An Instrument of Infinite

By KEN AUSUBEL

Editor's note: Santa Fe resident Woody Vasulka is a nationally known video artist and, along with his wife and co-worker Steina, is a pioneer in the field of video art and computer video. Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1937, Vasulka studied metal technology and hydraulic mechanics at the state school of industrial engineering. Then he entered the film-making program at the prestigious Academy of Performing Arts in Prague where he began to produce and direct short films. In 1965 he emigrated to the United States and worked in New York City as a free-lance film editor for several years.

In 1967 he began to experiment with electronic sounds, stroboscopic lights and video. In 1974 he was appointed associate professor in the Center for Media Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. At this time he began his experiments with computer-generated and computer-manipulated video images, which resulted in the construction of what has now become known as The Valsulka Imaging System.

On Wednesday, March 16, Vasulka's newest work, a video opera titled "The Commission," will receive its world premiere at the C.G. Reyn Gallery in Santa Fe. Based loosely on the life of Niccolo Paganini, the legendary 19th-century violinist, "The Commission" marks the first time that Vasulka has applied his video-imaging techniques to a narrative structure.

The following interview was excerpted from a longer one conducted by Santa Fe video-maker, Ken Ausubel.

Ausubel: Were you always interested in machines?

Vasulka: My father had a workshop and was a metal worker. I grew up during the war in Czechoslovakia. We lived across from an airfield. My first interest as a kid was to take machines apart. I was lucky living close to the airport because I could take the most complicated machines of that era — the German fighter planes — and play with them.

My youth was spent in these graveyards of airplanes. You could find everything there that would drive your fantasy crazy. Europe was a huge junkyard after the war, you could find everything from human fingers to weapons in the dump. As kids, we roamed through it. This basically set the scene.

Eventually I began to realize — here let me paraphrase Korean video-maker Nam June Paik — that if you make a simple tool, you'll use it for a while like a child uses a simple toy, then throw it away, because you will outgrow the challenge. But if you can make a tool that is infinitely complicated, it will fascinate you for the rest of your life. What I've been trying to do is invent tools that contain more mystery than I could possibly imagine. That's what characterizes our better tools — this ability to be inspired by the tool rather than being served by it.

Ausubel: How did you get into video?

Vasulka: That's a long story. After the war, the art scene in Czechoslovakia was dominated by Communist Party aesthetic that forbade any style of art or literature that deviated from strict dogmatism with marxist overtones. At that time I realized that no notion of any kind of experimentation with media was looked on like a notion of the avant-garde of the 20s. Though the avant-garde of that time had been lost and buried, by the time I grew up, the left was already bankrupt. It was associated with the most reactionary thoughts and suppressed experimentation. I'm talking about the Czech situation.

We, as a generation growing up in a film environment — like the film school of which I was a part — were concentrating on the opposite of experimentation. We paid no attention to what's called the "medium-basis of information," or undertaking a formal investigation of a medium for its own sake. We were interested in what ideologies are interested in, which is larger mythological or narrative systems. As a group in film school, we followed the metaphorical approach. Maybe you could disguise political opposition through metaphor.

But when I came to the States in 1965, I discovered there was a whole generation of practicing film-makers called the structuralists who paid close attention to what the European avant-garde of the 20s did. But these artists extended much further the idea about the material of the medium itself: film surface, motion, elements, information within a frame. Suddenly, I came to recognize the materiality of the medium — the medium has its own truth. All this prepared me for video.

Then, in 1969, I began to experiment with video in New York. About that time it hit me that this is the medium in which I wanted to work. I was interested in this metaphysical concept — that an image is an energy system.

Ausubel: What was the nature of your early work with video?

Vasulka: The nature of our early work was non-figurative or non-representational. We generated images through electronic systems. We produced numerous tapes that included this aspect of video — what some people call "abstract video." But that is just a transposition of one aesthetic term from abstract painting to this electronic environment.

Right from the beginning, we felt challenged by television as a perceptual system. We weren't interested in aesthetic results. You see, film travels at the rate of 24 frames per second, but with video you have 60 "fields" per second. Video encodes many more changes than film, and you can build devices that can work with a single field.

Ausubel: What was your role in the development of computer video?

Vasulka: In the early '70s, we happened to be with a group of people who were working with video, and they made an effort to bring video and the computer into a union. We had only one way of doing it. We built a separate small computer next to the general-purpose computer, and we made a time-link between them, in which they communicated synchronously, even that is not an innovative idea, because it's natural to these technology systems to copulate.

