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BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

Steina Vasulka's 'Borealis' — churning water and blowing steam on four translucent screens

Camera Turns on Itself

When machines become art, humanity is often left out

BY KENNETH BAKER

Chronicle Art Critic

No matter how you approach "Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the first part of it you see will be a device known as "Allvision" (1976).

It sits on a metal span at the top of the museum's central staircase and is visible from the lobby, revolving overhead.

The work is a spherical mirror from which two opposed metal arms project. At the end of each arm is a small video camera, pointed at the sphere.

As this apparatus slowly spins, pairs of monitors flanking the staircase display what the two cameras see. At the center of each screen is the mirrored globe. Reflections of its surroundings glide over it, bounded by a continuous peripheral view of the reality behind the sphere that the

'MACHINE MEDIA'

"Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media." Video and electronics installations. Through March 31. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco. (415) 357-4000.

corresponding camera takes in directly.

Because what mostly gets reflected in the sphere (and glimpsed beyond it) is the cylindrical interior of the museum's giant light shaft, the video images produce the bizarre illusion of a convex space revolving within a concave one. Viewers see their own reflections drift into and out of the picture.

"Allvision" sets the keynote of "Machine Media" in being a surveillance device that looks primarily at itself.

The Vasulkas are acknowledged pioneers of video art. Until 1974, they worked collaboratively.

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Since then, they have pursued separate interests. While she concentrates on videotapes and projection pieces, he customizes electronic imaging equipment to make elaborate interactive installations.

Their works converge on the idea that the hidden internal workings of imaging technology — hardware, software and energy flow itself — contribute as much to what these media show us as do the external realities we want them to inform us about.

The biggest statement of this theme is Woody's room-size installation "The Brotherhood: Table I" (1996).

His installation works get some of their ominous quality from the use of salvaged military equipment. "Theater of Hybrid Automata," for example, adapts the optical navigation device from an old SAC bomber, while "The Brotherhood: Table III" (1994-96) incorporates bombing footage from a Gulf War "friendly fire" incident.

The action in "The Brotherhood: Table I" is computer controlled but also ambiguously responsive to a visitor's presence. It appears to originate at a "plotting table," gridded with small lights whose shifting arrow patterns guide a mobile camera over its surface.

What this camera picks up, and the input of two other small cameras within the work, are thrown by separate projectors onto three screens.

The catch is that the screens and projectors change position constantly, running on upright parallel tracks. Images and screens are continually overlapping or occluding one another in an absurd ballet of useless information.

Again the information this contraction imparts is mostly about itself. The anxiety that Woody Vasulka's work stirs is not the fear of surveillance or of robotic autonomy, but of a kind of superhuman narcissism of technology. Artifi-

cial intelligence is not what looms here, but artificial neurosis.

Steina's work, by contrast, centers more on the optical content of electronic imaging.

Her lyrical two-channel color video piece "The West" (1983) shows here on 22 monitors. She used a version of the "Allvision" device to make this remarkable landscape video.

It is complemented by a new two-channel video installation piece, "Borealis," busy with images of churning water and blowing steam, projected on four translucent screens hung from the ceiling of a darkened room.

The Vasulkas' early "Matrix" pieces, playing here on 12 and 16 monitors, respectively, are like video abstractions, many of them derived from explorations of feedback and of reciprocal interactions

of sound and image peculiar to the medium itself.

The banks of monitors in the early '70s pieces echo the grids common in minimal art. And their nonnarrative flow of optical information similarly recalls turn-of-the-'70s New York art in which process itself was regarded as sufficient content.

"Machine Media" is not a complete retrospective, but it does include three rotating programs of videotapes that recapitulate the Vasulkas' artistic progress.

For all the effort and intelligence it represents, the show is finally disheartening — not because of any failure on the artists' part, but because of how well they reacquaint us with the essential rigidity of technology.