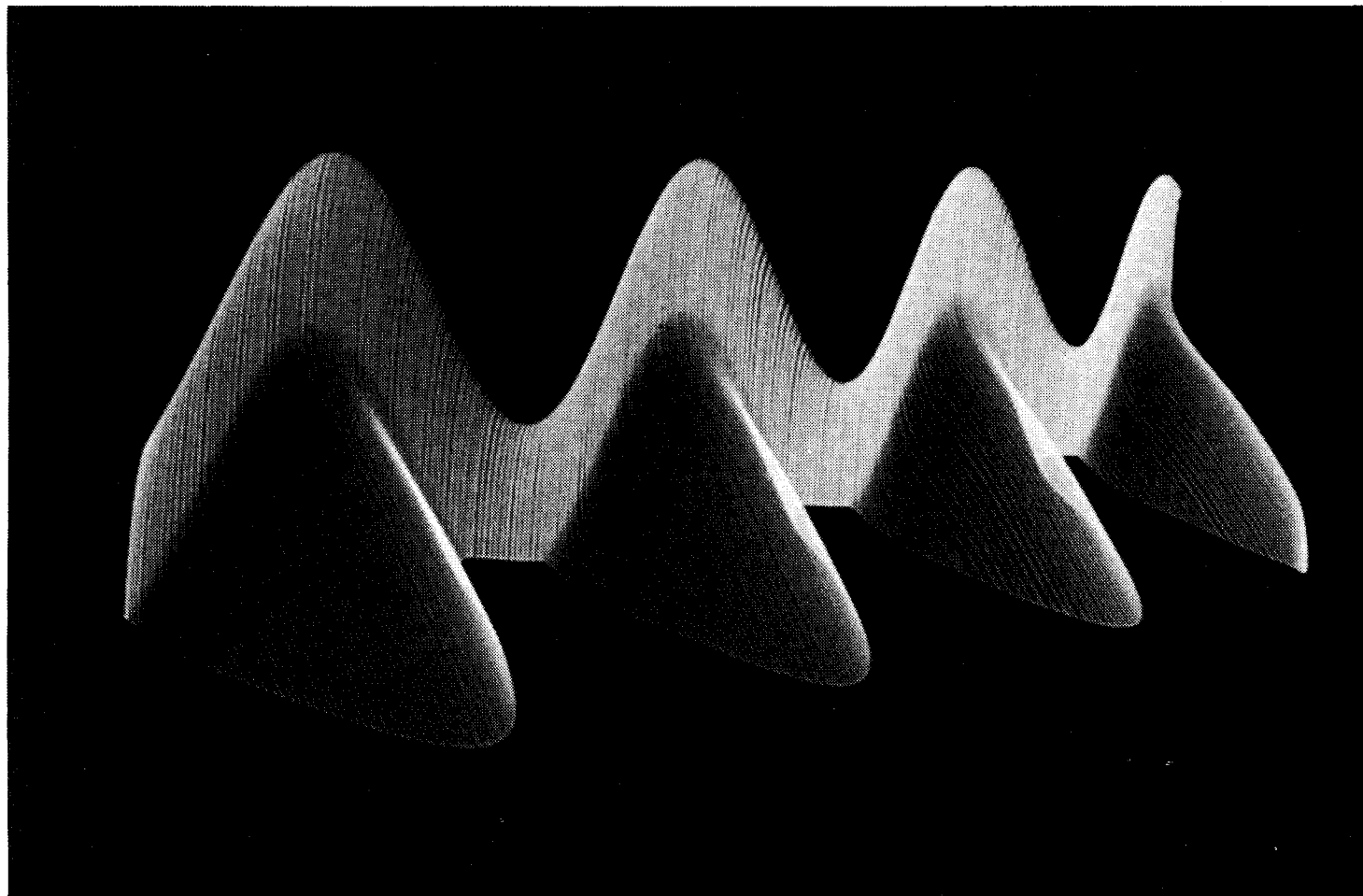


WOODY AND STEINA VASULKA: From Feedback to Paganini



Woody Vasulka, *Studies from Time - Energy Objects*, 1975.

