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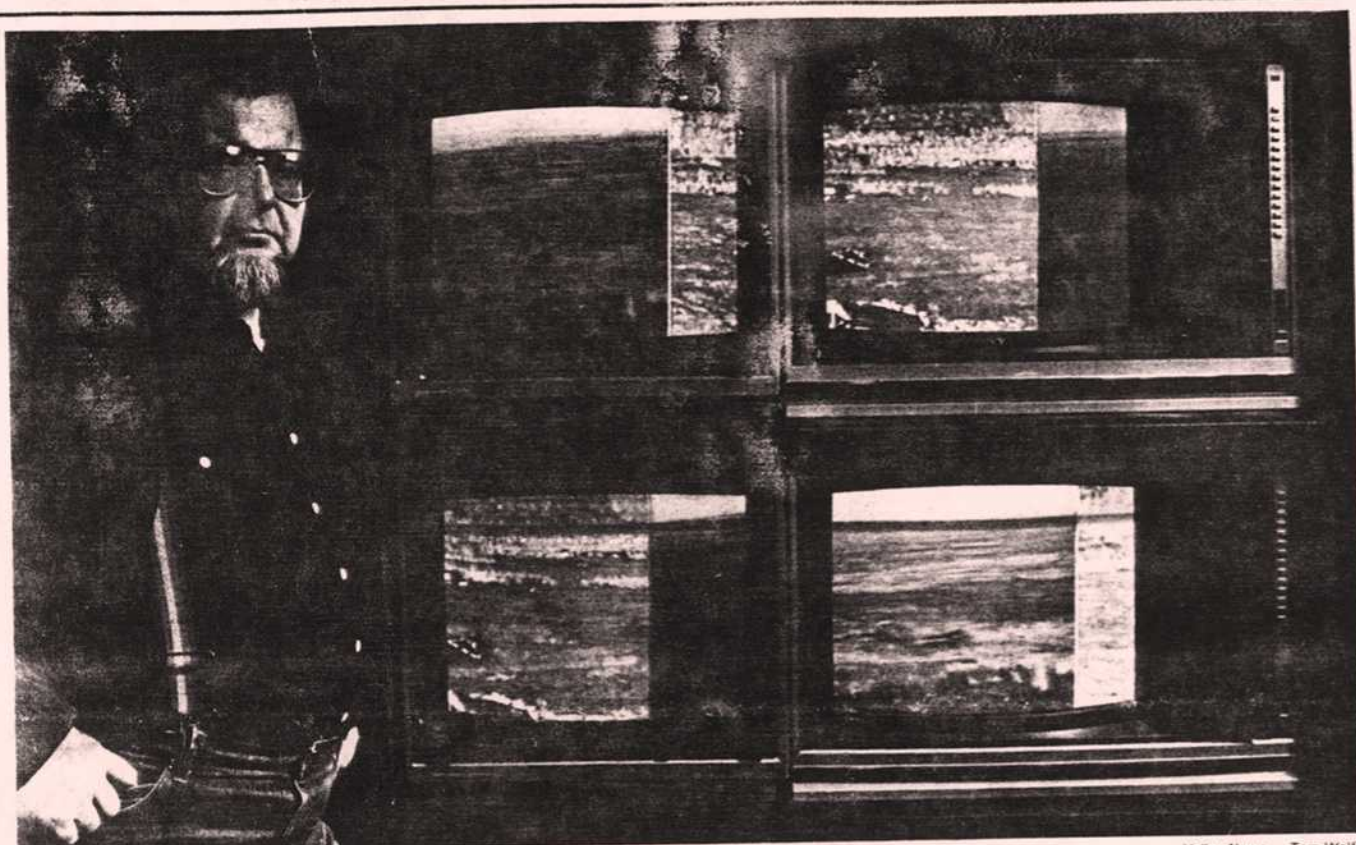
ART MARRIAGE: Video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka invite visitors to stroll around images of Icelandic seascapes or participate in an interactive work about violence and the military-industrial complex in their separate installations at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. **F1**



Woody Vasulka with his "Brotherhood, Table III": "I want to evoke the dilemma of using a killing machine." ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

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Valley News - Tom Wolff

Video artist Woody Vasulka and the four-screen video installation at Dartmouth, called *The West*.

