

# VIDEO ART AND STUFF

Pioneers in the development of electronic arts, The Vasulkas are Artists-in-Residence for Film Studies this fall.

## STEINA

Steina Vasulka was born in Iceland. She has studied at the Music Conservatory in Prague, and been a member of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. One of her works, *The West*, a video environment relating to the Southwest United States where she and Woody now live, was presented in the Rotunda of the Hopkins Center this fall. Steina was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1976.

Let's start with the difference between television and video. Do you think T.V. connotes "communication" and video connotes "art"?

Yeah, it is inherent. I don't consider them the same medium at all. The public channels were trying to do art on television which is not the same thing; there was a certain sentiment that T.V. should not abandon the arts altogether. Art on television is kind of trying to fit either a theater or musical performance into a little box and call it art. But what wasn't known until the late 1960's was that television had inherent properties for creative expression. It was probably always known to a few engineers, but it wasn't until it became available to visionary people that "video art" came about.

I'm sort of on a fringe because my idea is to use the television for art expression just like a potter uses clay or a painter uses oil on canvas. I'm using the medium itself to be my medium for expression. Whereas, if you say art on television, you make television subservient to some other kind of vision. There's a lot of video art that is not primarily concerned with the manipulation of signal itself -- it can be expressive camera work or even expressive narrative -- but it fits the description of video art because it is an artistic individual's expression, a vision.

If you think about television, it's all collaboration, from the engineers to the so-called art director. And usually when you get into a definition of art, you are talking about a single individual's vision. Commercial television is not done by people with very high aesthetic vision. It is meant as an industry and has a totally different function in this society.

What about the effect of technology on video art?

In a few years we are going to see in video what is currently in audio; that is, popularly used electronic instruments that do fairly shallow but flashy type of stuff. That's going to happen to video, too. It's alright. The most important thing is that all those instruments be available. I don't think the tool has to govern you. Technology challenges the mind. The more technology, the more sophisticated you have to be.

I just think what's good is good and what is bad is going to perish. It doesn't matter what it is, you know. A good painting, a primitive good painting, is just as valuable as a sophisticated good painting. The technological tools aren't going to make it on their own. They have to have a creative impetus behind them.

You were trained as a musician. A violinist. How do you treat the interaction of sound and image?

I am totally preoccupied with it. I would never take just some sound and put it on my video tapes. There are  
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## WOODY

Woody Vasulka was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Currently involved in computer controlled video, he has studied metal technologies, hydraulic mechanics, and film. Together with Steina, Woody founded The Kitchen in New York City — originally designed in 1970 as a theater for electronic art, sound, and image. Woody was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1979.

I'd like to talk about your childhood in Brno. What was it really like during World War II?

As a child, you take war as an adventure. Only the burning child being killed actually realizes the horror of it. If you are an observer -- as children are acute observers -- you see every detail in a non-dramatic way; it's like a theatre opening in front of your eyes that comes from the tension at your doorstep or from an aerial bombardment, which is the first experience of the war that I had. You see that everything breaks down; the adults break down and they cry, and you as a child look at it with great curiosity, not understanding the physicality — the shaking and the explosions. On the other hand, the behavior of the people is much more bizarre; I was entertained by this behavior of the adults. There are the adults that are adventurers who go out to the danger, playing the role of being fearless. So all the role-playing, stress, and crisis was my first experience. The war still dominates my memory bank, something like from a different world.

Right after the bombardment, the whole family and the neighborhood took a tour and looked at what was done. At some places there were still bombs ticking and a squad trying to defuse them. With the smell of explosives in the air and earth that's suddenly in front of your home that's never been there, it becomes like a field trip. Everybody took it that way. We just went sightseeing.

As a child, I recall catching the first bullet I found reflected still spinning on the ground. I grabbed it; it was still hot, so I had to kind of toss it in the air. I looked at it to see how it was shaped, then the adults came along and asked, "what do you have?" and I said, "I have a bullet." So they cut it open to see what was inside. That spoiled my first relic of the war. It went on. I would collect the weapons and hoard them in my basement; eventually the adults threw them out.