Artists in the late 1960s picked up the electronic tools of television and with them began creating works in the new medium called video. Much of the early video activity centered in New York City, where a community of video artists emerged, and Woody and Steina Vasulka were prime movers within that community. Woody, a film maker from Czechoslovakia with a background in engineering, and his wife, Steina, a concert violinist in her native Iceland, had emigrated to the U.S. in 1965. A few years later, they discovered video and began the experimentation that eventually led them to a synthesis of their individual interests and talents in music and moving images. Starting with a hand-held camera and an audio synthesizer, they learned to generate images with sound frequencies, and conversely to use images to generate sounds. Their fascination with the creative potential of electronic tools has expanded to include computers, which they use to generate both camera-less images and images recorded by computer-controlled cameras.

Steina and Woody have been awarded numerous prizes and grants including several Guggenheim fellowships for video between 1976 and 1980. In 1971 they established The Kitchen, a free-form gallery and electronic arts performance center in SoHo. They lived in Buffalo, N.Y., for a number of years before moving to Santa Fe in 1980. Steina's piece, *Machine Vision IV*, received a first prize at last year's Armory for the Arts open awards show. She has offered the prize, a 1982 show to be co-sponsored by the Armory and the Fine Arts Museum, to a number of video artists from around the country who will exhibit their video tapes as part of a group show. The Vasulkas, who frequently travel about, lecturing and jurying competitions, are dedicated ambassadors of the still fledgling video medium. They are also dedicated artists whose newest work is an application of the traditional dramatic form of opera to their skills at generating images and sounds electronically.

The Vasulkas were interviewed for ARTlines by MaLin Wilson and Jackie Melega.



Steina and Woody Vasulka with *Machine IV*, by Steina Vasulka, installation at the Santa Fe Armory for the Arts, 1980.

life was invested, and picked up the video. (Laughter)

SV Boy, was I glad to get rid of that violin.

WV The first day I came home, she had already produced a half-hour tape.

SV We got so involved that Woody decided, very rationally, that he had to quit work. There was no way he could be bogged down with some stupid job when all this was going on.

WV She sent a letter to her father in Iceland, who had never heard the term video: "I'm involved in video now, Daddy. Send me some money." And he did! It wasn't much, but it bought us a porta-pack or something.

SV My parents always believed in me, totally. The only time they didn't was when I was going to marry a foreigner. (Laughter) My mother was alarmed at that, but a friend came in and said, "Why are you so alarmed? Don't you believe in Steina!" My father saw video once when I was asked to give a lecture at the American Cultural Exchange in Iceland. And he was quite disgusted with it. "I cannot spend a minute on this. It gives me a headache," he said. So we laughed and that was it. It didn't matter.

AL To start off, would you give us a short history of *The Kitchen*?

SV First we had the space, and because we had the space, all those things could start happening. It was a beautiful space...

WV Others would say otherwise—a rat hole.

SV That's what it was, totally gutted. But it had this feeling! We cleaned it up, and asked everybody we knew to come and do something there, and we filled up the schedule that way. That's what we need in Santa Fe—a space with the rent paid. The income from the gate is enough to run the rest of it.

WV We started out with the general policy that we would present electronic arts there—music, video—because there was no place to show these things. But people eventually found everything experimental there. When we started, we had jobs to pay the rent. When we left it was a \$40,000 operation. Now, it's \$250,000—an institution. But there was a difference between the old Kitchen, which literally and symbolically collapsed—the building actually collapsed, killing two people. But just before that, The Kitchen had been transplanted into another location and changed hands and become more established.

AL It's become a myth.

WV Yes, but that was due to the particular vacuum that existed. There was nothing else. So it became... it took life on its own. We gave it an openness. It doesn't have that anymore.

SV That's the way to run this kind of place. Let anybody who wants to take it over, and just let people keep taking it over. People know what to do with a space, instinctively.

AL How did you two get into video?

SV I just got into video because Woody got into video, so this is a question for him.