We defined a basic set of rules, and our images were one of the first manifestations of what is called "video art." Our contribution, really, was to define the computer and video in the context of art. Even now there is still a debate on whether there is, in fact, computer art. Sometimes we are referred to as computer video artists, and sometimes we are referred to as video artists who use computers.
The show consists of five, untitled works in acrylic and Rhoplex on unstretched canvas. All are dominated by a single image—a modified triangle form. There is a soothing quality to Farber’s work, which derives from seeing the same shapes over and over again. But there is also a lack of tension in the ordering of the forms in space, which renders the works either too cerebral or too academic. As exercises, they go too far; as explorations, they do not go far enough. This is not to dismiss the paintings altogether, however, for they can be engaging.

Instead of being framed, Farber’s works are bordered by rough edges of multipurpose acrylic. This ambiguous limitation imposed by the artist highlights the definition of the triangles. Also, Farber’s work tends to give the pieces some affinity with organic forms. It makes them seem as if they are growing on the wall.

In general, I don’t like to work. I don’t love it either. I consider doing the work and sitting through the rush will work, perhaps not. That is another question. It was done as an exercise.

Still, in the work I’m not really saying anything through thought or conscious, spoken idea; these are scenes of the opera still communicated in the sense of the medium. I don’t like thought-produced meaning. I prefer an image-produced parable that penetrates through the shape of the opera will work, perhaps not. That is another question. It was done as an experiment.

Ausubel: Much of your work in the past has been done in the academic worlds in the East. Now that you’ve come to Santa Fe, do you see any changes?

Vasulka: As long as I was involved in discovering or summarizing the phenomenology, the electronic imaging, I was able to teach. In many ways I was excited about teaching when I was discovering those codes. But when I moved on to application, innovative application, I felt that my work became more personal. This work could not be communicated with such excitement, the combinative motifs of the word and image. When you start working, talking or trying to impose on someone else your own creativity, it’s a brutal and oppressive act. I was totally absorbed in what I was doing.

In general, I don’t like to work. I don’t want your advice about any job. If I can avoid a job, I will. Not being involved in a job is very natural where I come from. Here in America there is a moral code that says a job means dignity. The idea of being lazy here is devastating. Western morality says that people have the right to be lazy?

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Ausubel: Would you agree, then, with Paul La Fargue, Karl Marx’s son-in-law, that people have the right to be lazy?

Vasulka: The whole idea about activity and morality is very much a Western thought: There’s no relief for people accused of being lazy. In our eyes, they are heroes. They submit themselves to the deepest form of torture. Any activity takes you into some sort of activities; they hope to prevent death, improve finances, become mentally and physically healthy. True, it’s profitable to be active, but the opposite is much more challenging.

Coming to Santa Fe is a retirement from my duties. I found out that this isn’t a community to compete with. It’s a community to contemplate. It’s a privilege to be able to contemplate your life, but it’s more difficult to contemplate than simply produce.

Woody Vasulka’s video opera, “The Commission,” will be presented as a benefit for Tone Roads West, a four day festival of poetry and new music, at the C.G. Rein Gallery (122 W. San Francisco), on Wednesday and Thursday, March 5 and 6. Tickets, which are $8, are reserved by calling 988-1878.

Possibly the most accessible piece in the show depicts a union of two triangles against a creamy background tinged with green. As one eye is drawn inward, tiny dots (like blackberries) become visible in the matrix, thus lending a new level of interest—the microscopic. The work is peaceful, but it’s exasperated by its own imagination; it suggests otherworldly amniotic fluid that is nurturing the forms. This is something in Farber’s work that’s exciting, but there is also a slickness that leaves the viewer feeling somewhat cheated. The sheen of the canvas and the calm ordering of the forms in the piece seem too well established; yet effects of texture, color and composition are sometimes able to overcome this. It is this domination of the disparate elements that forces one constantly to reconsider and reassess Farber’s work.

On exhibit at The Haven restaurant (615 Camino Ruiz, through the end of March) are intaglio prints by local artist Joel F. Greene. The show includes etchings, engravings and mezzotints; landscapes, portraits and still life. Greene’s skill as a printmaker is evidenced by his ability to create subtle shades of meaning while working solely in black and white.

The artist seems intrigued by the reduction of natural shapes to planes and angles, and the more portentous forms to intimacy. “Nude on a Patio” shows a reclining nude with bulblike breasts; at her side is a pineapplelike plant that could pass for a sort of industrial machinery. Whether woman nor man are in the realm of the living, but their transformation has been achieved with a sort of very humor.

“Cat” is an engraving of a rather disgruntled feline whose body is composed of many planes, all detailed by harsh strokes.

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Showcase traces growth of pioneer video artists

Woody and Steina Vasulka, Santa Fe’s foremost video pioneers, will screen a collection of their works Sunday night at Club West, 213 W. Alameda.

The video showcase will begin at 8 p.m. and is scheduled to last more than three hours. Admission is $3 at the door.

