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This TV Couple Takes Medium Very Seriously

• See, "Make Your Own Television Show" in Sunday's Upstate.

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Woody Vasulka plunked an (old lamp in front of a blue backdrop.

"Ah, that's our actor," he said training a television camera on it.

Steina Vasulka wheeled another small camera around and came to rest on the brooding face of a young girl across the room.

One-by-one they superimposed images on a television screen.

"We can go up to six cameras," Woody said, little beads of perspiration popping out on his brow.

He punched buttons on one of many black boxes and the picture on the television screen moved and wavered. The face of the girl was still visible — masklike. She moved slightly and the whole image dissolved into a kaleidoscope.

The Vasulkas are husband and wife, and they are relaxed, obviously accustomed to working together.

"Do you have a coax-t?"

"Yeah, could you give me that feedback?"

Steina punches more buttons and sound waves are transmitted into sine waves on the screen. A low pulsing sound becomes a hum and evolves into a high pitched tone. It sounds like a television set that has gone on the blink.

Things are obviously building up to a climax when somebody comes in with pizzas and soda, and they all stop.

"We've been doing this for four years," Woody said, collapsing on a couch and dipping into the pizza. "It took us about three years to find out what the hell we were doing."

The Vasulkas make electronic pictures and they are visiting Rochester to demonstrate this new art form. Yesterday they conducted a workshop at Portable Channel on Prince Street. Today they will produce, "The Electronic Image," to be shown on Channel 21's Homemade TV series at 10:30 tonight.

"We will show our ingredients, put them together in a recipe, then cook a while," Woody promised when asked what tonight's show is about.

Comparing their work to cooking goes back to the Vasulka's first efforts in experimental video. They founded "The Kitchen," an electronic theater in New York City.



WOODY VASULKA

"There was no stage for such a scene," Woody said. "It provided an electronic stage."

They use cameras, oscillators, frequencies and timing to create their abstract art.

"It is a development in time," Woody explained. "We start with a simple object and build up a collage. We're trying to find the behavior patterns but we're only in the primitive stages."

The Vasulka's feel the audience reacts to the images first by trying to identify them. That is the "real" sequence, then comes the "dream" sequence of remembered images, and that is followed by the "hallucination" sequence.

"Sometimes people put names on our pieces," Woody said. "We never do — except as a joke."

Steina was born in Iceland, studied violin at the music school in Reykjavik and the Conservatory of Music in Prague. She played violin in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and free-lanced in New York City.

Woody was born in Czechoslovakia, has a background in engineering and studied at the Film Academy in Prague. He produced short films for movie theaters in Czechoslovakia on "very mixed" subjects. He recalled that he did a film on alcoholism, one on changes of the suburbs, a travelogue on Iceland.

"Television on Czechoslovakia was government-owned and everything had a political flavor," Woody said. "Here it was so different. It seemed so free."

"Of course, we had no commercials," he added. "I learned English from watching commercials here. The money they have presents the opportunity to provide the strongest message — a one-to-one confrontation with the viewer."

Woody hedges when asked if his work in television evolved into his interest in video art.

"Why don't you say your documentaries have nothing whatever to do with what you're doing now?" Steina said finally.

Woody nodded.

"This work represents a revolution, not an evolution," he agreed.

Steina often works with the visuals and Woody with the soundtracks but they stress they are a team — trying to relate audio and video.

In the summer of 1972, the Vasulkas were artists in residence at the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco. Before joining Media Studios, Inc. in Buffalo last fall, they were artists in residence at WNET's experimental laboratory in New York City.

"We're now working on tool development," Woody said. "We'd like to put all these big boxes into little boxes. We don't believe in big studios and massive equipment. Everybody should have the tools and they should have them in their homes."

"Television means broadcasting but it's not going to be that way," he went on. "Television is 40 or 50 years old, already an old invention."

The Vasulkas envision a time when your television set will be old-fashioned and the very walls of your home can be replaced by three-dimensional electronic images.

People from Portable Channel workshops, students from the University of Rochester and St. John Fisher College continued to arrive, curious to learn something about this new art form.

The Vasulka's drifted back to their cameras and boxes — soon becoming immersed in their myriad of buttons.