I grew up across from the airfield, where there were these enormous amounts of airplanes tossed in a pile. German and later the Russian airplanes. As children we would go and take these things apart; that was our pastime. We would find everything from objects to human limbs — anything you wanted: old albums of photographs, furniture, metals, war materials, cars, weapons. So as children we just rumbled through this junkyard called Europe and played around with all the remnants of the war and displacement of all the values. That has stayed basically with me up to now.

I still go through surplus, you see; I live close to Los Alamos, and I go there to look through what's there — atomic junk and encasings of the nuclear weapons that haven't been used. I like to live from the junk of the world. With electronics, most of the material I use is  
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## Stet Profile

**Name:** Donald E. Pease

**Occupation:** Professor of Literature

**Why?:** "I love to teach."

**Brand of Underwear:** Jockey Shorts.

"Yeah, I'm almost sure of it."

**Zodiac Sign:** Leo-Cancer cusp

**Favorite Diversions:** Weight-lifting, swimming, and meditating. "Not necessarily in that order."

**Best Book Not Read:** *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky.

"Heard so much about it that reading it would be a rereading."

**Make of Car(s) Driven:** Mazda RX7 and four-wheel drive pickup, "depending on my mood." (Five speeding violations this year.)

**Favorite Article of Clothing:** "Love neckties."

**Housepets:** One dog ("Beckett") and three cats.

**Favorite Film (recent):** *Diva* (Update: rumour has it that Professor Pease saw *Repo Man* three times in two days.)

**Favorite Film (all-time):** "Obsessed with *Vertigo*."

**Worst Film:** *Red Dawn* "Just awful."

**Favorite Rock Star:** Mick Jagger

**Biggest Qualm with Dartmouth Administration:** NROTC

**Philosophy:** "For me, teaching is the act of discovering the deepest capability of human-kind. The teaching of literature is that deepest capability made manifest in words."

## WOODY

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second-hand or third-hand or it's junk that I transform into some sort of useful tool. I don't believe in buying, for example, new and expensive machines; I'd rather buy a tool that's already thrown out and construct whatever I want from it. At times I have to construct new tools or have to get new devices — chips or circuits or something — but I'd rather live and work with technology that costs nothing. It's like a painter that paints a picture that is done from seven dollars of paint and maybe fifteen dollars of canvas. Anything that costs more than forty-five dollars cannot ever be creative, can never be art. That's the rule, and I think it applies to any level from painting to photography to high tech.

*You started out as a photographer. Do you consider photography an art form? To what extent were your photographs influenced by the war?*

I would put photography in a separate category — poetic journalism. But I have a very biased view of photography, because it influenced me the most when I grew up. It was the photography of a particular genre, it was the street or the battlefield. My generation went through some sort of social or political urgency looking at photography. Of course there's the other photography, based on the formal kind of expression, more abstract or compositional, more material or textural. But my generation took it rather as a social vehicle, or a vehicle for a social truth. I see photography as a reference to what we call reality or what we call representation of reality. It is a system that we compare things to. There are other possibilities. You can compare your visual kind of needs with painting or with drawings, but photography is a very important referential system to me. Other people do photograph and use it as an art form, finding much more interesting and profound ideas about it, but for my generation it was utility. It went beyond just utility as journalism — it was a poetic form. It had and still has its kind of artistic

quality, but it's not the art of painting, or of music, or of theater, and it's not the art of film. I feel it's necessary for photography to be looked at as a memory of the past — an educational system of the past.

*To what extent do you think art can influence politics or religion?*

From a historical standpoint, I think the direct link between politics and art is not very productive. In some ways, the most powerful art is not directly dealing with politics. In fact, there's only a few successful political works of art. Others would dispute that, but that's my opinion, and I think it's a well documented opinion. To

*"Art does not have power to change political systems, unless as a vehicle of some other ideology."*

me, art is a value system to which you attach importance. Most primitively, there was a kind of competition with the rest of the world through art objects. Past centuries prove that. Power and vanity were the most powerful motivations. Then there was the continuous need for metaphysical contemplation, and religious principles were trying to occupy everybody's minds by those contemplations. As you know, art always emerges as a competitor to those. And in some cultures, art tries to or actually replaces the religion. For my generation, art was much more important than any religious principle. Today, people are trying to go back to religion rather than to art. But American weakness art is so clearly visible. Americans would not attach much metaphysical importance to art, but European art could influence wars, lead to killings, pacify, or be the subject of religious and political struggle. So, the significance for art is ideology, especially when it is to replace religion or is to compete intellectually or politically. I am amazed as how certain societies tend to be satisfied with religion and others try to replace it with some other system.

