, concrete space..."

It's heavy. It's been culled from the scraps of things that were once deadly, like a navigation table that was once part of an anti-aircraft system on a Vietnam-era B-52.

Many of the pieces that comprise "The Brotherhood: Table III" come from the bomb factories of Los Alamos, N.M., where Woody buys once-prohibitive expensive war machines at auction for pennies on the dollar.

"The Brotherhood: Table III" consists of four standing screens, that circle the perimeter of the International Business Machine table. There's also a screen on the ceiling.

Images of fire and "smart bombs" zooming into various Iraqi targets flash across the screens as the sound of computer-processed explosions and military technobabble fill the gallery.

But the most disturbing element of Woody's investigation of hair-trigger technology is the playing out of a real-life "friendly fire" Gulf War incident, captured in all of its frontline terror and confusion.

The images, complete with targeting scanners, remind gallery strollers that there are no innocent bystanders in war.

Visitors are invited to regulate the images of explosions by tapping rhythmically on a Roland drum pad in the corner of the room. Suddenly, the illusion of distance from modern battlefield chaos is revealed to be only that—an illusion.

The Vasulkas have always been interested in shrinking the distance between images and events, but in different ways.

"Our pictorial interests are different," Woody says in a joint phone interview with his wife from their home in New Mexico.

Their accents are charming and impart a sense of humanity to their very serious ideas. Both speak with a European ease about concepts that would sound like jargon coming from an American.

"Steina uses the camera as an instrument; I've departed from using the camera as an instrument," he adds, teasing the sometime collaborator he knows is listening on the other phone.

"I'm interested in trying to find the synthetic or human-made image without the help of God."

"Yes," Steina chimed in. "And then he turns to me for the images he can't get from God."

Woody describes his work as a synthesis of mechanical, optical and robotic construction.

He speaks carefully and methodically of his fascination with the technology behind the image-creating process.

"Exploring unknown, untapped areas of video, sound and computers makes sense to someone like me," Woody says. "I come at it from a background of film and video."

Curiously, Woody doesn't mention his deep engineering background—a base of knowledge that makes emulating his work too difficult for those lacking his background.

"I don't make art that are 'pieces,'" Woody says. "I take it as a progression, a process. I have a systematic interest in boundaries..."
Machine heads

From page 2

where technology appears and other
structures disappear. My work is
not that complicated, though it has
lots of parts."

Like “The Brotherhood: Table
III,” “Borealis” is an engineering
marvel that perfectly displays its
creator’s particular aesthetic.

Five large screens float in a
pitch black room awash in the
sound of crashing waves. Five two-
channel video projectors illumina-
te both sides of all five screens
with the flowing image of water-
falls from Steinad’s native Iceland

Once again, “Machine Media”
describes the artist’s intention as
well as anyone ever has “The natu-
ral sounds and images . . . over-
whelm the environment in which
they are placed, emphasizing the
magnitude of nature.

“The viewer, swept into a medi-
tation on the patterns of natural
processes, is led to question the
static ways in which landscape is
usually represented.”

Despite the soothing, medita-
tive power of her work, Steinan
insists she’s hunting bigger game
than beauty with a capital “B.”

“I’m mostly after vision. Or af-
fter perception in the sense of when
perceptual organs are working at
their fullest when we’re in a very
happy state,” Steinan says.

“That’s when we feel closest
to ourselves, to the soul you men-
tioned earlier. But I can’t accept it
that simply, so what I do — even if
Woody says I pull a trick in order
to get the images — I always have
to alter them.”

A close inspection of “Borealis”
reveals what Steinan means.
The waterfall isn’t exactly like
one found in nature, even though it
was lifted verbatim from one of
Steina’s favorite places.

With me, it becomes this funny
play of never having the image just
right, yet never altering them to
such a degree that you cannot be-
lieve it,” she says.

“So I do a lot of turning images
upside-down. Like, when I turn
water upside-down, your eyes ad-
just to it and accept it as a weird
image.”

One of Steinan’s favorite tricks is
to move images backward in time.
She calls it “playing with temporal
realities.”

“If it’s a river flowing from right
to left, it goes from left to right,”
Steina says.

“You don’t know anything’s
wrong with it except [when] you
notice that droplets come before
the break instead of after it. These
kind of puzzlements I like very
much to play with because it puts
your brain into a busy mode.

“You ask ‘what is that, is it rea-

tly right, or is it not?”’ she says.

Asked if she has any idea of
what she wants before she begins a
work like “Borealis,” Steinan agrees
that she does, but doesn’t feel
bound by it in any way.

“All of that can go out the win-
dow,” she says. “I can only work
with what the machine gives me
and tells me. If the original idea
wasn’t so hot, there are plenty of
other ideas.”

April 4, 1997 Weekend