WV I was swept away! So romantic, so desperate to believe in what I was doing. I was trying to believe in my writing, I was trying to believe in film, which I was educated in. And suddenly, there was this primitive medium, video, and I saw this totally primitive material called feedback. I was lucky, too. The place I worked had small format video, and so I could start taking it home. That's when Steina took it over. "It's mine!" she said. She threw away her violin, in which half her

AL How did you learn to use all this sophisticated equipment? Did you go to school to learn about computers?

WV No, I could never learn that way. They teach you how to do payrolls, that sort of thing. The only way to learn how to use one is to buy it.

SV You buy one, you read the manual, you wonder, and, for a long time, you're very intimidated by this powerful thing in your living room. We would get our friends to come in and make it conversant. They would say things like, "Oh, you need a bootstrap." Then we'd have to find someone else to tell us what a bootstrap was and where we could buy one of those. We had to learn everything the hard way.

AL Artists such as yourselves have been using video for more than 15 years, but it's still a very esoteric medium.

WV We should demythify it. We should regard it in the context of the other arts. In other art forms artists admit to playing with the material. Inspired by the material, they revert to non-intellectual working, playing with hand or whatever. These are notorious processes—maybe the basis for the working of art. But when our kind lapse into playing with this stuff, people begin to differentiate, as if this crap, computer-video-electronics, should mean something intellectual, while it is very much the same process of play. If people do not play, then they move into the category of...

SV Professionals.

AL So, you are saying that all art is play, or is there also professional art—some kind of art that is not play?

SV We play very seriously, I would say. We get up in the morning and sit until late night at the computer, and you don't call it serious?

WV One of my motivations to play around with video and audio instruments was I very early recognized that it's the same material—it's energy in a particular arrangement in time. There's only a frequency range and organizational difference between video and audio. That unity of material inspired us to exchange all video events into audio, interfacing all sorts of video events into control for audio synthesizers, and vice versa. It became a mutually complementary inspiration. That taught us

Woody Vasulka, from *Visiting with Anthony Price*, 1981.



the most dramatic lessons about the material; what it is, how you move it around, change it. It's very close to what a sculptor would do with other materials, with clay. Instead of using our hands to mold the image, we use time and energy to manipulate it.

AL And in working with computers, you organize the effect of time and energy with the computer program?

WV Yes. Any work through a computer will demand writing a program first. In our case, the program is intended to work with or work on the image. Putting an image through a program is where the magic happens. It is here where the medium—all this hardware—becomes bearable, teaching and inspirational. It is also here where it connects to the world of art. It sorts the realities, it summarizes the styles. Some programs are very cubistic, some remind one of...

SV Seurat...

WV Seurat with the pixilated or pointillist canvas. But these systems have to be watched very carefully. Obsession with application can be the ultimate trap of art. People should learn to look behind the pictorial structures. With time, of course, the dominance of a pictorial surface will become more transparent, showing more of the processes behind the image, pointing towards tools, resources, creative environments in almost anthropological rather than aesthetic preference.

AL I didn't follow that. What did you mean by anthropological preference?

WV I'll give you a typical example: when we started to work with video in 1969, the first common artifact of that medium was a video feedback. It became overnight everyone's art—worship of electricity, one could say. It was so easy to make, you just take a camera, connect it to a TV set and then point the camera into the TV screen. It makes a structured image instantly, something that very closely resembles a moving mandala. That happened to have a certain cultural validity at that particular time. This phenomenon

—of making a mandala with feedback—I think is much more interesting in an anthropological context than in an aesthetic one.

SV Like the other day, Woody was mixing two different elements into a picture, and it made for a very interesting picture, so I said, Hey, I want to record this. But he said no, I am just playing around. But sometimes we have sessions and record these phenomena, though it is not discovery anymore.

WV Basically we collect found objects. We virtually find things. Whether by coincidence or because of the architecture of the machine, artifacts are produced which we have never looked for, or never tried to produce. But they are there, so you find them.

AL You're using the word artifact in a somewhat different way. Would you elaborate?

WV I mean two things by that. First I thought of artifact as the result, what you see on the screen, but now, more and more, I'm thinking of artifacts as the process of creating a specific result. A computer program is composed of artifacts. Artifacts are a set of visual devices, themselves without meaning.