You know Trotsky clearly defined what he thought art is. He believed it is a product of and serves the ruling class in a particular area. It seems *a priori* kind of primitive, but if you look into it, it's possible — wealth has the ability of manipulating art for its own need. The art process can be subverted, perverted, purchased, and bent towards its sponsors. The fragility of art fascinates me; how the what we call "weak foundation" of art can still produce quality. Art itself is powerful only in a historical sense. When it is being created, it is very vulnerable. The whole process of altering, mediating, or shaping of the art by commission can influence the direction in which the art is going. There are self-directed kind of ethical principles in art such as the *avant garde* of the formalist school, which insisted on its expression regardless of social order and commissions.

The bourgeois class, if you look at it politically from the viewpoint of *avant garde*, was there to be served by art, wanting and longing for something more popular and acceptable. So the *avant garde* erected these rigid moral codes — very austere rules, minimalism, things that insulted the bourgeois. There are always these moralistic movements, but then they are replaced by something that is in harmony with the mainstream of thought. In the beginning it may be radical, like romanticism was, but later it becomes reserved for the majority. Romanticism and sentiment sometimes link together and become a vehicle for mass culture. There are a lot of imperfections in this, which is the most interesting part of it. But, you know, I think overall art is very fragile and very insecure. Its quality cannot be fully predicted. It is not something that has strength; strength is assigned to it, eventually. Art does not have power to change political systems, unless as a vehicle of some other ideology.

These are serious questions, sister, what are you gonna do with them?

**Harriette Yahr**

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derground as often as not, drained me of my introspection and I redeemed the night by knowing that. Above all, I was flawless mannequin, gazed at and admired by people I would never meet.

One night I was at a small club-an underground place in a tiny gutted warehouse where the roof leaked and where the bar consisted of a long formica counter and a ratty refrigerator. The place smelled like the dusty cellar it was and the bathroom had the most beautiful graffiti depicting multiple unnatural sexual acts.

Here I was hanging out, and watching a boy whose jet black hair fell over his forehead clear to his mouth and whose face was smoothly made up in pale shades and black-lined eyes. He wore a black jacket over a white tee-shirt, and black jeans under a leather skirt. On his feet were heavy boots and on his head a Marlon Brando motorcycle cap. I approved.

I ended up speaking to someone who looked quite regular. I mean I think I noticed he was talking to me only because he looked so odd: A white collar shirt and blue jeans and tennis shoes. He came from a family like mine-excruciatingly normal. Our fathers followed the same profession. I found solace in his company.

"I am nobody," I said.  
"Who am I?" he said. "But then who is anybody. Manhattan is one big island full of nobodies running around thinking they're somebody because they're afraid of being nobody."

Nobody remembered what I had left behind. Only I did that. In a neighborhood of out casts I started thinking about it all. And the dreams I'd abandoned-were they mine or just my parents?

"Why?" my father had asked earlier. "Why?" He couldn't raise his voice. Was I that different now? I hadn't even noticed running around those neighborhoods but, there, in Virginia. "Hey, it's creative self-expression," I would have replied. To which he would have said, expression of what? I had no answer yet so I had boarded that plane.

