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Video 'Aggressive'

By Joan Lowndes, Sun Art Critic

Over the weekend, the Vancouver Art Gallery gave us a foretaste of what we may expect at the world video festival, which it is planning for next January. Woody and Steina Vasulka showed four hours of tapes which they had brought with them from San Francisco, where they have spent six weeks at the National Center for Experiment in Television. They are now on their way back to New York. There, in the Mercer Arts Center, they have a video theater affectionately known as Woody's Kitchen. The Vasulkas were happy to make this stopover in Vancouver because they consider it the most important place in Canada for video. They are familiar with our scene through the video exchange directory, instituted by Mike Goldberg. They were also visited in their Kitchen by Werner Aellen, who recently made a survey of personal video in the U.S. and Europe on a Canada Council grant. Mike Goldberg, similarly financed, made a parallel survey in Japan.

As far as the underground is concerned, film is waning in favor of video, largely because it is so much cheaper and hence more accessible. The range is enormous, from naturalistic tapes designed to stimulate political action to abstract electronically manipulated imagery. It is to the latter end of the spectrum that the creations of the Vasulkas belong, produced with sophisticated equipment not yet available in this country.

Images, explained Woody Vasulka, can be generated from an electronic sound tape, then fed into an image synthesizer. You feed sound into the visual and vice versa. "It's a purely electronic exchange," he commented, "with very little of reality in it." Further, by means of a colorizer which reacts to the gray scale, a black and white image can be transmuted into color. Or, it can be processed to a mere outline, drained of either its black or white content, overlaid with other images, made to travel back and forward, mirrored against itself by feedback (induced by positioning a TV camera too close to its monitor).

"Video," says Woody Vasulka genially, "is a lazy man's art. You just dial it and switch it." However it is obvious that many hours of skillful editing are required to control all these metamorphoses and give them a form. In aesthetic terms, the most striking aspect of the new imagery is its absolutely spectacular, electronic and electrifying color. The Vasulkas used four monitors arranged in a slight semi-circle. By manual adjustment, they varied the intensities on each one, so that the four versions of color shapes were rippling across them, shimmering up the scan lines or synchronized in a vertical choreography.

The four monitors are the video equivalent of the huge environmental painting for, although Woody is of Czech origin and his wife of Icelandic, they have absorbed the American obsession with bigness. They recognize, however, that video is an "aggressive" medium which can leave the viewer exhausted. They, therefore, programmed some equally inventive black and white tapes in lighter vein, including a hilarious spoof of Swan Lake in drag, performed to the famous violin adagio.

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