AL Would you give some examples?

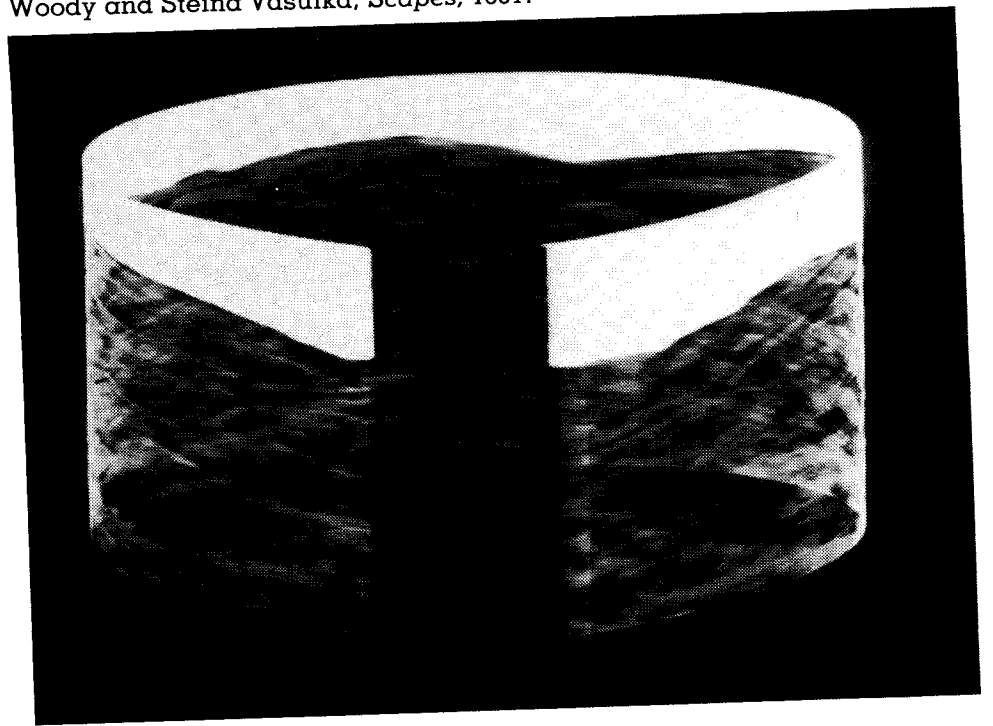
WV The device of the zoom—zooming in on the image—or any number of other ways of manipulating, electronically, the image: rotating it, splitting it in different ways. What we do is take these aestheticless artifacts, put images through them, and find out the meaning of meeting of the two—image and artifact.

AL Steina, you've said that your work is very different from Woody's, and his from yours. How would you characterize the differences?

SV The first two years our work was virtually indistinguishable, and sometimes we don't know anymore who did what on those old tapes. The way we worked either of us would take over some process that was already set up by the other.

WV We were kind of observing the phenomena in those years, so the

Woody and Steina Vasulka, *Scapes*, 1981.



only authorship we would take would be to control it. I do processing on a lot of Steina's tapes. I am not in the least bit interested in gathering images. You see, that reminds me of my film background. I'm interested in the conceptual part, the pictorial part is kind of arbitrary to me. But it evens out. I make programs that she shamelessly...

SV I shamelessly rip them off, and his sounds too, because he makes good sounds.

WV It is a very strange thing, I think: when you study the work, some of it is ambiguous enough to have been produced by either of us, but some is extremely specific—like Steina's optical work. She tends to work with reality as I tend to get away from it. But then she uses it in a way that is similar to conceptual work. It is very abstractive, so I can accept it. I can like her work.

SV Woody's work is always slightly more didactic. He likes to put it into a context of some kind of...

WV I like primitive magic, essentially. Like a hand, and what happens around it. Basically a hand is very unambiguous. I like to work with that kind of minimal image, and put it into the context of something absolutely abnormal.

AL You've mentioned that you're working on a new project, an electronic opera, tentatively entitled *Paganini*. Why opera? Will it have any traditional structure?

