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Earth and Fire, or Elements of Multimodality

We respond to the conference topic by taking a video matrix by Steina Vasulka that helps to raise questions about the multi modality of media in a very general way but through the controlled environment of audio-visual installation technology. The main topic of the installation, as its name *Pyroglyphs* suggests, is fire but much of what determines the end result is the effect of the soundtrack on the editing process, so the installation represents the interaction of several kinds of element in both senses of the word "element," that is, in terms of the elements (earth, wind, fire and water), especially as they come into the philosophy of ancient Greece, and in terms of the elements of perception (sight, sound, etc.) The idea of fire as medium and content is interesting in that it makes, transforms and destroys at the same time, just as the sound makes, transforms and destroys the images of the installation.

The relationship between medium and topic includes a relationship to fire which takes fire itself as its model (the carefully controlled media performance mediates as if it is a kind of fire): the installation takes fire in its capacity as medium and shows fire in its elemental function as imitating the eternal (in Plato's Cave fire was imitative of the sun, which in that metaphor was eternal and required no power other than itself). The notion of a *Pyroglyph* seems just right for this multimodal dimension wherein the media represents itself as simultaneously consuming itself and remaining. The sound/image in its space imitates the fire in its space, which imitates ... etc. An insight into the ancient and much misunderstood modality of mimesis intrudes once again into the kinesis on display. We are interested, then, in the connections between apparently ancient ways of understanding experience and possibilities of knowledge and more contemporary approaches to multi-modality. The slightly awkward balance between a kind of pagan mysticism and contemporary art's technical destabilizing thus suggests that a mythology continues to govern our thoughts in the fields of multimodal technology.