


Steina, Woody:

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vid•e•o (vid'ē ō'), n.

BY ROY DURFEE

While most of us have come to understand the word "video" as an abbreviation for "music video" or videocassette movies, for Steina and Woody Vasulka the word means a whole lot more. Even before opening The Kitchen in New York City 16 years ago as a forum for new video, film and music, the Vasulkas, who now live in Santa Fe, were involved in developing the potential of videotape as a wholly independent artistic medium.

Wholly independent, that is, from the camera obscura approach of conventional film and videomakers who see the camera or videopac as a window onto the world. Woody and Steina, world-travelling natives of Czechoslovakia and Iceland, respectively, found themselves more interested in creating their own reality than in merely recording the reality around them.

Moreover, as products of the 1960's, a period which coincided approximately with their own 20's, the Vasulkas had a notion of

MORE

vid e o, page two

future culture and social change which coincided with their own drive for computer literacy, video innovation, and the natural evolution of television into video, rather than vice versa. Fascinated by the potential to generate and alter electronic images entirely within the video camera without using the lens, the Vasulkas began a series of experiments that put them at the forefront of their art.

Perceiving himself in the midst of a renaissance, Woody, who was a practiced photographer and professional filmmaker, took up video as "a philosophical practice." Steina, a practiced and professional violinist, took up video as another discipline akin to her music. A six-year sojourn in Buffalo, New York, saw a culmination of their efforts in a joint show at Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 1978.

Steina's aesthetic had evolved through a series of machine-powered installations which used the video camera to record images created mechanically by the movement of the video camera and associated reflective surfaces. Woody's images, on the other hand, were created electronically by the modification of waveforms within a digital computer-controlled imaging system of his own conception.

Since moving to Santa Fe in 1979, the Vasulka's have led a private but active life in their "semi-improvisational" house, which doubles as a video workshop. The past two years have brought regular opportunities to see their work on display in Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Roswell as part of last year's ART/MEDIA project (Jonson Gallery, UNM; Fogelson Library, College of Santa Fe; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe) and the 1986 Invitational

MORE

vid e o, page three

Exhibition at the Roswell Museum and Art Center.

Woody's nearly narrative work, The Commission, won the Silver Reel at the New Mexico Film Festival, leading him into a new "endless" project, Art of Memory. Having explored the possibilities of camera with his photography and filmmaking, and the possibilities of electronic imaging with his digital system, Woody is now combining the two video realities, tying together images of great beauty from the New Mexico landscape electronically with images of historical lunacy and theatricality meant to provoke in Memory. Confessing to a passion for nonlinear structure in his work, Woody refers to his subtle and moving collage as "electronic narrativity

Steina, meanwhile, has extended the expressed video/music parallel into the realm of live performance. Her most recent work, Voice Window, is an interactive performance piece in conjunction with Pecos, New Mexico, vocalist/composer Joan LaBarbara. Separate views of New Mexico landscape are combined through a "window" created in the larger image by the modulated waveforms of LaBarbara's voice as seen on the video screen. The work was first performed last spring at the Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe.

While preparing for an extended residency in Japan next year, sponsored by a fellowship from the Japanese-American Friendship Society, Steina is working toward another performance at CCA. On August 28, 29 and 30, she and LaBarbara will premiere an expanded version of Voice Window INVOLVING BOTH TAPED AND LIVE ^{← lower case} video in a program featuring as well visual artist Lita Albuquerque and opera director Barbara Karp. This program will ^{surely} ~~likely~~ be one of the performance highlights of the summer.

MORE

vid e o, page four

Always active and enthusiastic, Steina and Woody Vasulka continue to work their special ways. Her fascination with pure movement yields a succession of dazzling images which she hopes to refine further with an exploration of "robotics" in Japan: "I want to develop pan-tilt-zooming that is entirely programmable." Woody, meanwhile, finds Art of Memory moving toward more musical than theatrical ends: "Increasingly I use images as elements in a larger structure. I've spent the last month scoring the insertion of curved mattes into the larger frame."

While Woody and Steina tend to be both ironic and self-effacing in person, don't miss any opportunity to see their work. It will likely put a new definition of "vid.e.o" into your personal dictionary.

END