



A still from Steina Vasulka's 'Machine Visions'
Is it art?

Video Art:

Technology and perception, the machine-made world

by Michele Cohen

Six television screens simultaneously project disc-like images. They move in hypnotic, throbbing impulses accompanied by an electronic beat. The piece, a video installation, is entitled *Machine Visions*.

Currently the Albright-Knox is hosting the work of Steina and Woody Vasulkas, internationally renowned video artists. The husband and wife team are exhibiting *Steina: Machine Vision* and *Woody: Descriptions*.

This presentation raises a number of questions for both critics and laymen. What is it? Is it art?

Video works on the same

principle as television but emphasizes the process rather than the product. It can be seen as the most recent development in the progression of theater to film to television. Video is television artistically transformed. The Vasulkas and similar artists are beginning to realize and maximize the qualities unique to video which distinguish it from its film predecessor.

Video flows. It is not a series of separate instants which can be spliced and taped together. The video artist sees his or her work completed at the time of shooting. The combined efforts of the Vasulkas demonstrate a number of video properties. This varied approach enables the

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Vasulkas

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unknownledgeable person to understand the medium more fully.

You're the subject

In *Machine Visions* Steina experiments with the effect of image repetition and juxtaposition on many screens. Two basic shapes comprise the piece: a disc resembling a machine part is set against a black and white striped background. Sometimes the disc streams in arches, sometimes it darts sporadically.

In this case video accomplishes what a painting could not. Movement is essential in creating an impact. The changing shapes attract attention and the undercurrent of rhythmic sound create an atmosphere. Technology presents the subject of technology.

Another room is devoted to a group of video cameras and mirrors. As one looks at the equipment it becomes apparent that you are the subject. The viewer walks around the room and is video-taped at different angles. It's amusing to see oneself inverted or sideways. The use of twentieth century science to baffle and entertain is similar to the use of illusion in Mannerist ceiling paintings during the sixteenth century which evoke a carnival aura. Both device intrigue

and engage the spectator.

Out of space

In *Descriptions*, additional concepts and techniques are explored, using electronic imagery or video to achieve a totally new perception of an object.

Woody Vasulka is interested in capturing the image as it is translated into wave lengths, stopping the process before completion. This results in increasing distortion as the subject is taped. It's almost as if video can reveal a new reality. Woody also conceptualizes wavelengths into drawings. This is an underlying principle in electronic imaging. He calls this representative group "Energy Image Projections."

A third part of *Descriptions* focuses on a single screen. Lines melt and fold into three dimensional shapes — sculpture evolving out of space. The installation brings to mind the child's toy, "Etch a Sketch." The linear patterns are magically transformed into more complex forms. The shapes possess clarity and symmetry, almost like a Classicist interpretation of video.

Is it art?

In considering the artistic merits of *Machine Vision* and *Description*, a definition of art would be helpful, or more specifically, of fine art. Video is presented in galleries and museums, places traditionally

associated with fine art. Is video part of that tradition?

Video could easily be aired on people's private television sets as a broadcast of creative programming. I see its presence in museums as a way of exposing people to it and not as its final resting place.

The Vasulkas could be regarded as participants in a new movement towards realism. They are expressing themselves in the most contemporary method possible. But being contemporary and original is not enough justification for being accepted as art. This exhibit left me with a cold, stark feeling. A machine, even if designed by the human hand and mind, is not a replacement for paint on a canvas or clay shaped into form. Watching video seems to move one further from the human creative process while providing an impact made possible by its technology.

Art *should* have an impact and in that way, the Vasulkas are more successful in conveying a message than Pollack or other Abstract Expressionists. However, I wonder about the implications of their work and video art in general. Nam June Paik, a pioneer in the field, views electronic imaging as a way to "humanize technology." I ask if it is dehumanization of art.