Woody Vasulka, a Czech-born industrial engineer and filmmaker, and his wife Steina, a violinist from Iceland, were among the first artists to experiment with video. They became interested in electronic media upon moving to the United States in 1965. They gravitated toward video after working with other new technologies, including electronic sound, synthesizers and stroboscopic light.

“Our context was not really artistic when we started to work with video,” Woody Vasulka once said. “It was very far from what I would recognize as art.”

The Vasulkas came to see the aesthetic possibilities of video more clearly after they founded The Kitchen, an electronic art gallery and performance space, in New York City in 1971. The Kitchen, in the words of American Film magazine, “soon became a Mecca for experimental videomakers.”

Through the center, the Vasulkas sponsored many of the nation’s first video tape festivals and influenced a new generation of video artists.

The focus of their own work began to change. While they produced largely documentaries in their earlier years, they started creating more abstract videos.

This new direction was evident in Golden Voyage, which they made in 1973, inspired by Magritte’s surrealist painting Golden Legend. They have continued to push the limits of video since coming to Santa Fe in 1980. The two have designed and built much of their own equipment, becoming ever more sophisticated in the use of computers to manipulate sound and images.

“Our work is a dialogue between the tool and the image, so we would not preconceive an image, separately make a conscious model of it, and then try to match it, as other people do,” Woody Vasulka says. “We would rather make a tool and dialogue with it.”

The Club West showcase will include tapes from the early days of The Kitchen, as well as tapes produced by the Vasulkas at the Center for Media Studies in Buffalo, N.Y., where they were faculty members during the 70s.

Also on the program will be recent New Mexico work.

Steina’s latest video was The West, which used the state’s vast, arid landscapes as a backdrop for various signs and symbols, from ceremonial Indian dwellings to scientific apparatus.

Woody’s most recent tapes include Artifacts and The Commission, an operatic work based on the legend of Paganini and Hector Berlioz.

Documentaries reveal another side of India

India, home of three quarters of a billion people, has suddenly become “in.” Films such as Gandhi and Passage To India, and the successful Masterpiece Theatre television drama The Jewel in the Crown, have rekindled American interest in the vast Asian nation and its diverse cultural and religious traditions.

A different side of India will be on view in a pair of documentaries opening today and playing through Monday at El Paso’s El Paseo Theatre, 123 W. San Francisco St.

Instead of the Westernized perspective provided by Gandhi and Passage To India, these two documentaries strive to invoke the spirit of ancient India.

The major film on the program is Malcolm Leigh’s Manifestations of Shiva, revealing the Indian view of the nature of reality as reflected through the worship of the Hindu god Shiva.

Shiva is both Lord of Life and Destroyer. The film shows the physically demanding preparations for a rhythmic dance evoking Shiva and the endless cycle of birth and death.

Juxtaposed with the dance are scenes of daily life, temple events and festivals in the small towns of southern India, primarily in the state of Kerala.

The film has received widespread critical praise, largely because it dispenses with the usual explanatory narrative, relying solely on music and striking images.

The Directors Guild of America called Manifestations of Shiva a “documentary of staggering visual beauty” that “provides a religious and poetic experience.”

Calgary Herald film critic Fred Haeseker was similarly impressed.

“Verbal expressions would detract from the film’s intimate observations of the preparations for a yogic dance,” he wrote. “The subtle visual detail, brilliantly edited and accompanied by a spare, delicate soundtrack, takes us deeper into the very basis of Indian mysticism than words ever could.”

Rounding out El Paseo’s program is the 1959 short, The Sword and the Flute, directed by James Ivory (The Bostonians and Heat and Dust).

This film is a study of 16th and 17th century India detailed through miniature Moghal (Moslem) and Rajput (Hindu) paintings, borrowed from the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts and Metropolitan Museum.

Indian composers such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan provide musical accompaniment.

Ritual dance to the Hindu god Shiva.
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tion after parting from his mother at the outset of his journey. A glass skylight built into his mother's casket, so he could watch

One of the narrators of Raymond Roussel. Both French authors suffered from ob-

about the Bride is represented by an amorphous shape. In an essay
dazzled up into the tap half of the glass, where the figure of
bolizes masturbation. The ejaculatory fluid that ensues is
ducted through sieves in the chocolate grinder, which sym-
paratus. "There...the energy produced by the nine bachelor

eighteenth-century showmen who are inscribed on the sheet of glass Is con-
ducted through sieves in the chocolate grinder, which sym-

Raymond Roussel died at the Grande Albergo Delle Palme, Room

lacked. The door was to keep the door unlocked. He dragged themattress, which rep-

Steve Fagin in.

Both productions stills from The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel (1986) by Steve Fagin.