

FEB 9 - 1996

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888

Electronic art takes on a newer, more mature form

VIDEO ART has been around for more than 30 years, ever since New York Fluxus artist Nam June Paik took a taxi uptown to buy a portable video camera and showed the tapes a few hours later at Greenwich Village's Cafe a Go Go.

Yet electronic art has remained on the margins of the art world, partly because of practical considerations such as its unique space requirements but also because of its rather puerile, pranksterish nature. A video artist must also be an engineer of sorts, and technological sophistication has sometimes taken center stage at the expense of the art.



**CATHERINE
MACLAY**
Art Writer

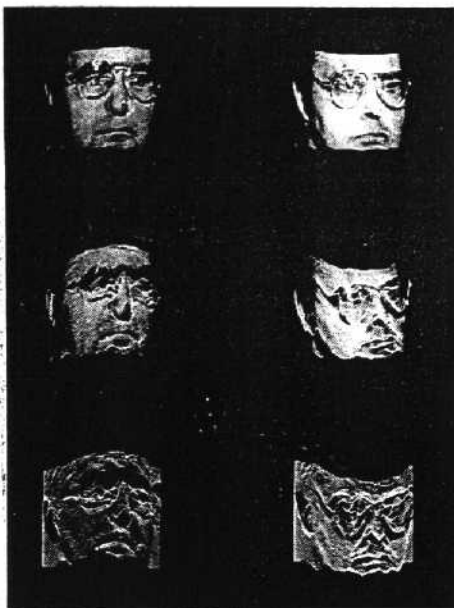
But video artists have been growing up, and "Machine Media," an overview of the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka (now on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) is proof.

The exhibit includes early, as well as recent, work by the Vasulkas, a married couple now in their 50s who, like Paik, were pioneers on the video-art scene in New York during the 1960s after meeting as students in Prague. The two "Matrix" installations date back to 1970-'72, about the time the Vasulkas founded the Kitchen, a media-art theater in Manhattan that served as an experimental live-audience laboratory for early video artists.

Typical of that era, the museum's arrays of video monitors show abstract images flickering in unison. The monitors reveal the technology that animates them, presenting waves on a cathode-ray tube in somewhat the same spirit that Pollock and other abstract expressionists presented paint on a canvas.

Despite its technological sophistication, this sort of thing can get boring — which is one reason video art has been slow to grip the hearts of art lovers. But the Vasulkas' more recent work, particularly Steina's, is quite different and at times remarkably poetic.

Steina's "The West" (1983) is a video landscape created with 22 monitors arranged in a semicircle. Many of the images were made with a motor-driven camera focused on a spherical mirror, which alters the landscape without making it unrecognizable. The "horizontal drift" of the setting gives you the sense of turning away from the scene and seeing it



Woody Vasulka's "Didactic Video" has a role in the "Machine Media" exhibit.

Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media

- **Where:** San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St.
- **When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, until 9 p.m. Thursdays
- **Through:** March 31
- **Admission:** \$7, \$3.50 seniors/students
- **Call:** (415) 357-4000

out of the corner of your eye, even though you are looking directly at the screens.

Even more impressive is Steina's "Borealis" (1993), an installation in which audio and visual material from Iceland is projected onto four free-standing translucent screens that hang in a darkened room. The sounds and images of a surge of rushing water, rising and falling vapor and changing light envelop the visitor in an experience of natural beauty that would, no doubt, have stunned 19th-century nature poets such as Wordsworth.

By contrast, Woody's recent work involves the use of cast-off military surveillance technology picked up at Los Alamos and elsewhere. His assemblages of optical and electronic devices superimpose a grid on the natural world for purposes of war and conquest. They serve as a grim meditation on the military-industrial machine.

"The Commission" is on display at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of the technological exhibit by Steina and Woody Vasulka, pioneers on the video-art scene in New York during the 1960s.