I returned to my place ready to find an answer, ready to resume my combats. I heard my father's whys the whole way back. Was I escaping boredom? Conquering it? Or was I merely jumping like a puppet on a string. I used to think he enjoyed being the decision maker. I was wrong. Why didn't I see, in his bursts of anger, that he was forcing me to take control of my life. He was putting me out on Avenue C and

fourth, where the four corners jump with gangs, holering and fighting tight with anger. By myself so I could learn to move through the drug dealers who would just as soon deal a fatal blow to my head, and past the bums whose legs are grey with festering wounds that smell worse than any other smell in the world. He put me there to exist side-by-side with the junkies who everyday "quit" while they enticed me into shooting galleries, because a writer should experience life to its fullest. He sent me out because that was the only way he could trust that my back would straighten and my gait lengthen. I moved along at the pace of a cat that's just lost it's battle. The streets were long corridors squeezed between high brick walls. And these corridors were those of a dream. Out of crevicesling alley cats and violent faces. From holes came noises. Raised voices or music. Sometimes something would fall from them. A coke can. A clock. Iron scaffolding edged along like black ivy from one window to the one above it. Dark spaces held the things I feared the most, whereas the lighted grey steps, covered with graffiti or stenciled "No Pot Smoking" and "No Loitering", bore another fear. On these steps sat the people. I could see them as passed and I waited for comments. Or wished I could sit down and share a cigarette or an emotion.

When I rounded the corner, I saw something that caught my eye: It was a doorstep. Concrete steps colored with graffiti. a blue and broken door. And on the steps, a young punk smoking a clove. He nodded at me. I reached that old apartment on Avenue B and waited for the stringy coke dealer that I said "What's up?" or "No" to nearly every night to open the street door. He hung out in the white hallway where blue paint once meant for the baseboards, spotted the wall with indecipherable words or names. I was becoming part of the dream with all its becoming cement steps and lurking dark recesses, for its haunting brick and treeless streets. For all its people, nearly everyong, someone I hoped to meet, but feared. As much a nightmare as a wet dream. He let me in. I marched up to the thick cracked wooden door that offered as much protection from the outside world as a beggar's dime and opened it.

I had left my father. I returned to the home arena where more fans stood stamping for my demise that for my success. And then it was I who took the light. They were my eyes that saw through esperience, who spoke few words, and who owned the apartment. It was my dream. And this house in which I moved was, to me, a house of the holy.

by Andy Festa



photographs by Scott Plunket

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people who do it; I am abhorred by it. Because, you can actually improve your art tremendously. You take a nice piece of music, like a Chopin waltz, and your video looks romantic. Just because of the music. If you use the same images and put on a jazz recording, it looks different. It's just dubious; whose art is it, is it the musician's? Is it his contribution that makes it interesting, or is it the images?

I always try to use what sound is there by either digging out the sound from the property of the image, making the image according to a pre-recorded sound, or recording the sound simultaneously. Sync-sound is very interesting — if you have the camera rolling, you should always have some sound rolling — of rustling trees or whatever there is. Then there is this whole interaction of signals — you can convert video signals into audio signals and audio signals into video signals quite easily.

(referring to a segment of *The West*) It is Woody's audio. I did the image to it knowing I was going to use the audio track. It is slightly more musical than most of our

tracks, but it's still not music. It doesn't have any kind of composition, rhythm, or drumming. It is just long sounds, long electronic sounds.

*What interests me is that, although you were trained as a musician, you seem to generally place greater emphasis on image than on text or sound in your pieces.*

Yeah, it surprised me more than anybody because I didn't even pay that much attention to sculpture and painting or the visual media before. Before I started video, I wasn't even a seeing person. And it turns out that is what I'm more interested in, ultimately, than sound. But I can't explain that.

*"Commercial television is not done by people with very high aesthetic vision."*

*What about the performance aspect?*

I consider all my video pieces performances. I make a performance — I call it "system performance". What I'm really interested in is setting something up, pushing the record button, and not interfering with it anymore.

I just like to set things into motion or set some event. Then it is recorded.

That was my problem as a musician. I didn't really enjoy performing. I enjoyed music tremendously, but the performance part in front of an audience was sort of a torture. So when I started in video, I could do all these performances for myself within my four walls, and just decide later if I wanted to show it to anybody else. It was kind of for me, a great liberation. I could do all my mistakes and not have to be bashful about it.

*You have the cameras there.*

You can always edit it.

*The future?*

I have no concept of it. But I just hope it continues in a way. I think the progression that's been established in video has so far been interesting. There has always been a certain amount of struggle, a certain amount of success, and a certain amount of what I call progress - a change in subject matter and things like that. And I would hate to see me somehow stop and not progress anymore. So all I can pray for is that it sort of continues.

Harriette Yahr