



Borealis, 1994, video installation

STEINA VASULKA
BOREALIS
1993
10 MINUTE REPEATING CYCLE

STEINA VASULKA: THE ELECTRONIC SUBLIME

Gene Youngblood

Steina Vasulka grew up in primordial Iceland surrounded by that terrible beauty which philosophers call the Sublime. The Aurora Borealis haunted the heavens above her family home. Through her window she could see erupting volcanoes. She could walk up to rivers of flowing lava. She could climb above raging cataracts, stand before sulphurous geysers, gaze into the turbulent coves of Iceland's fractal coast. This exhibition of works in multiscreen video, an artform Steina pioneered a quarter of a century ago, is informed by her attraction to the fevered landscape, her fascination with the fearsome majesty of fire and water.

For Steina, a concert violinist, the images and sounds of a multiscreen composition are equivalent to musical polyphony, functioning like voices and instruments in an ensemble. The multiscreen works in this exhibition — two of them recent, one incorporating techniques devised more than twenty years ago — are audiovisual equivalents of the trio, the quartet, the sextet. Steina proceeds as would a composer, playing on the visual equivalents of timbre, texture and tone. Her compositional strategies include recording scenes with her camera upside down, slowing their motion, reversing their direction, flipping them right-left, or combinations of these possibilities. Each channel of image and sound is edited to integrate with the others in an audiovisual point/counterpoint organized around duration, interval, rhythm, repetition and series.

Pyroglyphs (1995) was recorded at the Santa Fe foundry of metalsmith Tom Joyce, with whom Steina shares "a fascination with fire — as a phenomenon and as a medium that transforms other materials. Tom and I understand fire in an alchemical way," she told me, "as a medium of transmutation." Steina videotaped, mostly in closeup, the activities of blacksmithing (hammering, filing, welding, manipulating fire), the phenomenology of fire (flames, sparks, combustions, glowing metals), and various improvised scenes — a vise crushing a timber, a stack of books burning, paper and wood being scorched.

Editing this material into three complementary image tracks was relatively easy (the visuals were similar or dissimilar in compatible ways) but the sounds of those images were often too similar or too strident, competing for attention. So the sounds determined the editing. Steina processed them through digital devices like harmonizers, which couldn't turn the random noises into harmonics but produced interesting sounds anyway; pitch shifters, that move a sound to the octave immediately above or below; and reverb circuits to create echo effects. The sounds and rhythms are rendered *allegro con brio*, *pianoforte*, or *pianissimo*: there's a lot of percussive hammering, say, then all is quiet and we hear only crackling flame or the hollow whisper of the blowtorch.

This installation of *Pyroglyphs* consists of three image channels, six screens, six channels of sound, and six speak-

ers. Three video projection beams are each split into two, casting six "letterboxed" images onto six freestanding 4 x 8-foot translucent screens, arranged semi-randomly, with the image visible on both sides of each screen. This setting and the power of its imagery makes *Pyroglyphs* a spectacular meditation on fire. Steina has created a Sublime landscape illumined by the many-hued glow of fevered metals and shows of sparkling scintilla. She makes us feel the hypnotic pull of lambent flames even as our breath is caught by the preemptive ignition of the torch, our hearts quickened by the violence of the forge.

Water has been a frequent subject of moving image art, as it has in painting and photography, from the very beginning. Steina has produced many video waterscapes, and *Borealis* (1994), which means "northern," is one of the most spectacular. Steina defamiliarizes the coastlines and rivers of Iceland through upside-down closeups that are slowed, reversed, flipped, and displayed on up-ended screens. These waters are not serene but Sublime, coursing, surging, crashing in fluvial frenzy, then swelling voluptuously, their surfaces now fleshlike, now atomized, seeming to rush in two directions at once. The intricate density of its form and content make *Borealis* a stirring audiovisual symphony.

Allvision (1974), reflects Steina's interest in robotics or what she calls Machine Vision. Cameras are mounted on opposite ends of a rotating arm, focused on a mirrored sphere between them. Nearby monitors display what the cameras see. The sphere reflects circumambient space while each camera surveys a nearly 180-degree field of view. The results are threefold. First, we see the entire space at all times, including the space behind us. (*Allvision* thus becomes what Jorge Luis Borges calls an *Aleph* — a point in space that contains all other points in space.) Second, the space appears to be inside itself since the camera views are wider than the sphere. Third, we are both observers and observed, unable to step outside of the optical closure.

The images in *Matrix* drift horizontally, appearing to enter and exit the frames of adjacent monitors arranged in an arch, as though the images are independent of the display devices. This illusion is achieved by altering the built-in control frequency that usually prevents a TV picture from "rolling" horizontally (like the more familiar vertical roll), and by the end-to-end placement of the monitors. Since the entire video frame (or "raster") drifts, the objects appear to move across the arch. The images are both synthetic and photographic, old and new. The "electronic" images are results of investigations that Steina and her husband Woody Vasulka conducted in the early 1970s; the camera images are more recent. But all were selected for their appropriateness to the arch configuration, which Steina uses here for the first time in twenty-five years of experimenting with horizontal drift in multiscreen installations.

Gene Youngblood is Professor of Moving Image Arts at the College of Santa Fe. He is the author of *Expanded Cinema* (1970), the first book about video as an art form.