

Tribune photo by Vickie Lewis

Steina and Woody Vasulka in their Santa Fe studio. "Video is as passionate an expression for us as painting is for painters," Steina Vasulka says.

Video pioneers find new art forms

By KEITH RAETHER
Tribune arts editor

SANTA FE — He was an industrial engineer from Brno, Czechoslovakia. She was a violinist with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. But when they came to Santa Fe in 1979, Woody and Steina Vasulka already had been recognized for 10 years as the pioneers of video art in the United States.

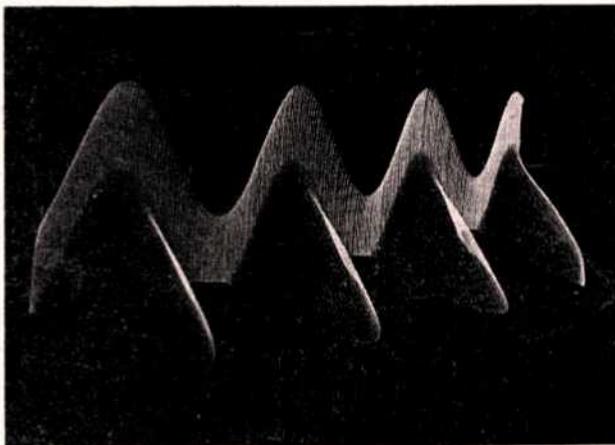
It began in New York City in 1969 with a video entitled "Feedback." The Vasulkas pointed a camera at a television set, multiplying the image on the screen. Then they zoomed the camera in on the image and discovered a whole new world of oscillating light patterns.

"We would sit night after night and watch the screen to see if there was a law to it," said Steina Vasulka in their home and studio in Santa Fe. "We used to joke that it was like sitting in front of the fireplace looking at a fire."

Jonas Mekas, champion of underground cinema, would later describe the Vasulkas and their colleagues as "the tribe that worships electricity."

The Vasulkas still worship electricity. Making videos is still their daily bread.

More audio experiment than video installation, their most recent project is a collaboration with Santa Fe poet and artist Doris Cross. The work will be on display and tape today (5 to 7 p.m. reception) through March 9



Woody Vasulka created "Temps Energie" in 1975.

at the Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico. Cross creates visual poems (dubbed "letterism" by French modernist artists) by reproducing whole columns of Webster's Secondary School Dictionary (1913 edition) and painting over most of the writing. The remaining words constitute her poems.

The Vasulkas' part in the project is to record Cross' readings of the poems at three different speeds, expanding and contracting the words until they can only be understood as sound.

"This is not our usual video madness," said Woody

Vasulka. "It's a sound piece, but I think it has very interesting parallels to the video work we do."

Examples of the Vasulkas' video work can be seen today through Jan. 31 at Fogelson Library of the College of Santa Fe and Feb. 11 to March 10 at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. The exhibitions are part of the ongoing ART/MEDIA project sponsored by Albuquerque Arts Alliance, the city Community Cultural Affairs Program and the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe.

The Vasulkas don't take credit for introducing video to the world at large. In the late 1950s, a group of European experimentalists including Nam June Paik were finding out about video through what Woody Vasulka calls "the electronic angle."

"It was the idea of the television set being the object of popular culture, and also the fact that this object constituted a beam of light that draws a picture — a picture that can be altered," said Woody Vasulka.

The Vasulkas didn't care much about popular culture, but the idea of altering images fascinated them.

"We belonged to a group which also existed in other media — film, electronic sound, and so on — which was concerned with the material and its performance," said Woody Vasulka. "What we discovered — what really took our hearts away — was that you could change an image internally through the alteration of the signal. In other words, we discovered how to generate images from sound. In that way we were pioneers."

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Time out

Adventures in video imagery reveal startling light patterns

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The Vasulkas' adventures in videoland reflect the cultural cross-pollination in their personal lives.

Steina Vasulka, 45, grew up in Reykjavik, Iceland, and studied violin at the Music Conservatory of Prague from 1959-63. There she met and married Woody Vasulka.

Woody Vasulka, three years older than Steina, was a student of metal technologies and hydraulic mechanics at the School of Industrial Engineering in Brno. Later he attended the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he directed and produced short films.

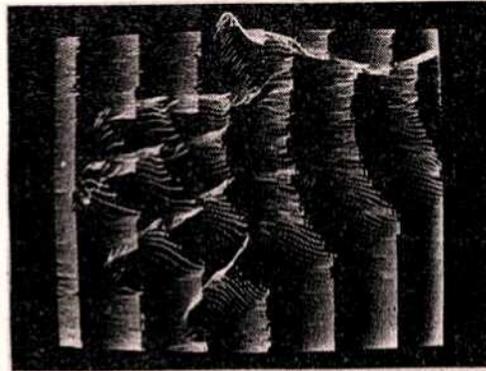
The Vasulkas came to the United States in 1965. Two years later Woody Vasulka began experimenting with electronic sounds, stroboscopic lights and finally video.

"The early video experiments weren't differentiated by genre or approach," said Woody Vasulka. "It was all radical art because it was personal and often against television and the establishment. Only later did it become recognized as an art form."

Some of the Vasulkas' earliest videos were documentaries of New York "happenings": Jimi Hendrix in concert, Don Cherry improvising on pocket trumpet in Washington Square. Other videos such as "Feedback" and "Violin Power" were decidedly experimental.

In "Violin Power," Steina Vasulka plugged her violin into an audio synthesizer that was linked to a video switcher. Aural distortion produced visual distortion and her bow suddenly looked like a double helix on the screen.

But was it art? "Actually, we weren't accepted as artists in the beginning," said Steina Vasulka. "At that time there was a great dialogue over whether video could be called art, but all that was irrelevant to



Woody Vasulka's handiwork appears in still photographs of "Hybrid Hand Study."

us. We just had to go on doing what we were doing.

"Video is as passionate an expression for us as painting is for painters. I understand perfectly that for other people it's not that important. On the other hand, in the past 16 years we have observed the whole culture going bananas over video. So we weren't alone."

To support the burgeoning video culture, the Vasulkas founded The Kitchen in New York City in 1971 as an exhibition space for video artists.

Two years later they moved to Buffalo. Woody Vasulka taught at the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York at Buffalo and invested years of time and thought inventing a video tool called the Digital Image Articulator.

In 1979 they moved to Santa Fe.

"We had seen this land," said Woody Vasulka, "and all we needed after that was the opportunity to come back."

In truth, the move wasn't that simple. The Vasulkas' work is essentially an urban art form. When Woody Vasulka came to Santa Fe he "violently opposed" the idea of landscape in their work.

"I didn't think modernist thought had any place on a mesa," he said. "But what I discovered is that New Mexico is the largest stage in the world for our work. Hollywood could never build such a magnificent stage."

The video stage at the Vasulkas' home fills four rooms. There are prototype digital programmers, time code generators, mixers, keyers, scopes, synthesizers, miscellaneous computers and eight Sony television sets all in a row.

"Our work is a dialogue between the tool and the image," said Woody Vasulka.

Theirs is not state-of-the-art equipment. And the support structure for what the Vasulkas do is a modest balance of fellowship monies, lecture and consulting fees and video sales.

"There aren't many who can afford to stay in this medium," said Woody Vasulka, "but there is always a minority in America who will support experimental artistic endeavors such as ours."

"It is always a struggle, but we've always had freedom in our work," said Steina Vasulka. "When we came into video we were able to carve our own niche. And now, even if the young detest us as being old, they're too busy imitating each other to cause much concern. We're still free to roam."