WV What I'm interested in with *Paganini* is making a transformation from one reality to another, from a photographic, filmic sort of reality, to an electronic reality. I don't want to be too specific about it, because it all may change. But it will be scripted, pre-planned—the first time we've worked this way. We'll build a set, and use some live actors, which is also a first for us. There will be some straight spoken text, some straight music, and in some other places the human voice and real images will be used as models—they'll be synthesized. I don't think of it as a musical opera, but rather as a sound opera.

AL Where did the idea come from?
SV A story about Hector Berlioz kind of triggered it. Berlioz was a music critic for a newspaper, because he couldn't make a living as a composer. His editor talked to Paganini, and got him to go on stage before a performance and announce that he was commissioning Berlioz to write a piece for him. Which Berlioz did, but Paganini rejected it, saying it was awful or something. And so we got interested in Paganini, how pitiful looking he was, how people laughed at him with his extremely long arms and ugly face, laughed until he started to play. He was the first real superstar, the first real mix of classical and popular performer. But there was something of the devil about him, too.

WV So *Paganini* is about him. It's also about art politics, about the right and left hemispheres of the brain, about landscapes. And it's about technology.

AL Who are the actors?

WV Ernest Gusella, certainly, who himself is a video artist. He walked into our studio one day with a video tape he'd done—called *Exquisite Corpse*, by the way—and he looked so much like Paganini.

AL Steina, are you doing the synthesizer music?

SV No, that's a natural for Woody. I was so trained in traditional music that I wasn't free.

WV I have a secret background in composition, but I have no preconditions about it or hang-ups.

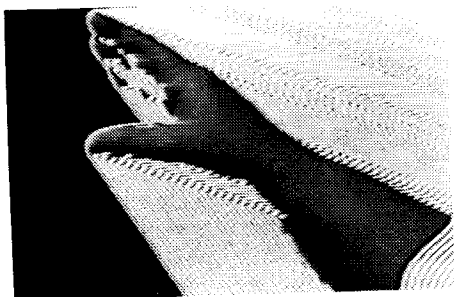
AL Are others working along these same operatic lines with video?

WV It's a new area, and what we're doing is probing it, probing new electronic genres. Robert Ashley is working along similar lines. Even Robert Wilson is. Because it's on such a larger scale than anything else we've done, it's also the biggest risk we've taken. I enjoy it.

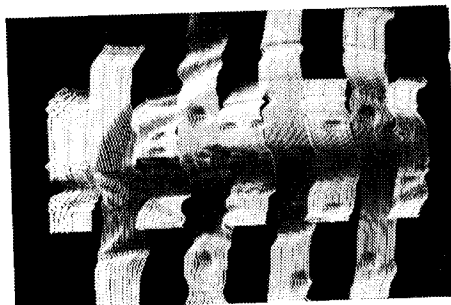
AL Film and video appear to be very similar, both deal with moving images. But you obviously regard the two as being very different.

WV One of the principal distinctions is in how each regards what

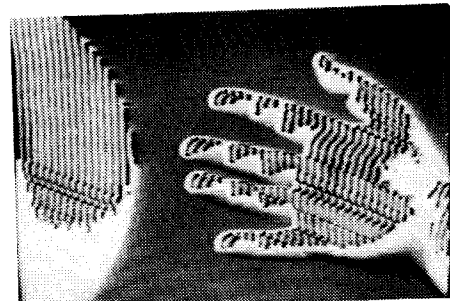
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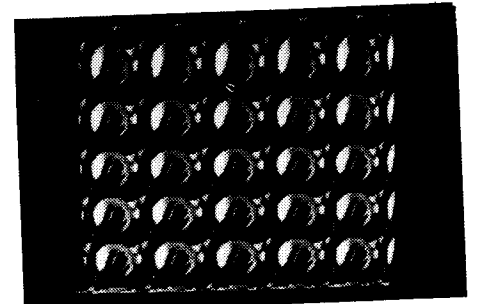
Steina and Woody Vasulka, *Vocabulary*, 1973.



