

Gallery

COMMENTARY

Now Playing: Woody & Steina Vasulka

By MaLin Wilson

When Steina and Woody Vasulka, two of the world's most active and famous, even infamous, video artists, were asked how they came to call Santa Fe home, their answers were utterly different. For Steina, Santa Fe has felt like home ever since the couple's arrival in 1980: "I don't live in America, I live in Santa Fe." But for Woody, New Mexico still feels provisional, its most significant feature being the weekly sale of Cold War junk—equipment, furniture and other salvageable material—from Los Alamos National Laboratories.

Santa Fe has become progressively more inconvenient for Woody, a daily trial of automated 800 numbers, as he searches for technical information not locally available. His every move hangs on a thin thread called FAX. And the spewing forth of fax documents accelerated to an almost non-stop pace this fall, as the Vasulkas prepared for three simultaneous exhibitions of their work: retrospectives at the impressive new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, and an early work called *Machine Vision* at the Biennale de Lyon in France.

It is impossible to imagine the development of the electronic arts without the Vasulkas, who are among the first generation of artists, along with Nam June Paik and Bill Viola, to be aptly described as the "tribe that worships electricity."

Steina was born in 1940 in Iceland and met Woody during the early 1960s in Prague, where she studied violin at the Music Conservatory. Woody was born in 1937 in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and, after graduating from the School of Industrial Engineering there, attended the Academy of Performing Arts Faculty of Film and Television in Prague. Of his youth, Woody has said: "I guess the war was an overpowering experience. I don't think, except for video, I've had any other overwhelming experience since. . . . Europe was a junkyard, where we would find great dumps full of war equipment. We could go through them and see the whole anthropology of war."

Both Steina and Woody have a European consciousness of art (you don't call yourself an artist; that is determined by

others looking at the work you do). But with their move to New York in 1965 and their repeated borrowing of a Sony port-a-pak in 1969, they were catapulted out of their immigrant circle into an American underground community of brilliant garage technicians. In a typical posture of generosity, they turned their studio into an open laboratory and performance space called "the Kitchen," which is legendary as a meeting place of the outrageous and the experimental, from drag queens to Laurie Anderson.

For the first five years of their "dialogue with the machine," Steina and Woody collaborated on multi-monitor installations or single-channel videotapes, probing the nature of the electronic medium of video, manipulating and controlling its electronic language in "real time." Take, for instance, horizontal drift. For the Vasulkas, it became an aesthetic element. In their 1970 *Evolution* tape, they brought this tendency of the image to slip and slide out of the frame to a humorous resolution by showing the standard chart of human evolution horizontally drifting backwards.

Since 1974, each has been working independently, often using the other as camera or sound technician, grip, go-fer, quality control monitor, engineer, critic or installation assistant. Steina's most widely exhibited installation, *The West* (1983, with sound by Woody), is a gorgeous two-channel piece that continues the use of horizontal drift by orchestrating sliding, overlapping images of desert landscapes imprinted by humans—from ruins at Chaco Canyon to the Very Large Array radio telescope system about 50 miles west of Socorro.

In the New Mexico landscape, Steina found a rich vein that she has successfully mined in a series of pictorial sound compositions. "I moved here because I wanted to experience what it is to live in beauty," she says. "I did not want to think that it was going to affect my images so much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it. First of all because the beauty of the West is so seductive. And, secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take God on?"

But then, one morning, Steina went outside the small house they were renting and said, "Well, my studio doesn't

These vibrations are terrible. First generation of art has to be ugly. It's supposed not to be true that art should always be beautiful."

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have to have walls, and the ceiling is very high, and it's blue." That moment, she says, was when she made peace with the idea that the landscape of the Southwest was going to be her image material.

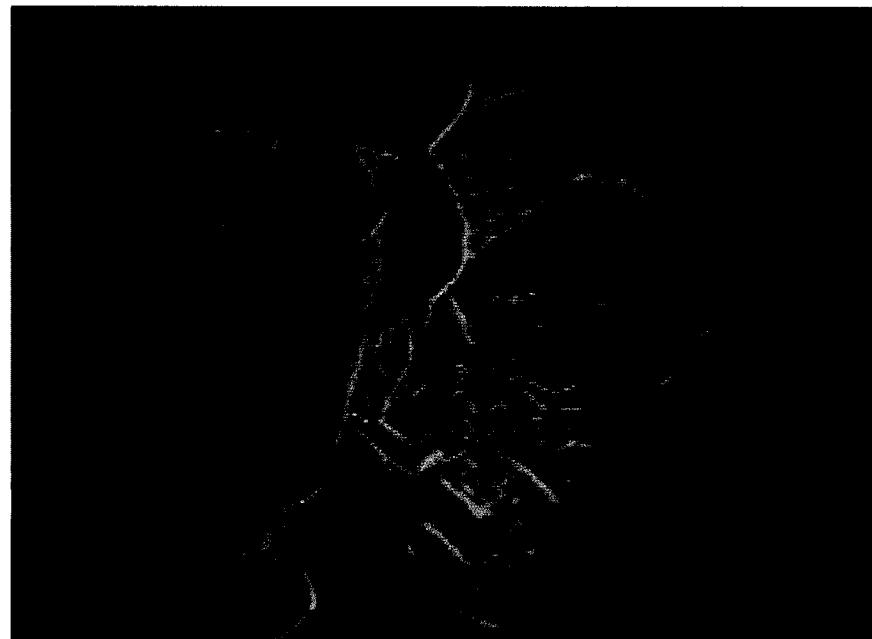
Woody's response to New Mexico has been to shift from one complex media project to another, from investigations of video space to physically interactive installations using remarkable pieces from his "backyard junkpile." His *Theater of Hybrid Automata* (1990) is built around a celestial navigator—a double cylinder with optics and sensors to keep the instrument locked to the polar star. "Obviously," says Woody, "this was a piece of military hardware, designed to drop its deadly cargo somewhere in terrestrial space."

Most recently he has turned such items as the navigator, an intercept plotting table, gyro heads and other opto-mechanical devices into installations for his admittedly modernist utopian goal—to counter propagandistic, mass cultural media products. "My social code is hopelessly arrested. . ." Woody writes in an essay for the SFMOMA catalog. "Somehow I have trusted the dynamics of time, and have believed in the adventure of technology as an automatic purifying process in itself."

The most convenient place to see the Vasulkas' responses to the "adventure of technology" is SFMOMA, where Steina & Woody Vasulka: Machine Media will be exhibited February 2 to March 31. A catalog is available. If you are planning a European trip this winter, Video/Virtuality: Steina & Woody Vasulka, runs to January 14 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome. The Vasulkas' Machine Vision will be on view in the 3ème Biennale de Lyon at the Nouveau Musée d'art Contemporain and Le Palais des Congrès in Lyon, France, through February 20. ♦



Steina Vasulka, *Voice Windows*, video stills with Joan LaBarbar. Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Woody Vasulka, *Theater of Hybrid Automata*, 1990. Courtesy of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.