

Who's Who in Film Making Video

The Vasulkas

by Hollis Melton

The fantastic is usually thought of as a violation of the natural law, as a rising up of the impossible. That is not how we conceive it. It is rather a manifestation of natural law, an effect produced by contact with reality – reality perceived directly and not through a filter of habit, prejudice, conformism. Modern science has shown us that behind the visible there is an extremely complicated invisible.

— THE MORNING OF THE MAGICIANS,
Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier

After meeting the Vasulkas and seeing their work, the grounds for my fascination with video became clear. For two years, I have kept up with video events, tried to turn other people on to its magic, attended lectures on electronics, thought about the possibilities of public access, but have always preferred film.

When I first say their tape, "Spaces", I got very excited. The moving patterns in the color monitor were deep, blue and fluid and the electronic sound was far away and magic – as if the box contained another world. The life of the video and the mysteries of its vibrations seemed like electronic circuitry breathing. I loved it and felt at home in the space of an endless nerve system that was a matrix of sights and sounds. It was the first time that I had seen TV from the inside out and I was seeing it as its own medium.



"Steina & Woody Vasulka"

I kept going back to see more of their work and to participate in the electronic image workshops they ran in visual perception. Seeing "Zapad", which is a series of tapes related to their trip West last summer, is like being in an electrified landscape. They have captured the feeling inherent in the Western skies and the life that goes on beneath them in such a way that one feels the familiarity and then sees beyond the superficial into other layers of reality. They presented this work on twelve monitors with three different tapes going at once, divided spatially between the monitors. The electronic music was haunting and the total experience tended to mesmerize the audience by inducing a state of non-ordinary reality. I felt as if it could change the world, blow apart the peoples' minds, shaking them so that they would forget who and what they were (labels, ideologies, religions, etc.) and just become pure essences. All of the tapes that I have seen so far have had an unpredictable quality that leaves the imagination limitlessly immersed in another reality, the effect of which is different from anything I have ever experienced in film.

After spending an afternoon with the Vasulkas I came away with the same sense of excitement that I had the first time I saw their work. We talked of video feedback and electronic images. The language of electronic imagery is practically non-existent, so we had to refer to other media. Steina, who comes to video from a background in music, often used musical images and analogies, while Woody, who was formerly a documentary filmmaker, tended to compare and contrast his experiences in film with those in video.

When they first got involved with video in 1970, Woody and a friend were taping people such as Jimmy Hendrix and Jethro Tull at the Fillmore East. Then he and Steina started doing documentary tapes of theatre and dance groups. Both of them had initially been fascinated by feedback and the instant live quality of video, and when they were at home they used to play around with feedback but did not think anyone would be interested, until they saw that neighbors and friends who dropped by were also fascinated by the process.

Electrons are the material of video art, and the monitor is the medium. Feedback is the process by which the electrons can be seen. It is created by a closed circuit between the TV camera and the monitor. When the camera is pointed at the monitor, the result is images of monitor upon monitor upon monitor. When the lens is zoomed out, it leaves only the light which illuminates the movement of the electrons. It is this electronic mirroring or echo that produces the movement of the electrons. In sound, the feedback echo occurs when the microphone is placed too near the speaker and it creates a shrieking sound. Video feedback is a picture version of the same echo in sound.

The flowing rhythms of the electrons can be controlled by keyers, oscillators, and synthesizers (sound and video). Sometimes the images create the sounds; sometimes the sounds create the images. The Vasulkas usually let the images create the sounds. The result is a beautiful and unpredictable environment of electronic organisms, live, very real, very enchanting and always fascinating. The art of the medium is in the selection and programming of the images. Each image has its own rhythm and pattern which develops according to the inner charging and discharging of the circuits.

Once one knows how to find the image, its behavior can be watched and shaped. The most successful images are those that are least manipulated. Sometimes when they discover an image that they want to tape, it becomes tempting to turn all of the knobs and then they lose the image. The biggest challenge for them is in learning how to tune in to the individual rhythms of each image which is totally fluid and will change as soon as a knob is turned. Just as a musician must bend and yield to his instruments so must they obey the laws of their electronic instruments. They cannot overplay them, but must select an image and let it live, always making sure that its environment contains the optimum conditions for it to happen. Woody says, "It's like an organism, our own private pet. For us it is very organic."

The image comes in frames; but the frames cannot be differentiated, as in film, because the image is made of light, and the light energy travels so quickly from the camera to the monitor that the human eye cannot perceive the steps

involved in creating the frame. This is what makes video an active recording whereas film is a passive recording of a moment framed in space. One cannot get feedback from film, nor can it be altered by its own development. Although there are infinite editing possibilities, it must be influenced directly (frames juxtaposed, art work or special effects added). The Vasulkas like the live shapeable quality of video. It is not an object; it is an organism that responds. The live form can be shaped while it is happening. There is no vacuum left by the need to create a beginning, middle and end as in film where form is achieved through editing.

The live-form quality of video and the equipment that they were using when they first began did not permit them to cut out their mistakes. The equipment has given them its own aesthetic; and in order to preserve the live quality, they hardly ever manipulate the images after they are taped.

The Vasulkas like to work in closed circuit which is similar to a concert or performance. Half-inch tape does not have the capacity to record the intricate details and textures that they can capture in closed circuit. They do have some tapes in circulation, but at present they prefer a small live audience they can see to an anonymous one. Their work is a performance rather than a product.

They have thought of making some of their tapes into films, but the expense and time that would be involved have prevented it. Before this could happen they would need a market for such films and someone willing to sponsor them.

