Artists in the late 1960s picked up the electronic tools of television and with them began creating works in the new medium called video. Much of the early video activity centered in New York City, where a community of video artists emerged, and Woody and Steina Vasulka were prime movers within that community. Woody, a film maker from Czechoslovakia with a background in engineering, and his wife, Steina, a concert violinist in her native Iceland, had emigrated to the U.S. in 1965. A few years later, they discovered video and began the experimentation that eventually led them to a synthesis of their individual interests and talents in music and moving images. Starting with a hand-held camera and an audio synthesizer, they learned to generate images with sound frequencies, and conversely to use images to generate sounds. Their fascination with the creative potential of electronic tools has expanded to include computers, which they use to generate both camera-less images and images recorded by computer-controlled cameras.

Steina and Woody have been awarded numerous prizes and grants including several Guggenheim fellowships for video between 1976 and 1980. In 1971 they established The Kitchen, a free-form gallery and electronic arts performance center in SoHo. They lived in Buffalo, N.Y., for a number of years before moving to Santa Fe in 1980. Steina's piece, Machine Vision IV, received a first prize at last year's Armory for the Arts open awards show. She has offered the prize, a 1982 show to be co-sponsored by the Armory and the Fine Arts Museum, to a number of video artists from around the country who will exhibit their video tapes as part of a group show. The Vasulcas, who frequently travel about, lecturing and jurying competitions, are dedicated ambassadors of the still fledgling video medium. They are also dedicated artists whose newest work is an application of the traditional dramatic form of opera to their skills at generating images and sounds electronically.

The Vasulcas were interviewed for ARTlines by MaLin Wilson and Jackie Melega.

AL: To start off, would you give us a short history of TheKitchen?
SV First we had the space, and because we had the space, all those things could start happening. It was a blank canvas space...

AL: Others would say otherwise—a rat hole.
SV That's what it was, totally gutted. But it had this feeling! We cleaned it up, and asked everybody we knew to come and do something there, and we filled up the schedule that way. That's what we need in Santa Fe—a space with the rent paid. The income from the gate is enough to run the rest of it.

AL: We started out with the general policy that we would present electronic arts there—music, video—because there was no place to show these things. But people eventually found everything experimental there. When we started, we had jobs to pay the rent. When we left it was a $40,000 operation. Now, it's $250,000—an institution. But there was a difference between the old Kitchen, which literally and symbolically collapsed—the building actually collapsed, killing two people. But just before that, The Kitchen had been transplanted into another location and changed hands and become more established.

AL: It's become a myth.
SV Yes, but that was due to the particular vacuum that existed. There was nothing else. So it became...it took life on its own. We gave it an openness. It doesn't have that anymore.

AL: That's the way to run this kind of place. Let anybody who wants to take it over, and just let people keep taking it over. People know what to do with a space, instinctively.

SV: We got so involved that Woody decided, very reluctantly, that he had to quit work. There was no way he could be bogged down with some stupid job when all this was going on.

AL: How did you learn to use all this sophisticated equipment? What do you go to school to learn about computers?
SV No, I could never learn that way. They teach you how to do payrolls, that sort of thing. The only way to learn how to use one is to buy it.

SV: You buy one, you read the manual and get to know it. After a long time, you're very intimidated by this powerful thing in your living room. We would get into the studio and make it conversant. They would say things like, "Oh, you need a bootstrap." They would try to find someone else to tell us what a bootstrap was and where we could buy one, and it was extremely hard to learn everything the hard way.

AL: Artists such as yourselves have been using video for more than 15 years, but it's still a very esoteric medium.

SV: We should demythify it. We must regard it in the context of the other arts. In other art forms artists admit to playing with the material. Inspiration is a direct route to non-intellectual working, playing with hand or whatever. These are notations—manuscripts for the making of art. But when our kind lapsed into playing with ideas, people begin to differentiate, as if this crap, computer-video-electronics, should be differentiated, as if this crap, computer-video-electronics, should be placed in the category of...should regard it in the context of the other arts. We should regard it in the context of the other arts. It became a mutually complementary inspiration. That taught us...
the most dramatic lessons about the material: what it is, how you move it around, change it. It's very close to what a sculptor would do with other materials, with clay. Instead of using our hands to mold the image, we use time and energy to manipulate it.

