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Woody and Steina Vasulka - the 48

5/23 Pasatiempo

By Lis Bensley

Over 30 years ago, when the visual media was still controlled by film, a technological subculture, called video, was born. Portapaks in hand, young video-ites could produce instant tapes with endless hours of information.

Woody and Steina Vasulka were early pioneers in this movement, working first out of New York City where they founded the alternative exhibition space, The Kitchen, in 1971, later in Buffalo, NY, and more recently in Santa Fe, where they now produce their extraordinary video and computer-driven imagery and installations, breathtaking as much for the imagery as for the unexpected feats into which they are able to coax these machines.

Speaking about their work, local video producer David Mather said, "The Vasulkas are really the godparents of video art. They are important because, from the beginning, their approach to video has been very distinct from other artists. They were investigating technology and only later found an audience in the art world."

A trip to the Vasulkas home and studio in Aqua Fria Village is a voyage into the internal workings of media technology. Computer fuselage lies in stacks in the backyard, machine entrails make up much of the interior. One settles into the kitchen, thankful to see one familiar machine among the Vasulka's materials - a toaster oven.

As he makes coffee, Woody bemoans the production expenses of their chosen craft. "Beethoven had only a piano, a little paper to write on and for his morning coffee, he counted out exactly 40 beans every day," he said. "Have you ever had a cup of coffee made with 40 beans. It's a pitiful cup. Nevertheless, those were his production expenses."

Financial struggles notwithstanding, one cannot imagine life for the Vasulkas without their machines. They are the 36th and 37th artists profiled in "Contemporary Art in New Mexico," by Jan Aldmann and Barbara McIntyre.

Pasatiempo: The video culture took off here in the early 1970's? Could you talk about its popularity?

Woody: Video was a kind of novelty in which you could send a personal message from person to person. It was a breakthrough in communication because of the small forms of video people had, called Portapaks.

Steina: Now it's called the camcorder.

Woody: With video, there was a profound liberation of time recording. Film was in 16 and 8mm and every minute was counted. With video you just recorded endlessly subjects that they would never look at with a film camera.

Steina: It was also this legend. It seemed we were all together, this vast subculture that was going to free the world, bring on peace and replace Walter Cronkite.

Pasatiempo: What happened to this culture?

Steina: It slowly died. I don't know why. It's still alive and well in Europe.

Pasatiempo: What's replaced it for you? Beyond the Internet.

Steina: Private, personal challenges. In my case, it's trying to outdo myself. All art has this great possibility of dialogue with oneself and inside that idea, I think video might easily be the best. For me, it's about understanding what this dialogue is because both of us, early on, understood that we are each here to dialogue with a machine.

Woody: When video met the computer at the end of the 70s, the computer stopped you dead because of its volume

of visual information. This new technology froze video into this half-baked product of the computer.

So I was intrigued by the presentation of the space that the computer had which video did not. And I saw there were a number of possibilities. I went into the construction of many media, of optical, mechanical, electronic, visual.

The computer is a good machine now to orchestrate, organize information but it is very poor in actual performing. It's only later that we have this emergent possibility that the computer will contain the whole process of presentation of possible art forms directly through their internal structure.

Pasatiempo: So your interest, Woody, lies in pursuing or developing the so-called intelligence of the machine?

Woody: That's an incorrect image because the machine has no intelligence. I'm trying to structure it with the ability of carrying some expression - visual, gestural or linguistic, for example - and how one organizes this into a pattern that resembles behavior. Which is the first step toward some kind of intelligence.

Basically, I'm interested in what is the autonomous manifestation of the saturated system that exhibits something you and I can learn from.

Pasatiempo: Steina, you come to your work with a background as a classically trained violinist. How has that impacted your imagery?

Steina: With music you get much closer to this sensuality. I studied things that have no sort of touchable value. I treat the image the same way. Music doesn't - or didn't when I was growing up - have any utilitarian function. It is just pleasure.

Also I like to present images as you cannot see them in reality, to change the reality, to reveal it differently.

Pasatiempo: What are you working on now?

Woody: I'm writing my first opera.

Steina: Usually I try to be innovative with each piece. Now I'm blatantly repeating myself and I'm taking a smug satisfaction in repeating myself.

It's still a struggle, though. It's a battlefield. It's one thing to come to an aesthetic conclusion of what you want to do. But the equipment wants to throw all this noise and grain into the pictures. So these are the struggles. And I struggle aesthetically too.

Woody: What is an aesthetic struggle?

Steina: You know. You go through this first phase where you love it. You think, God, this is so great. Then you look at the same thing again and say, what was I thinking. Why did I even like this. It's a trivial picture. So that is the aesthetic struggle.

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