

# Camera Eye: The Vasulkas

Artists who explore the camera instead of the world.

Robert A. Haller



*Steina's self-portrait alters the image, challenging our preconceptions.*

**M**ost people approach video like films: Cameras—film or video—are windows on the world. Steina and Woody Vasulka took this traditional stance when they began taping arts performances in New York lofts and clubs in the mid-sixties. But soon their frame of reference changed. They became more interested in how the camera worked than in what was in front of it. They covered the lens and constructed images, playing with pixels (the smallest unit of a video image), altering raster lines (the 525 lines that form the image on the screen), making pictures from inside instead of outside the camera.

“Ordinarily the camera view is associated with a human point of view, paying attention to the human conditions around,” Steina Vasulka explains. Tall, dark-haired, in her early forties, Steina dresses casually in blue jeans and warm sweaters from her native Iceland. She is anything but casual about her work.

“In this series [her “Machine Vision” project],” she continues in her peculiar brand of technospeak, “the camera conforms to a mechanized decision making of instruments, with the movements and attention directed toward their own machine-to-machine observations.”

Steina and her husband Woody create a form of television totally unlike what “television” usually means. The Vasulkas see with their equipment instead of

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**In 1971, Woody and Steina opened New York's Kitchen, an arts exhibition space for videomakers.**

through it. They become almost inseparable from the tools of their work, intertwining art and technology, human vision and machine vision.

Using computers and electronic synthesizers, often without cameras, the Vasulkas have extended the expressive range of the medium. By demoting the camera-and-lens combination to a secondary role, they make organization more important than observation. The television signal is much more malleable—and controllable—than most of us think. In the new realms of Vasulka video, we can see:

- television "snow" randomly falling across the screen, and then suddenly becoming "ordered," so that in the center of the screen a disc of different snow ap-

built: a Rutt/Etra scan processor, a dual colorizer, a programmer, a multikeyer, a variable clock, and a switcher (the last four made by technician George Brown in the early seventies). With these instruments, the Vasulkas have become electronic pioneers charting the digital and analogue space of the microcircuit, the time duration of "instant" information exchanges, the implications of infinite extrapolations.

The Vasulkas' adventures in videoland are paralleled by the cross-cultural, multidisciplinary histories of their personal lives. Born and raised in Reykjavik, Iceland, Steina studied violin, harmony, and music theory in her youth. In 1957 she traveled to Denmark; she spent the next year in Germany, moving to Czechoslovakia in 1959 to continue her study of music. In Prague she met and married Woody; they returned to Iceland together, and Steina joined the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Steina's video work benefits from the abstract, mathematical grounding of her career in classical music.

Woody was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1937. In 1945 he developed an interest in technology. "Europe was a junkyard, where we could find great dumps of war equipment," he recalls. His junkyard scavenging continued through the fifties, and he legitimized this obsession by earning a degree in industrial engineering. Growing a bushy goatee, Woody typecast himself for the work he did in the fifties as jazz critic, poet, and photographer before turning to filmmaking in 1960. When he moved to Iceland with Steina that year, he began a metamorphosis that would eventually end in a new name (Timoteus Petursson) and citizenship.

In 1965, Woody and Steina moved to the United States and quickly took up residence in New York's alternative television scene. Video impressed Woody as "an energy system"—a system he and Steina soon set out to explore on an electronic rather than a photographic basis. The industrial engineer and the violinist became video artists, fascinated by feedback and the flexibility of the half-inch tape on the Sony portapak. In 1971, Woody and Steina founded the Kitchen, an electronic arts exhibition space that would soon become a Mecca for experimental videomakers. The Vasulkas' early documentary work evolved into more adventurous projects; they made scores of tapes in the early seventies exploring the manipulation of the video signal.