AL And in working with computers, you organise the effect of time and energy with the computer program?

WV Yes. Any work through a computer will demand writing a program first. In our case, the program is intended to work with or on the image. Putting an image through a program is where the magic happens. It is here where the medium—-all this hardware—becomes bearable, teaching and inspirational. It is also here where it connects to the world of art. It sorts the realities, it summarises the styles. Some programs are very cubistic, some remind one of...

SV Seurat...

AL Steina, you've said that your work is very different from Woody's, even though they seem to be almost indistinguishable, putting images through them, and find out the meaning of the two—image and artifact.

AL Steina, you said that your work is very different from Woody's, and his from yours. How would you characterize the differences?

SV The first two years our work was virtually indistinguishable, and sometimes we don't know anymore who did what on those old tapes. The way we worked either of us would take over some process that was already set up by the other. We were kind of observing the phenomena in those years, so the only authorship we would take would have to control it. I do processing on a lot of Steina's tapes. I am not in the least bit interested in gathering images. You see, that reminds me of my film background. I'm interested in the conceptual part, the pictorial part is kind of arbitrary to me. But it evens out. I make programs that she shames me.

SV I shamelessly rip them off, and his sounds too, because he makes good sounds.

WV It is a very strong thing. I think: when you study the work, some of it is ambiguous enough to have been produced by either of us, but some is extremely specific—like Steina's optical work. She tends to work with reality as I tend to get away from it. But then she uses it in a way that is similar to conceptual work. It is very abrasive, so I can accept it. I can like her work.

SV Woody's work is always slightly more didactic. He likes to put it into a context of some kind of. I mean... WY I like primitive magic, essentially. Like a hand, and what happens around it. Basically a hand is very unambiguous. I like to work with that kind of magic, and put images into the context of some thing absolutely abnormal.

AL You've mentioned that you're working on a new project, an electronic opera, tentatively entitled Paganini. Why opera? Will it have any traditional structure?

WV What I'm interested in with Paganini is making a transformation from one reality to another, from a photographic, filmic sort of reality, to an electronic reality. I don't want to be too specific about it, because it all may change. But it will be scripted, pre-planned—the first time we've worked this way. We'll build a set, and use some live actors, which is also a first for us. There will be some straight spoken text, some straight music, and in some other places the human voice and real images will be used as models—they'll be synthesized. I don't think of it as a musical opera, but rather as a sound opera.

AL Where did the idea come from?

SV A story about Hector Berlioz kind of triggered it. Berlioz was a music critic for a newspaper, because he couldn't make a living as a composer. His editor talked to Paganini, and got him to go on stage before a performance and announce that he was commissioning Berlioz to write a piece for him. Which Berlioz did, but Paganini rejected it, saying it was awful or something. And so we got interested in Paganini, how pitiful looking he was, how people laughed at him with his extremely long arms and ugly face, laughed until he started to play. He was the first real superstar, the first real mix of classical and popular performer. But there was something of the devil about him, too.

SV So Paganini is about him. It's also about art politics, about the right and left hemispheres of the brain, about landscapes. And it's about technology.

AL Who are the actors?

WV Ernest Guevara, certainly, who himself is a video artist. He walked into our studio one day with a video tape—'he'd done'—called Esquites Corpse, by the way—and he looked so much like Paganini.

AL Steina, are you doing the synthesizer music?

SV No, that's a natural for Woody. I was so trained in traditional music that I wasn't free. WY I have a secret background in composition, but I have no preconditions about it or hang-ups.
we call real time. A film person would regard real time as film or tape that has not been edited. But for us, the notion of real time is the actual continuity of time within an electronic system, a computer, that ensures that the time of the recording process, the filming, will be virtually the same as the final product. The manipulation of the image—the process that with film includes the developing of the film, any other processing—with video is almost instantaneous. But if you involve the computer, the picture must be disassembled and assembled again, point by point, number by number, and this can take a much longer time than necessary to represent a moving image. So we say if a system cannot process or originate pictures as continuously moving, we lose real time. When we lose the illusion of continuous movement, we lose real time.

