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Machine Media
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STEINA & WOODY VASULKA
MACHINE MEDIA
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Machine Media, the recent retrospective of work by Steina and Woody Vasulka at SFMOMA, demonstrated the compelling vision and startling prescience of the work of these two seminal media artists. It displayed the range of cutting-edge themes and techniques that the Vasulkas have explored in their work from the mid-sixties to the present.

The Vasulkas met in the early 1960's in Prague. Steina, a trained musician born in Iceland, and Woody, a Czech filmmaker, married in 1965 and emigrated to New York City. There they were instrumental in establishing the New York video art scene as co-founders in 1971 of The Kitchen, the seminal experimental video and performance venue that exists to this day. In 1971 they also organized The Kitchen's first annual video festival as well as worked on a program at the Whitney Museum called "A Special Videotape Show."

Since that time the Vasulkas have been in the vanguard of experimental electronic art. The pair were among the first artists to use multiple video monitors to display several concurrent channels of video. Woody was involved in developing one of the first digital video processors, the Digital Image Articulator, in the mid-seventies. The couple also organized an exhibition of early electronic tools at the 1992 "Ars Electronica" in Austria, which included an interactive laser disc catalog.

The body of the Vasulkas work dealing with the interaction between technology and humanity presages much of the current debate now occurring everywhere from Capitol Hill to the World Wide Web. In 1989 Woody wrote, "Since technology provides an essential interface between human and machine, and since the technology proliferates its options rapidly, the technological environment by now has exceeded the dimensions of a tool and our relationship to it could be paraphrased *Man is but a guest in the house of technology*." (1) This sentiment acknowledges the concerns of such diverse commentators as Ned Ludd, for whom the nineteenth-century anti-industrial movement is named, and modern-day Luddite Senator James J. Exon, Democrat from Nebraska, author of the controversial Internet censorship bill now being contested in court. The historical recurrence of these fearful responses indicates society's anxiety over any significant technological advance.

As if to counter and assuage these negative reactions, Woody's essay goes on to state, "It seems necessary now to activate a core of creative excellence in order to oppose the cliche of resentment toward machine assisted creative processes." The work included at SFMOMA gave ample evidence of the Vasulkas success in tapping into that "core of creative excellence." The show demonstrated the Vasulkas mastery of a range of techniques and concerns that squarely address the ongoing hopes and fears of the Machine Age. "Machine Media" displayed the expressive and analytical possibilities of artwork emerging from artistic uses of technology.

The show included work created by the Vasulkas, both collaboratively and individually, which explored the implications of technology and machinery in the art-making process. Woody's installations more explicitly investigated the mixed blessings of the technological age.

The Theatre of Hybrid Automata (1990) consisted of five projection screens, with four at cardinal points and one overhead, displaying computer-generated grids overlaid on images of the installation itself. A centrally mounted camera scanned the screens, tilting and rotating to seek out sensors within the grids. While a touchpad supposedly provided an interactive point of entry for the viewer, its sensors apparently linked only occasionally to the operations of the installation. Rather, the piece was internally interactive, that is, the computer interacted with itself and the camera's sensors, instead of with the viewer, to determine its course of action. With its computer-generated targets and crosshairs eerily evoking the "smart bombs" used in the 1991 Gulf War, the installation echoed both the worst fears and greatest hopes of technology. It implied that future autonomous machines will no longer depend on a human overseer for instruction or guidance.

The Brotherhood, Tables I & III (1993-96) likewise posited a similar near-future. Presented in a single large room, these linked installations also used self-driven sensors, cameras, projection screens, and machines to describe a world of mechanical self-reliance. The viewer walked between two wall-sized vertical constructs, one mounted with moving video cameras, the other with moving projection screens. The action of the viewer moving through space seemed to prompt activity by both the cameras and screens, though the extent of the interaction was unclear. It seemed more likely that the machinery, which also included a camera scanning over a lighted tabletop, was communicating with itself, triggering its own movements and actions. The human participant was thus left as a mere observer only peripherally affecting the routines and schematics of the machines; the piece echoed Woody's earlier decree, "Man is but a guest in the house of technology."

Steina's individual work also looked at the relationship of humanity and technology, with perhaps less sinister overtones. Her early single-channel video *Violin Power* (1970) examined her evolving relationship to electronic media as she moved from being a violinist to a video maker. In this piece the artist's violin gradually changed from an acoustic musical instrument to an electronic signal generating device. This simple conceit cleverly illustrates the artist's transition from musician to video artist, while explicating the link between organic (i.e., acoustic sound) and technological (i.e., electronic imagery) creation.

Steina's later installations included in the exhibition also examined the relationship between naturally occurring and man-made phenomena. *The West* (1983), a sweeping configuration of two rows of twenty two video monitors playing two synchronized channels of video, dazzled the viewer with its highly processed and manipulated images of the American Southwest. As the camera panned gracefully across radio telescopes, Anasazi ruins, mesas, and pueblos, Steina's choreographed wipes and rhythmic reversals invoked a thrumming cadence. Each level of imagery traveled implacably across another, interweaving with its predecessors to suggest a monumental layering of time and place. By commingling the ancient and the modern, the natural and the man-made, Steina suggests that each is simply another strata of history and evolution of the American West.

Borealis (1993) also examined the evolving relationship between nature and technology. Two channels of video played across four vertically oriented large-scale translucent video screens arrayed throughout a darkened room. The videos' images of rushing waterfalls, waves, and rivers created a kinetic environment that gradually enveloped the viewer walking through and into the room. While clearly a recreation of an exterior landscape, the large-scale projections effectively emulated the visual and aural sensation of standing in an outdoor environment. Yet by omitting the attendant smells and weather conditions that would have also been encountered at the original site, Steina points out the impossibility of any "virtual" environment wholly duplicating or replacing a lived experience.

Although they almost exclusively create their work with machines and computers, the Vasulkas are not simply sycophants of the *Church of Technology*, nor are they doomsaying seers of technological armaggedon. Rather, they use electronic media to both explore and critique itself, with all of its attendant social and political implications. They create machine-made work that is complex and compelling, with formal virtuosity and aesthetic beauty that arouses the senses and challenges the intellect. Theirs is both a celebration and a warning, heralding the future's coexistence between humans and machines.

NOTES
1. Woody Vasulka, "The New Epistemic Space" in *Illuminating Video,* ed. Hall and Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1989), 466.
2. Ibid.

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