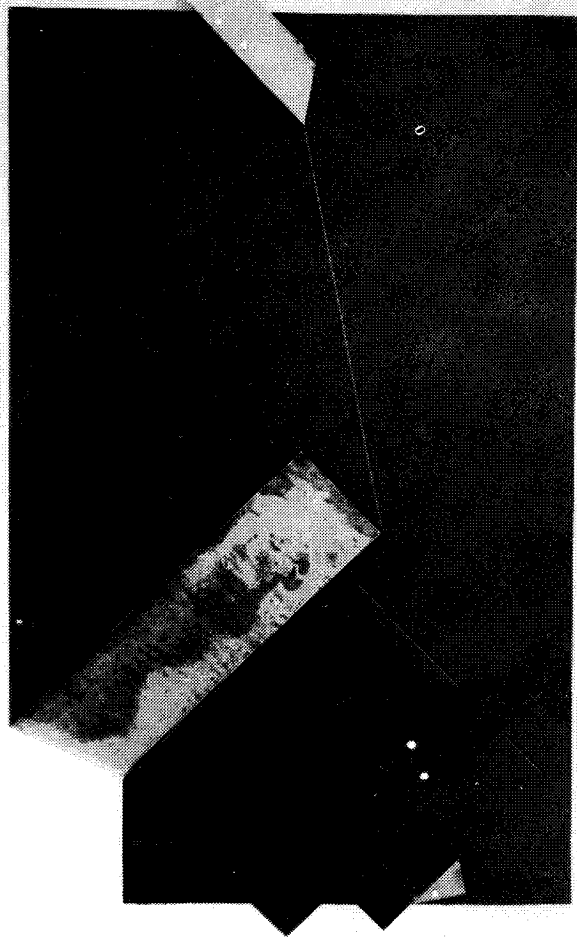
Woody Vasulka, from *Visiting with Anthony Price*, 1981.



Steina and Woody Vasulka, *Vocabulary*, 1973.



Woody Vasulka, *Artifacts II*, 1981.



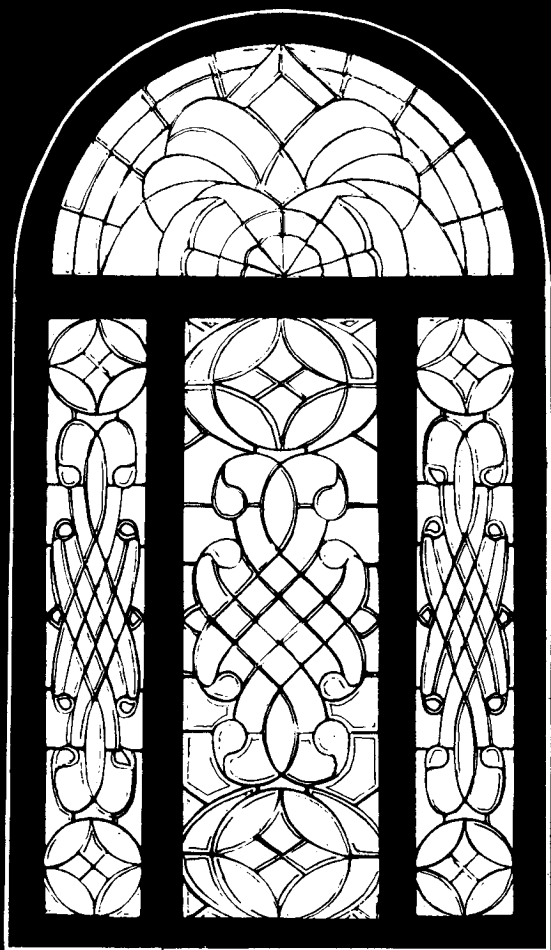
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we call *real time*. A film person would regard *real time* as film or tape that has not been edited. But for us, the notion of *real time* is the actual continuity of time within an electronic system, a computer, that ensures that the time of the recording process, the *filming*, will be virtually the same as the final product. The manipulation of the image—the process that with film includes the developing of the film, any other processing—with video is almost instantaneous. But if you involve the computer, the picture must be disassembled and assembled again, point by point, number by number, and this can take a much longer time than necessary to represent a moving image. So we say if a system can not process or originate pictures as continuously moving, we lose *real time*. When we lose the illusion of continuous movement, we lose *real time*.

