Video art pioneers stuck on pause

SFMOMA exhibit long on pretension, short on potential

By David Benett

EXAMER ART CRITIC

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HE OLD FEAR that video art was inherently boring, to be avoided at all costs, almost died with slow-witted and slow-moving, even ugly, has been put to rest in recent years. Such artists as Bill Viola, Thierry Knuth, Chantal Akerman, Mary Lucier, Gary Hill and Doug Hall, among others, have demonstrated that video art can be as thrilling, beautiful and emotionally evocative as painting, sculpture and photography — in a way unique to the medium that the traditional arts are incapable of.

The work of Steina and Woody Vasulka gives fresh ammunition to old prejudices. “Machine Media,” an exhibition of their work organized by media artist curator Robert R. Riley, continues through March 31 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It must be hard to make the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and nuclear warfare dull, but, damnit, Woody Vasulka does it. He makes this videotape, “Art of Memory,” and he also manages to stretch, a good 80 min. of advanced art, in making a 36-minute work seem to last a small eternity.

Long live the avant-garde!

The Vasulkas are charter members of that part of the post-war avant-garde that is obsessed with technology and absorbed by technology. Woody, who was born in Czechoslovakia in 1937, trained as a dancer in Iceland in 1940, together came to New York City in 1965, where they settled into the downtown scene. (Their first shows were at Max’s Kansas City and on Warhol drag star John Dee’s One Night Stand spe- cial.) In 1971, the Vasulkas founded The Kitchen, still a New York City showcase for cutting-edge video and performance arts. (They decamped for Buffalo City in 1974 and have lived in Santa Fe since 1977.)

Their early work established the way they have continued working. In the beginning, technological developments have expanded their possibilities. From the start, their work was marked by a late 60s attack on the avant-garde. It is experimental, experimental, definition-blurring and boundary-busting. But now they are more interested in exploring the nature of the medium than in using the medium as a vehicle for communication, ideas related to a particular medium, or even as a means of aesthetic expression. Instead, they are interested in exploring the nature of the medium than in using the medium as a means of communication, ideas related to a particular medium, or even as a means of aesthetic expression. Instead, they are interested in exploring the nature of the medium than in using the medium as a vehicle for communicative goals.

The Vasulkas’ continued record-breaking attendance, let’s hope that a convention of technolo- gists, especially as it reflects the rise of the medium than in using the medium as a vehicle for communicative goals.

The Vasulkas demonstrate an understanding of the potential of video in early works like “Matrix” (1970-72), in which banks of television sets are scrambled with pulsating images. (Perhaps it would be best to visit the exhibition without bad practices, however, never to smoke while watching.)

The Vasulkas’ current ground-breaking work when conceived, but today, when phalanxes of video monitors appear everywhere, from airports to terminals to cocktail lounges, it’s hard to get excited about the Vasulkas’ early prototypes, especially since today’s versions usually offer more intriguing imagery. The problem with groundbreaking art is that it often gets tuned before the audience has time to understand what made it possible.

Although the Vasulkas are usually packaged as a team, they work separately. Their work is different, especially as it reflects their attitudes toward the audience. Steina, for instance, understands that the exploration of technology is not an end in itself, that art is essentially a medium of communication and that beauty is a traditional compo- nent of art that allows it to make its appeal to an indifferent public.

Not that she is an aesthete. In terms of beauty, Steina has only taken baby steps, but she does offer something seductive to look at. In deed, the most engaging work in the show is hers. “Borealis” (1993) is a room-sized installation of large panels on which images of surfacing water (shot in her native Iceland) are projected. The technology that in other Vasulka works tends to absorb attention before the work itself starts. If there is any doubt about the power of the virtual experience, you inhabit a world of wonders and events and you become swept up in the experience before you ask how it is achieved.

Steina is less successful in "The West" (1983), her other major work in the exhibition, a piece owned by SFMOMA. A semi-circle of 22 double-stacked television monitors, "The West" is a recreation of the southwestern landscape with images constantly washing across the screens. The imagery, which ranges from ruins of the Anasazi Indians to radar scopes of a nuclear power plant, as long as humans inhabit the landscape, they have made interventions in it.

Steina’s images, however, have little inherent appeal, and you are reminded of other video artists like Roberta Lake or photographers such as Richard Marrah or John Pfahl who have dealt with similar issues with greater success and more inventiveness in their work.

Steina’s juxtapositions of multiple images on a single screen, wash- ing across the entire screen, tend to obscure the content of the medium as she exploits it to the max. The use of a single, changing image for a screen that is too big to be appreciated by the medium. SFMOMA’s inaugural show is more formally successful than it is as a history of the video medium.

Steina’s forced juxtapositions of images made remnant, specifically, of a single object from multiple view- points on a flat surface.

But Steina’s preoccupation is at least something other than video technique. Woody, in comparison, seems to have a love for technology that is reflected in the many self-contained video installations from "The Brotherhood" series (1995). Woody’s work has made beautiful,ainless machines that flash lights and suddenly move in abrupt but plotted patterns.

His enormous, ego-drenched install- ations left no entry point for the ordinary person. He was once witnessed at SFMOMA Sunday after- noon, for many others. But for the Vasulkas, what makes itself exist is the work. The work pretends to be an allegro- ry of masculinity and the male’s drive to destruction, raised to a high art by machinery. In fact, it seems to be about the boy’s love of technology, with no apologies given. If that’s what it is, no problem, but at least admit that it’s the machine that you love and not humanity.