Albright-Knox Art Gallery

Human Presence Seems Violation In Video World of 'Machine Vision'

By ANTHONY BANNON

In one corner of the white room, a video camera with a mechanically rotating prism lens surveys the scene with an unblinking eye scanning through 360 degrees. Beneath it, a monitor reveals the view.

In the opposite corner, a camera mounted on a turntable presents another arced vision through a similarly vertical axis, displayed on a monitor below.

Two corners are left in Steina Vasulka's video installation in Albright-Knox Art Gallery; two corners and a capping center:

In the third corner, a camera regards its own cool optics reflected in a vertically tilting mirror, while in the fourth corner an opposing camera sees itself in a horizontally panning mirror

With the four cameras, a thorough mapping of the space is executed. And should anything be missed, it is picked up by two cameras in room's center that point into a reflecting globe.

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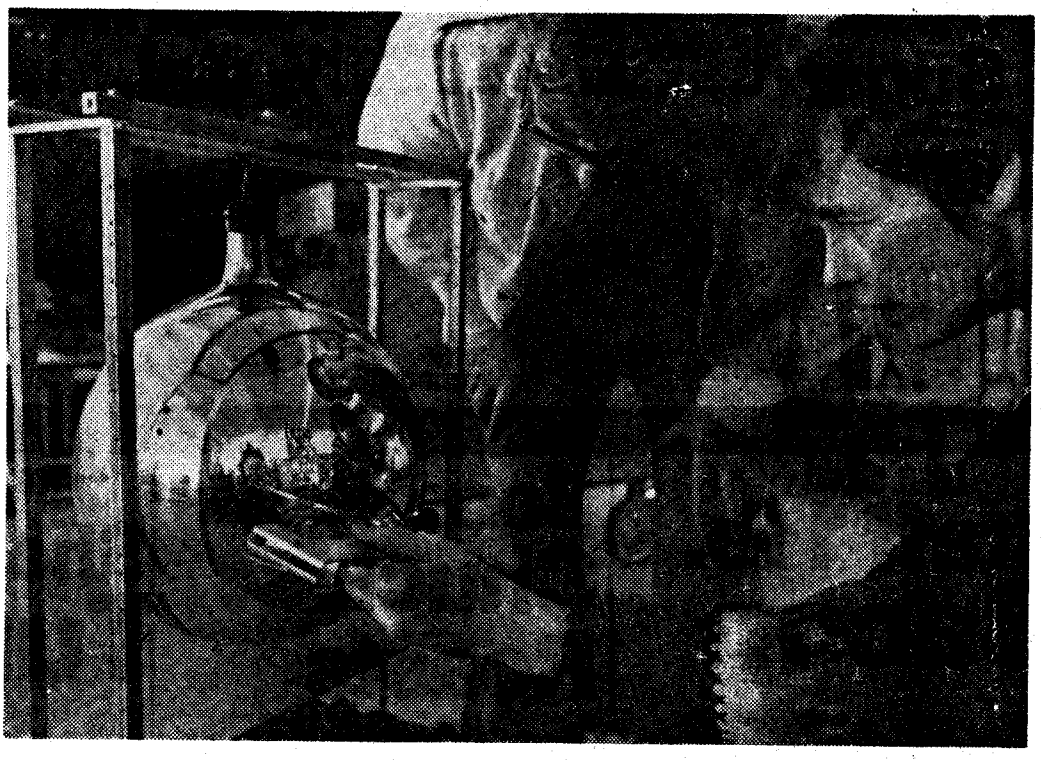
SIX CAMERAS, six monitors and a reflecting globe — a multiple display of a fractured space split like a broken egg and reassembled, reprogrammed and re-presented around the room It is the inside looking out and the outside looking in. Systems observe themselves. Human presence seems a violation.

Here, it is less the movement of the scene that creates moving images than it is a matter of the camera systems themselves in motion.

"Machine Vision" is the name — "a decadent auto portrait of cameras," said Ms. Vasulka.

Steina and Woody Vasulka are video pioneers, founders of the Kitchen in New York, an electronic media forum for display and interaction. They have been internationally exhibited and are recipients of grants, including state and federal arts foundations and most recently the Guggenheim Fellowship for Steina. Both now live and work in Buffalo.



VIDEO VIEW — Video artists Woody and Steina Vasulka check a part of their installation now on view in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

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THE VIDEO medium has thrived for fewer than 10 years, and the Vasulkas — together and separately — have explored most means of image manipulation available. They have collaborated in the design and discovery of new electronic image-processing equipment, revealing the elemental structure of the video signal and displaying its possibilities.

Their videotapes through the years are a testimony to an exploding medium as they present, more like scientists, the summaries of experimentation, rather than like artists, creating an aesthetic.

Explanation of their procedures, as well as expressions of their imagery, are simply beyond the ken of most, including art initiates.

"Forced editing ... asynchronous overlays ... camera/monitor rescan ... scan processor ... multikeyer ... H.D. Variable Clock ... Field Flip/Flop Switcher" — these are processes and pieces of equipment used early in their career, when video was still young and innocent.

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WOODY VASULKA'S exhibit, called "Directions," introduces the thoughtful viewer to the new considerations of electronic image processing.

Chronologically, Vasulka's works begin here with film strips from the late '60s that display a field of 360 degrees, rejecting the confinement of the film frame and its implications of narrative sequencing.

Later work, including panels of still video images, document various wave forms — the building blocks of electronic images — and their extension into spatial illusion.

Sketches, didactic tableaux of binary (yes-no/off-on) images, stereo images taken from video, a stack of monitors showing images that appear to progress coherently from one monitor to another, and still other examples of video experiments complete the display.

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"I WANT to decode the images into their elements of structures," Vasulka told me. "Every image is justified by its underlying code."

The hothouse of experimentation in early video "didn't lead me into freedom. Early video was an uncontrollable pleasure, but I discovered that I'm a collector of the underlying codes. I believed they could become building blocks of structure ... And I became disinterested in images I cannot decode."

He explained: "In film, we take an image itself to be a code. Take a face, for example. We read from it one's age, a certain state of mind — or we think that we can — and process of life. This is a photographic code ...

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"ELECTRONIC IMAGES possess a certain code, too. The elements are wave forms, time and energy. From that, I ask: What is the possibility of one line? How does it behave from top to bottom, and how can it be built up, and into what?"

Using a computer, Vasulka arrived at other elements of structure: A point for instance, a dot upon the screen. That dot has values of brightness and darkness, and it has location within the frame that enable it to build toward a significant meaning.

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"BUT WHILE I'm grateful that video relates to the past, I would like to locate my work within a technical process. I am presenting a technical system rather than an aesthetic, and we obey a technical inspiration, consciously denying ourselves any aesthetic system."

The Vasulkas' exhibit, curated by Linda L. Cathcart and made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, continues through Nov. 26.