SV It's the most important thing, because I don't have the skill, the interest, or the attitude to work with a frozen frame, to work with anything except a moving, *real time* image. That is number one. I would sacrifice any kind of image resolution, any kind of perfect image, rather than sacrifice *real time*.

AL We're edging up here on philosophy. Does the functioning process of your equipment alter or relate to your personal life perception?

SV It is very referential. Like every other medium you learn so much about yourself. But the computer is different because it is even more involved in giving you an idea of who you are. It is a philosophy in itself that a signal is either there, or it is not there. The opposite of good is *not good*. What is important is the absence and presence of things, and not the contrast of one thing with another.

WV There is another thing that the computer gives you. It is not the medium, it is not the hardware, but something in between called the code. You have to master the code. Out of the computer comes this majestic flow of time that brings these waveforms of the analog world. We chop these waveforms into little pieces, and each piece then is reduced, so to speak, into a number, and that number then propagates inside of the computer as a representation of reality. It represents certain reality that is translated from the code to certain value—light, color—and once it is in the computer it is in the form of a code. The code is this intermediary between you and the world.

SV It's the code that brings us pictures from Jupiter.

WV Yes, and that introduction of code into our processes I find very significant. Many people would not want to bother with it because they think it is not the creative part of the process. We have discovered otherwise. The code should be controlled and finally specified by creative people, artists.

AL Some artists are very affected by place. Others feel they produce the same work whether they're living in New York or Santa Fe...

WV I could be anywhere. The reality of my struggle is that machine and the pictures that come out. The rest—the trees, the hills—are very beautiful and if I can go out for two or three minutes, I get refreshed. But the work is unrelated.

SV We need a larger space, which maybe we could find in Taos, but Woody you say you want to be here in Santa Fe! Yet you say the outside is just decoration! (Laughter)

WV It's beautiful, but the uninterrupted volume of time we get here is what's important.

AL There's been some talk about establishing a low-power television station in Santa Fe. Is that going to

happen? How's that going to effect your time?

SV I'll do whatever I can to make it happen, but I don't have the time to actually do it. It's an incredible challenge to set up a low-power station and make it a total cultural station, run it like The Kitchen, where anyone can schedule a time and isn't asked what he or she is going to do. Let it go out, let it fail when it must.

AL How much has been done?

SV The engineering study is done, the application has been submitted to the FCC, and we've put out feelers for funding. If we're on the air a year from now, I would consider that a miracle. But it's possible.

AL Are either of you concerned about the proposed cuts in federal arts spending? To a large extent you've been funded by grants, haven't you?

WV Yes. Our work may have to change, somehow become more product-oriented. It is a strange lifestyle, and something of a mystery to me that we've been able to live this way: our hours are our own, no obligations, commissioned by something. By what? Survival has always been a team effort. I certainly couldn't have gone this far alone.

SV Video couples do better. They can share equipment.

WV But I must confess that the most free support I ever got was from the government. In teaching there was always a payoff, and the direct work for business was always the least honest.

SV It's interesting to think how art flourishes where the money is. We saw it in New York, where the New York State Arts Council was so active and really radical in its funding. The money came there, and the creativity exploded. It's probably the same thing that happened with the Medicis.

WV We're basically interested only in supported art, rather than art that makes it commercially. I'm interested in imperfections, ambiguous products, the dying, the weak. For me, the strong, established things eventually become oppressive and boring.

AL Who benefits from your work?

SV I ask myself that every day. I don't know.

WV Not many people seek what we do, except for our own colleagues. In the future, however, our work will inevitably be relevant. Perhaps even popular.

AL So, in that way, the federal and state funding agencies can be very farsighted.

WV Yes. The early funding of video, in the '60s, was done with the idea that art could cause social change. Video looked like it could be a tool in the hands of the people. It was very seductive in that way, and politicians wanted to be on the side of the people, so they backed video. That evaporated in the '70s. But there's still a tradition in this country of supporting experimental work. That's the way the system works.



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