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Denver Art Museum / Exhibition Catalogue**By: Gene Youngblood****1/25/92****Video by Steina and Woody Vasulka****TOKYO FOUR**

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 superfluous, 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. Sometimes one screen is the melody and the others are accompaniment, then another screen takes the lead. A musical syntax emerges from this visual point/counterpoint organized around duration, interval, rhythm, repetition, and series.

In one compositional strategy, Steina begins by assembling a long single channel segment which represents the "melody," or what she calls the "ground track." She makes three copies of it and inserts new images into each channel as accompaniment. Sometimes she records the ground track in reverse motion, which, in her musical terminology, "breaks the line" (the linear progression) and makes it easier to start inserting other images. She often works on all four channels simultaneously, using time code to bring them forward synchronously. They don't always have the same edit at the same point, but, like a musical canon, they progress simultaneously toward a unified conclusion.

Her compositional devices include flipping or reversing an image (right becomes left) and playing it at imperceptibly different speeds on different screens, which gradually all synchronize at the same speed. These strategies are especially effective in the final movement when the female dancer is bowing. The Strauss Waltz the dancers use would be banal without the manipulations of Steina's spectacular visual matrix, which transforms it into something at once exotic and poignant.

ART OF MEMORY

Not only is *Art of Memory* Woody Vasulka's most famous work, but it must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely exhibited works in the history of video art. Three and a half years in the making, *Art of Memory* has won numerous awards and has been exhibited countless times around the world since its premiere in November 1987. There were three major sources of inspiration for the tape-Vasulka's childhood memories of newsreels of world conflict; historian Frances Yates's book *The Art of Memory* and the engravings of the 19th century Romantic illustrator Gustave Dore. 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 newsreels, 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 (leafing 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 organized into six major movements—an introduction/European Theater, the atomic era, the Spanish civil war, the Russian revolution, the war in the Pacific, and an epilogue which Vasulka calls the "catharsis." The movements 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 Dore'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.

End of article.