Video Impressions: Vasulkas' Work Isn't Usual TV Screen Fare

By VICTORIA LUBIN
Valley News Correspondent

Is it an art?" asked video artist Woody Vasulka rhetorically. Vasulka and his wife Steina have been leaders in the field of electronic art for 15 years.

Vasulka threw himself back in his chair at the Hopkins Center snack bar, where he had just finished a cup of coffee. He still held the empty white styrofoam cup, which looked small in his hands.

"We decided, if they would accept it, then we'd just do it," he said with characteristic bluntness. The debate on the subject became mute for them because they received so many offers to buy their video art tapes.

Vasulka and his wife have been artists-in-residence in the Department of Film Studies at Dartmouth College this fall. They split the job, Steina taking the first half of the semester and Woody the second half.

Vasulka, who is a likely recruit for Santa Claus, except that his goatee would need growing and whitening, speaks intensely about his art, as if he never stops living it or thinking about it. His conversation, like some of his tapes, is not dramatic.

Vasulka concluded, on the issue of the value of video art, that it is the computer art, the art created by numbers, that will really stir up the question of artistic merit that haunts so much of 20th century art. Video art, at least, has a heritage in filmmaking, he said, that machine-generated art does not.

The ever-experimental Vasulka plans to turn his attention to computer art in the future.

The Vasulka's video art has little to do with the videotapes that most of us know, the tape in Purity Supreme supermarket of a woman demonstrating how to cook kale, for example.

Some people have had an opportunity to see their work at Hopkins Center, where an installation done in 1983, *The West*, has been on view in the Rotunda.

The equipment needed to create this installation, for which Steina did the visual taping and Woody the audio aspect, includes two video tape recorders (VTRs), synchronizing devices, and four television monitors. The work was originally designed for 10 to 20 monitors.

The West includes two 30-minute tapes, each of which is shown on two of the monitors. The tapes are shown

simultaneously and are accompanied by eerie music that resembles wind passing through a large, vacant building.

The tapes show many aspects of the American Western landscape, including both natural and man-made elements — buildings such as a large kiva, which is a round, underground structure made by the Indians; ancient pueblos, and scientific equipment such as the Very Large Array, a radio-telescope system located in New Mexico, where the Vasulkas live.

The Very Large Array, which turns slowly to scan the sky, resembles the process that the Vasulkas use to make their tapes. Video cameras are mounted to a turntable that slowly rotates. Sometimes a spherical mirror is used in the process and the landscape is taped as it appears reflected by the sphere.

Colors are saturated, heightened and distorted in these tapes, although the naturalistic reference is never completely lost, and usually a blue sky looks blue.

The program begins with a series of images that indicate the synchronization process between the two tapes. After the tapes are synchronized, scenes drift in and out of the picture. The tapes end abruptly and the television monitors become gray as the tapes rewind.

The effect of *The West* is hypnotic, mesmerizing in the way that many describe the effects of popular television. Errie sounds and the slow, steady pace of the camera surveying the surrounding scene, contribute to the effect. "It gets you into another state," said Woody.

If the visual and audio components of this installation alter your state of mind, a reading of the script for *The West* will make you realize just how baffling the world of video art is. It's a whole new vocabulary.

For example, the script describes the "concept" of *The West* as: "Layers of multi-directionally scanned images of landscapes and artifacts of a landscape proportions are presented through an enclosed circular environment of monitors suspended from a ceiling. A four corner speaker system delivers low frequency sound textures."

"Installation" and "Concept" are only some of the words in the world of video art. Just scraping the surface, Vasulka offered a short vocabulary lesson.

