Camera Eye: The Vasulkas
Artists who explore the camera instead of the world.

Robert A. Haller

Most people approach video like films: Cameras—film or video—are windows on the world. Steina and Woody Vasulka took this traditional stance when they began taping arts performances in New York lofts and clubs in the mid-sixties. But soon their frame of reference changed. They became more interested in how the camera worked than in what was in front of it. They covered the lens and constructed images, playing with pixels (the smallest unit of a video image), altering raster lines (the 525 lines that form the image on the screen), making pictures from inside instead of outside the camera.

"Ordinarily the camera view is associated with a human point of view, paying attention to the human conditions around," Steina Vasulka explains. Tall, dark-haired, in her early forties, Steina dresses casually in blue jeans and warm sweaters from her native Iceland. She is anything but casual about her work.

"In this series [her "Machine Vision" project]," she continues in her peculiar brand of technospeak, "the camera conforms to a mechanized decision making of instruments, with the movements and attention directed toward their own machine-to-machine observations."

Steina and her husband Woody create a form of television totally unlike what "television" usually means. The Vasulkas see with their equipment instead of
The Vasulkas with their machines.
is based partly on a work from another medium, René Magritte's painting "Golden Legend." The Belgian surrealist had long fascinated Steina and Woody. "Magritte's work anticipated the possibilities of many electronic-imaging concepts," Steina says. *Golden Voyage*'s weightless loaves of bread drifting through the space beyond the window frame recall Magritte's locomotive emerging from a fireplace, downpour of bowler-hatted gentlemen, and boulder serenely floating above the ocean.

*Golden Voyage* begins as an homage to Magritte, but it rapidly becomes much more. The framing window vanishes, the screenspace expands with sudden depth, and the loaves cease to be just bread, now suggesting images of the human body. The background and foreground also change, moving the loaves over the ocean, drifting them over rock-strewn plains, and along an electronically colorized coast. At times the screen "pans" and "tracks forward" with a flexibility noticed only after the fact. False perspective, contradictory illumination, improbable juxtaposition, and poetic harmonies punctuate *Golden Voyage* and other Vasulka tapes (just as they do Magritte's paintings).

In Buffalo, where Woody taught at SUNY's Center for Media Study and invested years of his time building a "Digital Image Articulator" (with technician Jeffrey Schier), Steina plunged anew into her "Machine Vision" project, a series of tapes and installations that broke ground conceptually and aesthetically.

From 1975 to 1977, she produced five tapes whose mechanical aspect lay not in image formation but in alternation of photographed views (somewhat like a surveillance camera system). In some of these tapes, and then more spectacularly in her installation series "Allvision," two or more cameras simultaneously regard each other and the external world. Displayed on side-by-side monitors (in the installation) or rapidly alternating (on the generated tapes), these works provide an encyclopedic perspective, a kind of omniscience that slips in and out of our grasp.

Marshall McLuhan's maxims about the impact of media on perception are reaffirmed by the experience of watching the Vasulkas' video work. One comes away from it with an enhanced recognition of how much we do not see, and how much effort must be expended to gain a wider vision.

In 1978, shortly before they left Buffalo for Santa Fe, where they continue to work, the Vasulkas assembled a remarkable series of programs for broadcast. Initially shown on WNED in Buffalo, the six half-hour programs (funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) survey ten years of the Vasulkas' work. Excerpts from many of their tapes are included with explanations of how they were made.

Today, thirty years after the beginning of the massive growth of network television, and after more than a decade of widespread experimentation by video artists, all network and most individual video construction is based on the aesthetic of film. But there is no necessary relation between the two—in practice, films convert into videotapes with difficulty and transferring video to films causes even greater problems. Had video been invented fifty years earlier, or film fifty years later, the two media would surely have evolved differently.

The potential of video technology for personal expression and discovery—in broadcast and in the art gallery—is a great, largely unexplored terrain across which the Vasulkas are traveling. That they are discovering exciting new imagery should be no more surprising than the very recent discovery (in the early sixties) of the "hidden" side of the moon. We knew that side of the moon was there, but didn't know what it looked like. The Vasulkas know that something they don't know is waiting for them in the circuitry of their computers and behind the screens of their video monitors. They have accepted their mission to find it.

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