AL It’s the most important thing, because I don’t have the skill, the interest, or the attitude to work with a frozen frame, to work with anything except a moving, real time image. That is number one. I would sacrifice any kind of image resolution, any kind of perfect image, rather than sacrifice real time.

SV Are we edging up here on philosophy. Does the functioning process of your equipment alter or relate to your personal life perception?

SV It is very referential. Like every other medium you learn so much about yourself. But the computer is different because it is even more involved in giving you an idea of who you are. It is a philosophy in itself that a signal is either there, or it is not there. The opposite of good is not good. What is important is the absence and presence of things, and not the contrast of one thing with another.

WV There is another thing that the computer gives you. It is not the medium, it is not the hardware, but something in between called the code. You have to master the code. Out of the computer comes this majestic flow of time that brings these waveforms of the analog world. We chop these waveforms into little pieces, and each piece then is reduced, so to speak, into a number, and that number then propagates inside of the computer as a representation of reality. It represents certain reality that is translated from the code to certain values—light, color—and once it is in the computer it is in the form of a code. The code is this intermediary between you and the world.

SV It’s the code that brings us pictures from Jupiter.

WV Yes, and that introduction of code into our processes I find very significant. Many people would not want to bother with it because they think it is not the creative part of the process. We have discovered otherwise. The code should be controlled and finally specified by creative people, artists.

AL Some artists are very affected by place. Others feel they produce the same work whether they’re living in New York or Santa Fe...

WV I could be anywhere. The reality of my struggle is that machine and the pictures that come out. The rest—the trees, the hills—are very beautiful and if I can go out for two or three minutes, I get refreshed. But the work is unrelated.

SV We would need a larger space, which maybe we could find in Taos, but Woody you say you want to be here in Santa Fe! Yet you say the outside is just decorative (laughter)

WV It’s beautiful, but the uninterrupted volume of time we get here is what’s important.

AL There’s been some talk about establishing a low-power television station in Santa Fe. Is that going to happen? How’s that going to effect your time?

SV I’ll do whatever I can to make it happen, but I don’t have the time to actually do it. It’s an incredible challenge to set up a low-power station and make it a total cultural station, run it like The Voice, where anyone can schedule a time and isn’t asked what he or she is going to do. Let it go out, let it fail when it must.

AL How much has been done?

SV The engineering study is done, the application has been submitted to the FCC, and we’ve put out feelers for funding. If we’re on the air a year from now, I would consider that a miracle. But it’s possible.

AL Are either of you concerned about the proposed cuts in federal arts spending? To a large extent you’ve been funded by grants, haven’t you?

WV Yes. Our work may have to change, somehow become more product-oriented. It is a strange lifestyle, and something of a mystery to me that we’ve been able to live this way: our hours are our own, no obligations, commissioned by something. By what? Survival has always been a team effort. I certainly couldn’t have gone this far alone.

SV Video couples do better. They can share equipment.

WV I must confess that the most free support I ever got was from the government. In teaching there was always a payoff, and the direct work for business was always the least honest.

SV It’s interesting to think how art flourishes where the money is. We saw it in New York, where the New York State Arts Council was so active and really radical in its funding. The money came there, and the creativity exploded. It’s probably the same thing that happened with the Medicis.

WV We’re basically interested only in supported art, rather than art that makes it commercially. I’m interested in imperfections, ambiguous products, the dying, the weak. For me, the strong, established things eventually become oppressive and boring.

AL Who benefits from your work?

SV I ask myself that every day. I don’t know.

WV Not many people seek what we do, except for our own colleagues. In the future, however, our work will inevitably be relevant. Perhaps even popular.

AL So, in that way, the federal and state funding agencies can be very tyrannical.

WV Yes. The early funding of video, in the’60s, was done with the idea that art could cause social change. Video looked like it could be in the hands of the people. It was very seductive in that way, and politicians wanted to be on the side of the people, so they backed video. That evaporated in the’70s. But there’s still a tradition in this country of supporting experimental work. That’s the way the system works.