

THE VASULKAS by Roy Durfee

Video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka moved to Santa Fe at the beginning of this decade seeking a new landscape. "I was interested in how one works in a non-urban culture," Woody says today. "There is something extraordinarily conservative about landscape which pits you against urban ideological fantasies. In Czechoslovakia I always believed that the city had the wisdom. After all, 'Land and Blood' was a fascist slogan! But the Southwestern landscape is so highly artificial it becomes a fantasy landscape for any European."

While Steina confesses to having acquired in her native Iceland an attitude toward the land perhaps more akin to Native American reverence, she denies that the Southwestern images she uses currently are really what her work addresses: "Woody wants to do something with images now, but I don't. I'm interested in how the camera moves and how the signal can be altered in the process. My painter friends see video as a series of pictures, but if an image stands still it is meaningless to me."

Self-equipped with what may be New Mexico's most versatile video lab, the Vasulkas continue to work on a number of projects which move the artform they pioneered in the early 70's on into the 90's. "We're still products of the 60's," says Woody. "We don't understand the term 'post-modernism.' The original job isn't done."

"The original job" inspired the Vasulkas to create The Kitchen in New York City 16 years ago as a forum for new video, film and music. It also took them to Buffalo, New York, for 6 years in the 70's where they apprenticed themselves to Woody's students at the Center for Media Study in order to master the emerging

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video technology of computers. While Woody was creating a digital computer-controlled video facility called "The Vasulka Imaging System" with the help of Jeffrey Schier and others, Steina was moving beyond a fascination with images generated electronically within the video recorder and was creating instead a series of works which used the conventional video camera to challenge conventional ways of seeing.

A joint installation of Steina's Machine Vision and Woody's Descriptions at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo during 1978 convinced them both that "the whole mystique of the art world was not really interesting to us." Moreover, even in a congenial atmosphere shared with imagemakers Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton and Tony Conrad, Woody began to detect a "crisis of ideology" in the New York environment, a realization that the infinite potential for video that they felt early in the decade was rapidly moving toward television.

Thrilled as he was with the "extraordinary opportunity to understand a code, a new language," Woody nonetheless saw the industry go its own way, neglecting "the humanist branch of development" in computer language. "'Technological'," says Steina, "is now a negative adjective applied by critics to video that doesn't work."

Seeing today's computer or machine art as "vastly trivialized," the "retired" Woody Vasulka claims to have "lost the passion for innovation" in the years since "imprinting my opinion upon students became a painful process" and he gave up teaching. Now "striving for synthesis," he no longer sees any evidence that video will be the dominant artform it has the potential of being: "The

video tool has become democratized and video art has been relegated to an undefined environment. They call it 'abstract' video, but it has always been very concrete. We have returned now to the camera."

Years spent experimenting with scan processors, dual colorizers, multikeyers, programmers, and variable clocks have not been wasted in the most recent works of Steina and Woody Vasulka. If the New Mexico landscape has contributed to a new lushness of image, those images nonetheless become malleable patterns of electrons in the hands of these videomakers.

For Steina, the process of image manipulation is akin to playing the violin, an activity she has taken up again after an extended sabbatical: "I draw very heavily upon my musical background. It was a liberation to jump into a new medium and put the violin aside for ten years, but the video camera sits on my shoulder like a violin, and I approached video like something to be practiced everyday.

"I was a minimally seeing person when I began. I had never drawn or painted, and I had to just accept images as they came. I have learned how to see."

Seeing and hearing are intimately related by today's ~~mid~~ ~~mid~~ ~~mid~~ technology, and Steina is quick to point out that even 15 years ago the first video device they bought was an audio synthesizer: "Before we did video with separate audio, we did audio directly from the video."

"We both compose now, so to speak," says Woody, "but I approached the video/audio interface from the material and the machine, not from the aesthetics. There are no audio-visual

aesthetics per se, but only the technology. Once you can modify a waveform you have a craft."

It might be said that both Vasulkas, however self-effacing they may be regarding their part in the process, have felt what Woody calls "the duty of the modernist." Both artists, while influenced by what they have described as "the architecture of the tool," have displayed a need to violate the established formal expectations of the medium.

First of all, they abandoned the camera obscura approach to filling the frame, and then they abandoned the frame itself, learning how to "take the frame away and shape it into an object," an activity described by Woody as "a formal exercise." Also in the manner of exercises were Steina's machine-powered installations which articulated both time and space in new ways and generated videotapes which challenged the accustomed act of seeing.

Cameras and reflective surfaces mounted on turntables in motion created in the 70's fully programmed performances which have now given way to the inevitable progression of video into live performance. Steina's Voice Window, a performed piece involving live interaction between the voice of Joan LaBarbara and two video machines, will be brought to its newest fruition during an August performance at The Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe. The existing work, featuring unextraordinary images of New Mexico mixed together in a non-linear fashion, is keyed by LaBarbara's voice modulating waveforms.

Voice Window is a logical extension of Steina's prior work, which has consistently challenged the notion of the frame as a rectangular portal onto the world. In this case, one image is

parted to reveal another, with the shape and size of both modulated by the waveforms of the attendant voice.

Woody, meanwhile, is perhaps halfway through a trilogy in progress, a process toward the synthesis he seeks. The Commission, completed four years ago with the assistance of the New Mexico Arts Division and the National Endowment for the Arts, was, he says, "a personal experiment larger than ever tried before, with the intention to take away drama and bring the action to the surface with electrons in action, what I call electronic narrativity."

A filmmaker long before he took up video, he sees the aesthetics of film as based on the cut and the editing of individual frames, while the aesthetics of video are to be evolved within the amorphous frame itself. Attributing his insecurity about The Commission to "the primitive means of control available, compared to music," he has nevertheless moved aggressively in-to the second work of the trilogy, Art of Memory.

Keying three tapes together into a one hour work, Vasulka is reaccessing the political events of his lifetime, from the Spanish Civil War onward, in a grandly operatic fashion combining theatrical, archive, and landscape images with the music and sounds of war and recollection. He is seeking "to shed my human responsibility for this century's violence and evil, and to understand what happened to my life. I was victimized by these events."

A look at the work in progress confirms his preference for non-linear images and flexible frames, a combination which finds him "combating the regularity of the tools, since it's difficult for computers to deal with non-linear images." The work now

evident surpasses in power and polish anything to come before from this artist, affirming the value of experiments preceding it.

With relentless curiosity about their medium and its limits, and a hands-on approach to satisfying that curiosity, the Vasulkas are models of a blue-collar approach to art. "I'm an empirical person," says Woody. "I can only understand something by taking it apart, so my work is instructed by my instruments, but not directed by them."

"A lot of video is bureaucracy; you can delegate the process. We built our own tools both out of curiosity and necessity, because an artist cannot accept what is given. Everybody can make art and, although 'masterpieces' are determined by commonality, art must be a unique affair, always antagonistic to the common thought. What is natural to me is useless; what is not natural is interesting to me."

Steina, working toward her collaboration with Joan LaBarbara in August, comments that "it is very inherent in video to be a performance medium, but nobody has solved it yet." Steps toward a solution may be taken in an ongoing series of installation projects which will take her to Japan later this year.

She sees her audience as being "like that for books or poetry: people who go look and find it." As for the evident neglect of video art by galleries and museums, she is sanguine: "There are different reasons for installations and for galleries. Galleries are for timeless art, while we create time-based art, like music in a concert hall. An installation is for people to go and sit for a period of time."

Woody's response is even more serene: "If it is interesting

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to me, surely it will be of interest to someone else. I can't address myself to an audience per se."

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