

Stephen Rife

Video History & Critique

Lisa Steele

The Vasulka's pioneering work in the video art and performance scene has long been revered by both experimental artists and the critical establishment. Combining their efforts through legal matrimony and a less easily defined collaboration in art, their skills and vision <sup>are</sup> ~~were~~ complimentary, enriching their individual as well as collaborative work under the aegis of "marriage." Short of an unlikely secret life of domestic abuse, theirs has been a worthwhile pairing, certainly in public terms. Without their aesthetic contribution to electronic and video art, the work of other video luminaries such as Bill Viola and Nam June Paik would likely be quite different. In addition to their past influence, they continue, as a couple, to command a presence in the international arts scene: Steina with her geologically-themed video installations and Woody with his involvement in large-scale electronic projects like the ARS Electronica five years ago.

In the summer of '91, the Vasulkas were asked to curate and design an exhibition, aptly titled, "Pioneers of Electronic Art," to take place in Linz, Austria the following year. Peter Weibel, principle organizer for the ARS, requested they track down early synthesizers, video feedback machines, and all manner of original electronic art components from the 60's and 70's for inclusion in the exhibit. No small task, it is testament to their knack for innovation and inspiring audience participation that they chose a system of bar codes, complete with light pens, to facilitate an interactive survey of the early history of electronic art, represented with digital stills, video clips, music, text, and original machinery (the acquisition of which was a feat in itself). The catalog for the exhibit included bar coding throughout, with corresponding vignettes on laserdisc at separate stations in the museum. Woody Vasulka's playful instructions in the catalogue's intro read: "The light pen tool itself is clumsy, hard to hold for long without getting a severe pain in your wrist. You are to drag it over the barcode in the proper time intervals and speed, in the rhythm of the tango or the carrioca."

Before meeting in Prague in the early 1960s, Steina Bjarnadottir and Bohuslav Vasulka were scarcely on similar paths. Steina had studied music in Reykjavik, excelling at the violin and later joining the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Bohuslav focused on metal technology and hydraulic mechanics for his formal education. Soon after their marriage in 1964, the Vasulka's moved to Manhattan and made a living in free-lance music and film work. By 1971, their passion for the arts, combined with the need for a larger work/performance space, led to their opening of The Kitchen with Andreas Mannik. The Kitchen quickly became one of the most active free-form galleries in New York, hosting innumerable screenings of early experimental video and providing a grass-roots electronic arts center for an arts community, and an art form, still in its initial stages. Apart from the memories of those who participated in that time and place, the ghost-image of video documents and the ghost-image of influence are all we have to suggest The Kitchen as it was from '71-'74, when the Vasulka's resided there. A 30 minute video from that period, titled, *Participation*, documents several performances involving dance, music (Soul), and drama, arranged in a seemingly arbitrary fashion and reflecting a sense of folksy 60's communalism that the Vasulka's no doubt shared. The video also satisfies a popular perception of that era as a time of increasing empowerment for blacks, gays, and drag queens. In viewing *Participation*, one gets the sense of having discovered fragments of an epic, an urban epic, miraculously preserved by a black & white Vidicon tube camera to tell an incomplete but compelling story of a civilization in its formative years.

The Vasulka's collaboration, the fact that they worked together much of the time, figures chiefly in the overall quality of their video work: It's vitality, it's techno-intensive aesthetic, it's pure dynamism. Woody's background in optical printing and film editing brought an advanced visual sensibility to his experiments with abstract video imaging, particularly with raster manipulation <sup>(in a way)</sup> ~~of~~ effect achieved by altering the monitor's ability to generate solid lines), while Steina's training and natural talent for the aural provided a necessary technical, and musical, element to the couple's holistic approach to the medium of video. The Vasulka's extensive use of sound as a means of image generation is a reflection of this. They also reversed the process, using the video signal to generate sound, allowing for interactivity between the a/v components themselves and creating work which was, to a great extent, unpredictable and self-generating. Steina explained: "Our work is a dialogue

between the tool and the image, so we would not preconceive an image, separately make a conscious model of it, and then try to match it, as other people do. We would rather make a tool and dialogue with it; that's how we belong with the family of people who would find images like found objects..."

This use of found image and sound through experimentation with video and audio technology was not unique to the Vasulka's, as the exhibit they curated for The ARS showed, but their focus on the technology of electronic sound and image production, over political or aesthetic concerns, gave their work an abstract industrial feel that set them apart from their peers and sometimes made their work less aesthetically appealing than that of single-channel video artists of the era. It almost seems an act of conscious defiance of video art standards that they chose horizontal, rather than vertical movement of images in their multi-screen installations.

One such installation, the first formally exhibited in a gallery space, is the Vasulka's *Matrix I* (1970-72). By modifying a video keyer to combine source material and transport layered images in wave-like sequences across the face of the video wall, they created a scintillating video dream machine which fed and contributed to its own sounds and imagery through a then sophisticated system of random electronic signals. Employing 20 video monitors and screening a compilation of two years of video experiments in multiple layers, *Matrix I* serves as a concrete expression of the Vasulka's collaboration, demonstrating the natural occurrence of gentle mutation- or, if you like, "dialogue"- that is the hallmark of any partnership, technological or corporeal.

### Two Person Exhibitions (formal)

*Steina and Woody Vasulka: The West.* New York: Fine Arts Center Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1987

*Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media.* San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, 1996

### Group Exhibitions

*American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove.* Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1988

*Traversals: Instructions to the Double.* Long Beach Museum of Art, 1990.

*Eigenwelt der Apparate-Welt: Pioneers of Electronic Art.* Linz: Ars Electronica, 1992

*Critical Mass.* Santa Fe: Museum of Fine Arts, 1993

### Photos

**Cover:** *Vasulkas w/portapack equipment.* San Francisco, 1972 (Warner Jepson)

**Series:** Top- *The Vasulkas outside their home.* Santa Fe, NM, 1991 (Christophe Nebel)

Middle- *Scrap acquired from the now defunct Los Alamos Lab site.* “

Bottom- *A recent project of Woody's; a robotic camera/mic.* “

### Sources

*Mediascape (catalogue).* Guggenheim Museum Publications, NY, and ZKM/Center for Art and Media,

Karlsruhe, 1996

*Eigenwelt der Apparatewelt Pioniere der Elektronischen Kunst (catalogue).* Oberosterreichisches Landmuseum,

Linz, 1992