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Vasulkas: See Not Say

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By Anthony Bannon

Woody and Steina Vasulka, video artists, often speak grandly, using words such as “integrated” and “omnipresent” accompanied by large gestures describing their intention: “To explore the whole spectrum of the electronic image.” The electronic image means television, except in their case the abbreviation TV is transposed to VT, short for videotape. The word video has come to describe a personal, artful use of the medium, while television is generally used to describe commercial, broadcast use.

A visit to the Vasulkas Franklin St. loft discloses an open spaced floor in a downtown building where cables hang from the walls in place of paintings and decks of circuiting and monitors are stacked in place of furniture. The sight suggests just such an integration of work and life and the omnipresence of one in the other. Founders in 1971 of the Mercer Arts Center Video Kitchen in New York, the Vasulkas came to Buffalo last year to join the growing work force at State University of Buffalo's Center for Media Study and the private Media Study workshop at 3323 Bailey Ave. “We don't work every day, but everyday we live with the equipment,” said Woody Vasulka. “We may just sit around and find something together while testing the equipment, trying things out. Most of the time we spend learning. We now have three different kinds of new equipment, and you could say it is like learning a new skill or a new instrument.” For example, learning digital computer language to “translate your wish into numbers and finally into an image.”

Is there a division between technology and art?

Steina Vasulka: Art has never lived a day without technology. From the person who used a tool to chip away at a rock, or the person who used oils to make a painting or the musician and his instrument - all have used technology. And now, in this century, we use the technology of this century. And art will always make use of the technology of its time. This craving to use technology to make art has always been there.”

The art in video is “the life form of it,” explained Woody Vasulka. “We used to sit around and watch feedback and it was absolutely alive. It was developing in front of your eyes. It had a quality like fire or other natural events - a cyclical involvement.”

Steina Vasulka interrupts, “...with a man-made device that was the most organic. We could let it exist on its own after interacting with it minimally!” He continued: “Television also can produce an image on its own, by accidentally pointing the camera into a monitor, which displays the image the camera is shooting.”

Such a situation is called feedback. The picture is a kind of visual squeal, a parallel to what one hears in sound feedback. “In our case,” he said, “an accident became a rule. We found meaning in the accident and capitalized on it by disclosing it.”

Steina Vasulka: The drama of video is what one can do with such a feedback image: bend it, wave it, break it, make it transparent, mix it with another image, assign different colors to different parts.

Woody Vasulka: We discovered a different source of art material and we do with it what others do with other materials: process it, alter it, transfer, transmit, whatever.

A description of the outcome of their work is difficult. Let them describe it:

“We may work with real images and make them less real or surreal by changing them. Or with totally synthetic images and make them real or make them remind you of something,” offered Steina. “I don't agree. That's just

words, surreal-real,” argued Woody. “We are interested in image planes. We are interested in the behavior of patterns and we use purely abstracted images without resemblance to reality. We are interested in movement and take a trivial, trivial image and let it appear and disappear to focus on the control of movement. But even that is not true, not pure,” he insisted, questioning the efficaciousness of describing with words a non-verbal event.

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