Colorizing — an electronic process in which you change certain frequencies to

produce changes in the colors.

Drifting (of images) — "You take one timing structure and you overlay it with another timing structure."

Electronic Collaging — the combination of electronic images from several tapes, all fused onto one tape, creating layers of images.

Video feedback — you point the camera into the monitor. Vasulka likened the effect to the sound of plugging a microphone into an amplifier.

Image processed — the term describes images that have been electronically processed so that the color, texture, or shape of the subject is altered.

Vasulka described image processed videotapes as one of four genres of video art. The others are narrative video, installation, and music-television.

If the vocabulary seems baffling, the theme or purpose that has emerged in the Vasulkas' work is more obvious. The themes differ in their work. Steina's interest is summed up in the phrase "machine vision," which was the title of a major exhibit she and Woody had in 1978 at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo.

It "signifies the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. The act of seeing, the image source, and the kinetic resources come from the installation itself, choreographed and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanical performance," said Steina. She goes on to liken her work to "a surveillance of space."

Woody describes Steina's interest as to show "landscape and how it is perceived by optical mechanical devices. . . . The world as seen by machines, not human vision."

Showing a machine's perception of the world is a way of humanizing the machine, and making it less intimidating.

Woody Vasulka's preoccupation is the process of taping. "Most of my work deals with the process itself, observing the controls," he said. Some of his work is dramatic, with a narrative or development, and some of it is non-dramatic. Some is figurative and some is non-figurative.

As he talked he reached for the empty coffee cup and a salt shaker in front of him. Holding them in his hands, and then arranging them as if they were chess pieces, he suggested that he could make a tape of the two objects. The tape would explore electronic means of recording them. "The process is the content of this work. . . . I could make

a tape of two sheep feeding on the bottom of the ocean."

For Vasulka, "reality is a mere reference." A typical tape of his "would be mostly non-dramatic but it would create its own tension, because the object is out of its normal context."

"Now I'm looking into how images are formed, images organized by computers," he concluded.

Vasulka has been called a "didactic" video artist because of his concern with the process itself, with "trying to explain or define the craft of video."

The Vasulkas' dedication to video is one reason they established The Kitchen in 1971. Now a center for contemporary music, video, dance and performance art in New York City. The Kitchen was originally dedicated to the electronic arts during the two years that the Vasulkas directed it.

The Kitchen was first located in a real kitchen in the Central Hotel on Broadway. The entire building collapsed, although their "electronic arts action center," as Steina calls it, had been moved two months before.

The Vasulkas occasionally teach in order to make ends meet but, he said, "We try to live off what we do instead of what we teach."

They show their work at media centers, museums, festivals, and through small distributors. "Video has its own small network," he said. Television has little use for video art. "The genre is not for mass audience."

Both Woody and Steina came to video art from other, more traditional art forms. She was a professional violinist and he was a filmmaker. "For both of us, this idea of being electronic was the most exciting part of it," he said.

Steina was born in Iceland in 1940. She studied classical violin at the Music Conservatory in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where she met and married Woody. Subsequently she took a job with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra.

In 1965 they moved to the United States. She became a free-lance musician and, gradually losing enthusiasm, turned to video.

Woody was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. After studying metal technology and hydraulic mechanics, he began writing poetry and playing the trumpet. He was in the military, wrote short stories and non-fiction, and studied photography before turning to film. He experimented with electronic sound and stroboscopic lights and then turned to video.

ROCHESTER, N. Y., THURSDAY, JANUARY 17, 1974

This TV Couple Takes Medium Very Seriously

• See, "Make Your Own Television Show" in Sunday's Upstate.

By BETTY UTTERBACK
D&C Staff Writer

Woody Vasulka plunked an old lamp in front of a blue backdrop.

"Ah, that's our actor," he said training a television camera on it.

Steina Vasulka wheeled another small camera around and came to rest on the brooding face of a young girl across the room.

