



TV, Or Not TV?

By GREG AUSTEN

Standing next to a century-and-a-half old church here in Santa Fe is another, newer "temple." Like its neighbor, the newer structure is visited regularly by faithful practitioners, and its high ceilings enhance a distinct sense of mystery to the uninitiated. Yet there are no pews here, no altar or screen—but miles of cable, plugs and circuit boards, control panels, computers and video monitors. And the litany here is composed of the hum, beeps and whir of high-tech electronics.

This sanctuary is the workplace/studio/home of internationally known video artists Woody Vasulka and Steina, his wife. Early this week in the sanctuary "high priest" Vasulka presided over numerous projects, even as he discussed his work with this visiting reporter. Despite its awe-inspiring display of technology, Vasulka's studio possessed an air of warmth and a feeling of real comfort.

In an editing/control room a trio of young video-makers was happily involved in the production of a documentary, while in another room a technician was engrossed in the circuitry of another project. Throughout the morning, creative people filtered in and out of the studios. Through it all, the Czech-born Vasulka dished out cheerful advice and instruction as he conducted a tour of the premises. Steina was away in San Francisco on this day, and Vasulka himself was finalizing the portions of his video opera, "Art of Memory," that will be shown on Friday, Sept. 12, at the Center for Contemporary Arts, to open the center's "Video Art New Mexico" series.

Vasulka came to this country in 1965, and after free-lancing as a film editor for a few years, began, in the late '60s, to devote himself to the study of video. "I was very much interested in what's different about video," he said. "First of all, how are pictures made? How can they be altered, manipulated?"

Vasulka said that electronic music was a precedent, aesthetically and technologically, to video: "The audio synthesizer as an instru-



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Video artist Woody Vasulka: Making the form become the content

ment gave you an alternate sound source—from, say, nature, or from instruments made by people. Video suddenly came to the same possibility: Pictures could be made electronically, with no help from the world, so to speak—even denying the camera as an exclusive source of image." This was the startling point from which Vasulka launched a long involvement with the medium.

For about a decade, while he taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Vasulka concerned himself primarily with discovering the *nature* of video and with discovering the *determinants* of its manipulation. "I spent

most of the time experimenting with and defining what I call the material, its law, its behavior and so forth."

He explained that most of the images he created at this time were non-representational, which led some people to call them abstract. Yet, he claimed, his work was the opposite of abstraction in painting. "The iconoclastic idea in art, in painting, brought painting into abstract form by *denying* the reality," he pointed out. "Here [in video] we had a material that was amorphous, very undefined, and were trying to shape it into something whose perception would be cognitive. The 'abstraction' was not a goal, it

was a *necessity*, and we tried to shape it toward reality." This, said Vasulka, was the hallmark of his work during that period: defining, understanding and creating tools for the manipulation of video images.

Vasulka received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979, and a year later he and Steina relocated to Santa Fe, where he has produced two complete video works, with his third in progress.

"The Commission," his first video opera, was completed in 1984. The central question addressed in this work, said Vasulka, was: "If, in fact, there *is* independent language, if

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there is the possibility of creating narrative segments of a 'story' out of electronic materials." "The Commission," he explained, dealt with the relationship between violinist Nicolo Paganini and composer Hector Berlioz. But the story was not the point, claimed the artist.

"I took the subject purely to have a space to experiment with something that happened in the past, so that it would give me a space to work on the surface." Vasulka expanded: "In 'The Commission' I tried to use the textural, the surface as a carrier of some sort of emotional ideology. It was not drama that interested me but the electronic surface." For Vasulka, his medium is truly his message: "To deal with content means, in fact, to subdue the form to it."

Yet Vasulka is aware of the cognitive implications of his work. "People eventually fuse it to a single perceptual event," he said, "and judge it on their own conditions. If it succeeds on general terms, people will perceive it successfully." His work, Vasulka believes, will succeed: "In my eyes, if work has integrity and is successful formally, it actually creates its own content."

In his present work, Vasulka has shown some evolution, conceptually as well as chronologically. "Art of Memory," he said, reflects 20th-century concerns. Vasulka listed some of the themes reflected in segments of the video opera. "One deals with the Spanish Civil War, which I find very essential to the European establishment of the Left. Another segment is about the atomic age; it's a statement of Oppenheimer, describing the first event of the atomic blast." Other segments involve the Japanese surrender in World War II and events in early 20th-century Russia.

Vasulka made no apologies for what he called the fragmented nature of themes in "Art of Memory," explaining, "I want to present it in rather a kind of musical form, rather than dramatic. In the definition of the genre, I try to distance myself from actuality. I'm using newsreel material, but I

electronically reshape it: I make some kind of object out of it. It's not really the reality of it—I'm interested in a particular form."

But of course the form itself comprises an aesthetic of its own. Vasulka explained that a very recognizable part of Santa Fe life will be prominent in "Art of Memory." "I'm going to present these ways of using various materials," against "the Western landscape, as a sort of referential background." He said our landscape represents something stable, unchanging, and that, "By living here, we use that background for our thoughts daily. So I'm just using that in the same way as a stage. It's just the biggest stage I can afford."

The constraints imposed by the present medium—the printed, reportorial word—make it difficult to fully convey the reality of another. Woody Vasulka has pioneered, and to a great extent defined, a new medium vastly different from anything we've known. It has its own language, symbols and messages. Its underlying philosophy can be discussed, as can its technological base and something of its particular aesthetic, but a true description is not achieved in this way. Our own everyday language has not caught up with the technology responsible for this new art form.

One leaves the "temple" of Woody Vasulka perhaps a bit daunted, yet also challenged—to take on another language, to learn the joys of a new aesthetic. For the next two weekends, the Center for Contemporary Arts will present a series showcasing the work of Woody Vasulka, Steina and 15 other New Mexico practitioners of the new art form—artists who have chosen this medium as their message.

"Art of Memory" will be presented at the Center for Contemporary Arts on Friday, Sept. 12, at 8 p.m. The work of eight different local video artists will be presented there on Saturday, Sept. 13, at 8 p.m. The video work of Steina Vasulka will be shown there on Friday, Sept. 19,

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