In 1973 the Vasulkas moved again—to Buffalo this time. That year they made *Golden Voyage*, a work that illuminates some of their creative interests. The tape



*The Vasulkas with their machines.*

pears—frozen or moving against the direction of the original snow;

- the raster lines of the image retreating from the edges of the screen, folding over on themselves, and forming baffling configurations;
- a recognizable image molded into a topographical surface that soon turns into a terrain different from (but born of) the initial image.

The Vasulkas' imagery is fascinating because the transformations we witness are mathematical, rigorous, *our own*—in that they are made by machines made by people—yet also *not our own*—because these electronic images cannot be made without machines. Woody Vasulka often speaks of "a dialogue between the tool and the image," a phrase that conspicuously fails to emphasize or even acknowledge the human presence.

Woody and Steina design and construct their equipment with the intention of learning from it during and after the programming process. Their tools are not that extraordinary, although they are custom-



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is based partly on a work from another medium, René Magritte's painting "Golden Legend." The Belgian surrealist had long fascinated Steina and Woody. "Magritte's work anticipated the possibilities of many electronic-imaging concepts," Steina says. *Golden Voyage's* weightless loaves of bread drifting through the space beyond the window frame recall Magritte's locomotive emerging from a fireplace, downpour of bowler-hatted gentlemen, and boulder serenely floating above the ocean.

*Golden Voyage* begins as an homage to Magritte, but it rapidly becomes much more. The framing window vanishes, the screen space expands with sudden depth, and the loaves cease to be just bread, now suggesting images of the human body. The background and foreground also change, moving the loaves over the ocean, drifting them over rock-strewn plains, and along an electronically colorized coast. At times the screen "pans" and "tracks forward" with a flexibility noticed only after the fact. False perspective, contradictory illumination, improbable juxtaposition, and poetic harmonies punctuate *Golden Voyage* and other Vasulka tapes (just as they do Magritte's paintings).

In Buffalo, where Woody taught at SUNY's Center for Media Study and invested years of his time building a "Digital Image Articulator" (with techni-

cian Jeffrey Schier), Steina plunged anew into her "Machine Vision" project, a series of tapes and installations that broke ground conceptually and aesthetically.

From 1975 to 1977, she produced five tapes whose mechanical aspect lay not in image formation but in alternation of photographed views (somewhat like a surveillance camera system). In some of these tapes, and then more spectacularly in her installation series "Allvision," two or more cameras simultaneously regard each other and the external world. Displayed on side-by-side monitors (in the installation) or rapidly alternating (on the generated tapes), these works provide an encyclopedic perspective, a kind of omniscience that slips in and out of our grasp.

Marshall McLuhan's maxims about the impact of media on perception are reaffirmed by the experience of watching the Vasulkas' video work. One comes away from it with an enhanced recognition of how much we do not see, and how much effort must be expended to gain a wider vision.

In 1978, shortly before they left Buffalo for Santa Fe, where they continue to work, the Vasulkas assembled a remarkable series of programs for broadcast. Initially shown on WNEB in Buffalo, the six half-hour programs (funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) survey ten years of the Vasulkas' work. Excerpts

from many of their tapes are included with explanations of how they were made.

Today, thirty years after the beginning of the massive growth of network television, and after more than a decade of widespread experimentation by video artists, all network and most individual video construction is based on the aesthetic of film. But there is no necessary relation between the two—in practice, films convert into videotapes with difficulty and transferring video to films causes even greater problems. Had video been invented fifty years earlier, or film fifty years later, the two media would surely have evolved differently.

The potential of video technology for personal expression and discovery—in broadcast and in the art gallery—is a great, largely unexplored terrain across which the Vasulkas are traveling. That they are discovering exciting new imagery should be no more surprising than the very recent discovery (in the early sixties) of the "hidden" side of the moon. We knew that side of the moon was there, but didn't know what it looked like. The Vasulkas know that something they don't know is waiting for them in the circuits of their computers and behind the screens of their video monitors. They have accepted their mission to find it. ■

Robert A. Haller is the executive director of Anthology Film Archives.

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