

Artists' Studio Achieves Look Of Science Lab

By PETER KOBEL

SANTA FE — The studio of video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka might resemble a science laboratory more than an artist's studio, were it not for the clutter and apparent confusion more typical of the artist. The equipment is right out of a lab: cameras and monitors, sound synthesizers, image-processing computers.

In the Vasulkas' art, C.P. Snow's dichotomy of two cultures, science and the humanities, doesn't exist. For the average person, however, their studio, with all its high technology, can be vaguely intimidating.

The Vasulkas use computer microchips and video tape in their work, rather than traditional materials like canvas and paint.

"What we do is useless," Woody said. "That's why we still call it art rather than science."

The Vasulkas have lived in Santa Fe for about a year, having moved here from Buffalo, N.Y. (Steina describes that city as "Siberia.") Steina has exhibited her work in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, while Woody has kept a low profile.

Steina will conduct a series of seminars March 22 through April 5 at the Armory for the Arts.

At a recent conference on electronic media at "The Kitchen" in New York City, a media center for video, film and music founded by the Vasulkas in 1971, Steina was quoted as saying, "You're all afraid of technology." It's a surprisingly common fear. The schism of the two cultures is very real.

At their studio, Steina, pushing her short black hair back from her forehead, said, "All people are thrilled by things they don't understand, and at the same time frightened. It goes for science, or astrology, or how to make sex when we are kids. And we always go those two ways — either we denounce it because we can't master it or we find a challenge and we try to understand it."

Woody, a large man with a goatee, is anxious to "demythify" technology. He described his role in an interview in "Afterimage" in mock-heroic terms.

"I would say that the first thing I realized when I tried to analyze why I was interested in technology was that I felt this primitive need to analyze its secrets....I wanted to be a person who takes the fire from the gods and brings it down to the common level....I want to transform computer science into a commonly utilized, or art-utilized, or people utilized material."

Woody is, however, dead serious about his mission. He takes obvious pleasure in explaining how things work. "I'm a blue-collar artist," he said.

During this interview, for instance, their camera was pointed out the floor-to-ceiling window of their studio at a field of pinon pines. On the television screen, though, was a mosaic of green rectangles. The picture was spinning into itself like a maelstrom, but leaving a center rectangle stable, about half the size of the screen.

As the fans of the computer whirred softly in the background, Woody explained that the picture was digitized, a process which works much like television. The image coming through the camera was being scanned in the horizontal lines by a computer moving left to right. Then the scene was divided up into a grid of points of different intensities of brightness and color, and the points were then lumped into rectangles. The same technique is used by computer graphics artists to make maps showing things like population densities and annual rainfall.

Here, a typical Santa Fe scene was turned into pure geo-

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metric abstraction. Of course, a camera is not necessary to create an image; one can be produced by computer programming alone.

Is there some chance of the feeling being lost or something essential being left out in computer-generated art? Woody shakes his head, holding up his hands as if to say, "Stop."

"No, you see, emotion has little to do with the creative, interpretive mode. I happen to adore all cold art because I'm Slavic. All my ancestry is full of soul and heart. They get all sentimental and then cry."

Steina interjected, "The people over there regularly go to concerts and cry their eyes out. They listen to a Beethoven symphony and cry."

To understand how the Vasulkas became interested in high-technology art, one has to go back to their origins. Steina, an Anglo-Saxon born and raised in Iceland, studied the violin there and later in Czechoslovakia, where she met Woody. She was a member of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra for a while. In 1965, the Vasulkas came to America.

"I became a free-lance musician in New York City, and I knew by then I didn't want to do that. It dawned on me that I was making music only for the money, and that wasn't right, because music should be done for the passion and the fun."

In 1969, Steina became fascinated by the possibilities of video. "When I first picked up a camera, it just felt right. I have loved it ever since," she said, smiling.

Woody was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. In the Vasulkas' catalog, he describes himself in the third person: "Experiences the end of the war in the suburbs of Brno across from a military airfield. Soon after, collects sizable number of electro-mechanical parts of war machines. Performs extensive autopsy on them."

"I guess the war was an overwhelming experience," he said. "Europe was a junkyard, where we would find great dumps full of war equipment. We could go through them and see the whole anthropology of war."

Woody attended the Academy of Performing Arts, Faculty of Film and Television in Prague. He studied under Milan Kundera, author of the recent novel "The Book of Laughter and Forgetting" and one of the fathers of the Czech new wave cinema.

In New York, the Vasulkas bought a portapack, an audio synthesizer and three TV monitors, which they set up in a



Journal Photo

Woody and Steina Vasulka Relax in Their Lab-Like Artist Studio

row. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, they filmed rock concerts at the Fillmore East — concerts featuring groups such as the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Ten Years After. They worked with the people at Andy Warhol's Factory. Woody likes to call the whole scene "The new American decadence."

Video equipment was just becoming affordable, and the new art form was influenced by the social, political and artistic convulsions of the time.

Much of the early video work was explicitly political, and many artists saw video as a "tool for social change." But Steina said, "We were never really radicals, because we're outsiders in this culture. Woody comes from behind the Iron Curtain. Being radical changes totally — what's radical here and what's radical there."

"What is radical, anyway?" Woody asked. "Over there, I'm an 'empty bourgeois formalist.'"

The Vasulkas' work is tremendously varied. It has a tentative quality about it. They regard themselves as explorers or discoverers. Often, they will program a work and be completely surprised by the final product.

The Vasulkas buy their equipment at surplus sales in Los Alamos, Albuquerque and Phoenix. Although they probably could gain access to more advanced technology, they insist on their freedom as non-institutional artists, even if they have to make certain sacrifices.

Woody said that he buys equipment before even knowing how to use it. Only by experimenting with it does he gradually come to understand the potential. Once he understands it, he moves onto something else.

Peter Kobel is a Santa Fe writer.