



Video artist Woody Vasulka and the four-screen video installation at Dartmouth, called *The West*.

Valley News — Tom Wolfe

Video Impressions: Vasulkas' Work Isn't Usual TV Screen Fare

By VICTORIA LUBIN
Valley News Correspondent

Is it an art?" asked video artist Woody Vasulka rhetorically. Vasulka and his wife Steina have been leaders in the field of electronic art for 15 years.

Vasulka threw himself back in his chair at the Hopkins Center snack bar, where he had just finished a cup of coffee. He still held the empty white styrofoam cup, which looked small in his hands.

"We decided, if they would accept it, then we'd just do it," he said with characteristic bluntness. The debate on the subject became mute for them because they received so many offers to buy their video art tapes.

Vasulka and his wife have been artists-in-residence in the Department of Film Studies at Dartmouth College this fall. They split the job, Steina taking the first half of the semester and Woody the second half.

Vasulka, who is a likely recruit for Santa Claus, except that his goatee would need growing and whitening, speaks intensely about his art, as if he never stops living it or thinking about it. His conversation, like some of his tapes, is not dramatic.

Vasulka concluded, on the issue of the value of video art, that it is the computer art, the art created by numbers, that will really stir up the question of artistic merit that haunts so much of 20th century art. Video art, at least, has a heritage in filmmaking, he said, that machine-generated art does not.

The ever-experimental Vasulka plans to turn his attention to computer art in the future.

The Vasulka's video art has little to do with the videotapes that most of us know, the tape in Purity Supreme supermarket of a woman demonstrating how to cook kale, for example.

Some people have had an opportunity to see their work at Hopkins Center, where an installation done in 1983, *The West*, has been on view in the Rotunda.

The equipment needed to create this installation, for which Steina did the visual taping and Woody the audio aspect, includes two video tape recorders (VTRs), synchronizing devices, and four television monitors. The work was originally designed for 10 to 30 monitors.

The West includes two 30-minute tapes, each of which is shown on two of the monitors. The tapes are shown

simultaneously and are accompanied by eerie music that resembles wind passing through a large, vacant building.

The tapes show many aspects of the American Western landscape, including both natural and man-made elements — buildings such as a large kiva, which is a round, underground structure made by the Indians; ancient pueblos, and scientific equipment such as the Very Large Array, a radio-telescope system located in New Mexico, where the Vasulkas live.

The Very Large Array, which turns slowly to scan the sky, resembles the process that the Vasulkas use to make their tapes. Video cameras are mounted to a turntable that slowly rotates. Sometimes a spherical mirror is used in the process and the landscape is taped as it appears reflected by the sphere.

Colors are saturated, heightened and distorted in these tapes, although the naturalistic reference is never completely lost, and usually a blue sky looks blue.

The program begins with a series of images that indicate the synchronization process between the two tapes. After the tapes are synchronized, scenes drift in and out of the picture. The tapes end abruptly and the television monitors become gray as the tapes rewind.

The effect of *The West* is hypnotic, mesmerizing in the way that many describe the effects of popular television. Errie sounds and the slow, steady pace of the camera surveying the surrounding scene, contribute to the effect. "It gets you into another state," said Woody.

If the visual and audio components of this installation alter your state of mind, a reading of the script for *The West* will make you realize just how baffling the world of video art is. It's a whole new vocabulary.

For example, the script describes the "concept" of *The West* as: "Layers of multi-directionally scanned images of landscapes and artifacts of a landscape are presented through an enclosed circular environment of monitors suspended from a ceiling. A four corner speaker system delivers low frequency sound textures."

"Installation" and "Concept" are only some of the words in the world of video art. Just scraping the surface, Vasulka offered a short vocabulary lesson.

Colorizing — an electronic process in which you change certain frequencies to

produce changes in the colors.

Drifting (of images) — "You take one timing structure and you overlay it with another timing structure."

Electronic Collaging — the combination of electronic images from several tapes, all fused onto one tape, creating layers of images.

Video feedback — you point the camera into the monitor. Vasulka likened the effect to the sound of plugging a microphone into an amplifier.

Image processed — the term describes images that have been electronically processed so that the color, texture, or shape of the subject is altered.

Vasulka described image processed videotapes as one of four genres of video art. The others are narrative video, installation, and music-television.

If the vocabulary seems baffling, the theme or purpose that has emerged in the Vasulkas' work is more obvious. The themes differ in their work. Steina's interest is summed up in the phrase "machine vision," which was the title of a major exhibit she and Woody had in 1978 at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo.

It "signifies the awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. The act of seeing, the image source, and the kinetic resources come from the installation itself, choreographed and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanical performance," said Steina. She goes on to liken her work to "a surveillance of space."

Woody describes Steina's interest as to show "landscape and how it is perceived by optical mechanical devices. . . . The world as seen by machines, not human vision."

Showing a machine's perception of the world is a way of humanizing the machine, and making it less intimidating.

Woody Vasulka's preoccupation is the process of taping. "Most of my work deals with the process itself, observing the controls," he said. Some of his work is dramatic, with a narrative or development, and some of it is non-dramatic. Some is figurative and some is non-figurative.

As he talked he reached for the empty coffee cup and a salt shaker in front of him. Holding them in his hands, and then arranging them as if they were chess pieces, he suggested that he could make a tape of the two objects. The tape would explore electronic means of recording them. "The process is the content of this work. . . . I could make

a tape of two sheep feeding on the bottom of the ocean."

For Vasulka, "reality is a mere reference." A typical tape of his "would be mostly non-dramatic but it would create its own tension, because the object is out of its normal context."

"Now I'm looking into how images are formed, images organized by computers," he concluded.

Vasulka has been called a "didactic" video artist because of his concern with the process itself, with "trying to explain or define the craft of video."

The Vasulkas' dedication to video is one reason they established The Kitchen in 1971. Now a center for contemporary music, video, dance and performance art in New York City. The Kitchen was originally dedicated to the electronic arts during the two years that the Vasulkas directed it.

The Kitchen was first located in a real kitchen in the Central Hotel on Broadway. The entire building collapsed, although their "electronic arts action center," as Steina calls it, had been moved two months before.

The Vasulkas occasionally teach in order to make ends meet but, he said, "We try to live off what we do instead of what we teach."

They show their work at media centers, museums, festivals, and through small distributors. "Video has its own small network," he said. Television has little use for video art. "The genre is not for mass audience."

Both Woody and Steina came to video art from other, more traditional art forms. She was a professional violinist and he was a filmmaker. "For both of us, this idea of being electronic was the most exciting part of it," he said.

Steina was born in Iceland in 1940. She studied classical violin at the Music Conservatory in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where she met and married Woody. Subsequently she took a job with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra.

In 1965 they moved to the United States. She became a free-lance musician and, gradually losing enthusiasm, turned to video.

Woody was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. After studying metal technology and hydraulic mechanics, he began writing poetry and playing the trumpet. He was in the military, wrote short stories and non-fiction, and studied photography before turning to film. He experimented with electronic sound and stroboscopic lights and then turned to video.