Video Impressions: Vasulkas: Work Isn't Usual TV Screen Fare

By VICTORIA LUBIN
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It is an art," asked video artist Woody Vasulka rhetorically.

For Vasulka, "reality is a mere concept. A typical tape of his "would be mostly non-dramatic but it could be eventful," he said, "because the object is out of its normal context."

"I'm looking into how images are formed, images organized by computers," he concluded.

Vasulka has been called a "dadaistic" video artist because of his concern with the process itself, with "trying to explain or define the craft of video."

The Vasulkas' dedication to video is one reason they established The Kitchen in 1971. Now a center for contemporary music, video, dance and performance art in New York City. The Kitchen was originally dedicated to the electronic arts during the two years that the Vasulkas directed it.

The Kitchen was first located in a real kitchen in the Central Hotel on Broadway. The entire building collapsed, although their "electronic arts action center," as Steina calls it, had been moved two months before.

They show their work at media centers, museums, exhibits, and through small distributors. "Video has its own small network," he said. Television has little use for video art. "The genre is not for mass audiences."

Both Woody and Steina came to video art from other, more traditional artforms. She was a professional violinist and he was a filmmaker. "For both of us, this idea of being electronic was the most exciting part of it," he said.

Steina was born in Iceland in 1940. She studied classical violin at the Music Conservatory in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where she met and married Woody. Subsequently she took a job with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra.

In 1963 they moved to the United States. She became a free-lance musician and, gradually losing enthusiasm, turned to video.

Vasulka was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. He created his own electronic technology and magnetic and hydraulic mechanisms, he began writing poetry and playing the trumpet.

In the military, wrote short stories and non-fiction, and studied photography before turning to film. He experimented with electronic sound and strobe light devices and then turned to video.

Video artist Woody Vasulka and the four-screen video installation at Dartmouth, called The West.

First Visions: The West

Installation: an electronic process in which you change certain frequencies to produce changes in the colors.

Drifting (of images) — You take one timing structure and you overlay it with another timing structure.

Electronic Collaging — the combination of electronic images from several tapes, all fused onto one tape, creating layers of images.

Video feedback — you point the camera into the monitor. Vasulka liked the effect to the sound of plugging a microphone into an amplifier.

Image processed — the term describes images that have been electronically processed so that the color, texture, or shape of the subject is altered.

Vasulka described image processed videotapes as one of four genres of video art. The others are narrative, video installation, and music-television.

If the vocabulary seems baffling, the theme or purpose that has emerged in Vasulka's work is more obvious. The themes differ in their work. Steina's interest is summed up in the phrase "machine vision," which was the title of a major exhibit she and Woody had in 1971 at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo.

It signifies "an awareness of an intelligent, yet not human vision. The act of seeing, the image source, and the kinetic resources come from the installation itself, choreographed and programmed by the cyclical nature of its mechanical performance," said Steina. She goes on to liken her work to "asurveillance of space."

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