One-by-one they superimposed images on a television screen.

"We can go up to six cameras," Woody said, little beads of perspiration popping out on his brow.

He punched buttons on one of many black boxes, and the picture on the television screen moved and wavered. The face of the girl was still visible — masklike. She moved slightly and the whole image dissolved into a kaleidoscope.

The Vasulkas are husband and wife, and they are relaxed, obviously accustomed to working together.

"Do you have a coax-1?"

"Yeah, could you give me that feedback?"

Steina punches more buttons and sound waves are transmitted into sine waves on the screen. A low pulsing sound becomes a hum and evolves into a high pitched tone. It sounds like a television set that has gone on the blink.

Things are obviously building up to a climax when somebody comes in with pizzas and soda, and they all stop.

"We've been doing this for four years," Woody said, collapsing on a couch and dipping into the pizza. "It took us about three years to find out what the hell we were doing."

The Vasulkas make electronic pictures and they are visiting Rochester to demonstrate this new art form. Yesterday they conducted a workshop at Portable Channel on Prince Street. Today they will produce, "The Electronic Image," to be shown on Channel 21's Homemade TV series at 10:30 tonight.

"We will show our ingredients, put them together in a recipe, then cook a while," Woody promised when asked what tonight's show is about.

Comparing their work to cooking goes back to the Vasulkas first efforts in experimental video. They founded "The Kitchen," an electronic theater in New York City.



WOODY VASULKA

Please turn page

TV COUPLE

From 1C

"There was no stage for such a scene," Woody said. "It provided an electronic stage."

They use cameras, oscillators, frequencies and timing to create their abstract art.

"It is a development in time," Woody explained. "We start with a simple object and build up a collage. We're trying to find the behavior patterns but we're only in the primitive stages."

The Vasulkas feel the audience reacts to the images first by trying to identify them. That is the "real" sequence, then comes the "dream" sequence of remembered images, and that is followed by the "hallucination" sequence.

"Sometimes people put names on our pieces," Woody said. "We never do — except as a joke."

Steina was born in Iceland, studied violin at the music school in Reykjavik and the Conservatory of Music in Prague. She played violin in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and free-lanced in New York City.

Woody was born in Czechoslovakia, has a background in engineering and studied at the Film Academy in Prague. He produced short films for movie theaters in Czechoslovakia on "very mixed" subjects. He recalled that he did a film on alcoholism, one on changes of the suburbs, a travelogue on Iceland.

"Television on Czechoslovakia was government-owned and everything had a political flavor," Woody said. "Here it was so different. It seemed so free."

"Of course, we had no commercials," he added. "I learned English from watching commercials here. The money they have presents the opportunity to provide the strongest message — a one-to-one confrontation with the viewer."

Woody hedges when asked if his work in television evolved into his interest in video art.

"Why don't you say your documentaries have nothing whatever to do with what you're doing now?" Steina said finally.

Woody nodded.

"This work represents a revolution, not an evolution," he agreed.

Steina often works with the visuals and Woody with the soundtracks but they stress they are a team — trying to relate audio and video.

In the summer of 1972, the Vasulkas were artists in residence at the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco. Before joining Media Studios, Inc. in Buffalo last fall, they were artists in residence at WNET's experimental laboratory in New York City.

"We're now working on tool development," Woody said. "We'd like to put all these big boxes into little boxes. We don't believe in big studios and massive equipment. Everybody should have the tools and they should have them in their homes."

"Television means broadcasting but it's not going to be that way," he went on. "Television is 40 or 50 years old, already an old invention."

The Vasulkas envision a time when your television set will be old-fashioned and the very walls of your home can be replaced by three dimensional electronic images.

People from Portable Channel workshops, students from the University of Rochester and St. John Fisher College continued to arrive, curious to learn something about this new art form.

The Vasulka's drifted back to their cameras and boxes — soon becoming immersed in their myriad of buttons.