

Television comes into focus as art form™

Steina and Woody Vasulka have been making video art since the early 1970s, when they had to haul TV monitors across New York by taxi in order to show their work.

Today, every cutting edge gallery has access to video equipment. And in the small world of video art, the Vasulkas are stars.

Their work is shown in prestigious displays, such as last year's Whitney Museum biennial exhibition in New York. They are respected as video pioneers and also as founders of The Kitchen, the 15-year-old New York experimental space originally devoted to video art.

But the world hasn't totally caught up with the couple. Private art patrons do not yet collect videos, and the market for the Vasulkas' work remains limited to museums and libraries. Their income comes from teaching, lecturing and screening their creations at places such as Denver's Center for Idea Art, where they are showing their breathtaking collaboration, *The West*.

The Vasulkas, who moved to Santa Fe in 1978, made *The West* as a celebration of the Southwest. Steina Vasulka did the visuals for the 28-minute production, and her husband created the electronic score, a kind of space-age hum that matches the slow pace of unfolding images. Sixteen monitors stacked in two rows play two slightly different tapes of *The West* simultaneously, in the visual equivalent of musical counterpoint.

"If you have only four or six monitors, you're looking at them as cinematography on a straight screen. The idea is it's happening within your vision, and it's also happening outside your vision," Steina Vasulka explained.

Filmed in New Mexico and Arizona, *The West* pans across many landscapes, including the Chaco



Woody and Steina Vasulka bring *The West* to life via TV monitors in a unique art display through April 14 at the Center for Idea Art in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts Galleria.

LINDA McCONNELL/Rocky Mountain News

Canyon Indian ruins and an installation of huge outdoor radio telescopes. These subjects link the ancient Indians, who used stone markers to map the stars, with modern westerners who use science to track the sky.

The most dazzling aspect of the video is its kaleidoscopic transformations. Images do not just ap-

pear, they unfold from right to left in vertical strips. Part of an autumn scene is reflected in a mirrored sphere, and natural hues are heated up, so that sky is bluer than blue and sandstone becomes bright

red-orange. Color also is altered to create an occasional turquoise mesa or add a purple accent. *The West* thus becomes a mesmerizing kinetic painting, with one view more beautiful than the next.

The Center for Idea Art also is screening five short videos by both Vasulkas. These works, each approximately 8 minutes, reflect the artists' interest in using the native properties of video to create art. One segment, for example, was made by manipulating magnetic forces around a cathode ray tube to turn a test pattern into a changing abstract design.

Unlike the younger generation of video artists, most of whom cut their teeth on Saturday morning television, the Vasulkas first encountered video as adults. Steina Vasulka was trained as a violinist in her native Iceland, and her Czech-born husband was an industrial engineer and filmmaker. They began working in video after

moving from Europe to New York, and the rapport was immediate.

"It was a medium that was accessible, transparent. You put a tape on and played it back instantly," Woody Vasulka enthused. "In my case, the whole idea that the picture can be changed electronically became extraordinarily powerful and completely eliminated my interest in film.

"It was a medium that was so easy to work with, so rewarding, so philosophical. It gave us a whole practical philosophy about energy and time. And we didn't have to go next door to the laboratories. We didn't have to have actors to work with. We were home, working on our own schedule, our own time." While many younger video artists are fascinated with commercial television, the Vasulkas see their work as diametrically opposed to the popular medium. Steina Vasulka compares the difference between video and commercial television to the difference between

literature and newspapers.

"Literature aims always at some kind of cultural achievement that I think I'm aiming at — I'm not saying I'm successful. Whereas a newspaper aims at entertainment and information," she said.

Her husband was even more adamant. "Television as an environment is very impoverished. Any work you see on television is instantly trivialized by the context, by the mercantile ideology.

"The only protest we can make is to work with television differently. Any breakdown of cultural cliché is very important," he said.

The Vasulkas' videos will be shown through April 14 at the Center for Idea Art in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts Galleria, 14th and Curtis streets. Hours are noon to 6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, and 1 to 4 p.m. Sundays. Information: 629-7813.



Eye on Art

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