

REVIEW: VIDEO

Six TV monitors capture a kaleidoscopic desert.

By RICHARD HUNTINGTON
News Critic

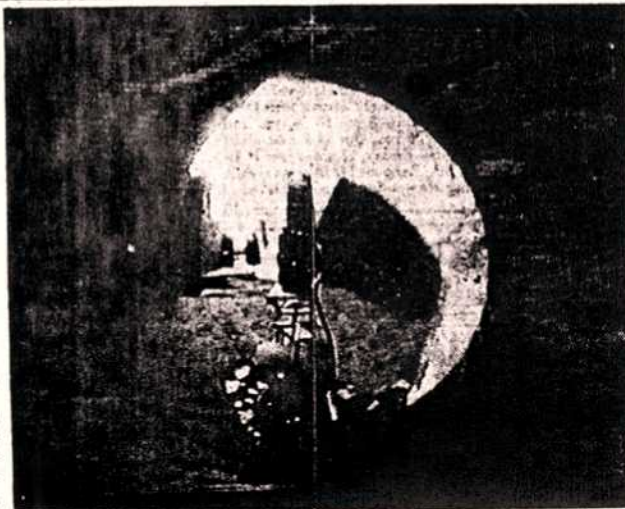
VIDEO, with its small electronic stage, tends to cramp the aesthetic field. As in ordinary television, our vision is, in effect, trapped within a 21-inch box.

One way around this for video artists is an installation using a number of monitors. This effectively can break the limited physical boundaries of the single monitor and decentralize the video image.

Steina and Woody Vasulka, who are showing a six-screen installation called "The West" at the Michael C. Rockefeller Art Center at Fredonia State College, demonstrate the impressive effects possible with such multi-monitor pieces.

Here, the six monitors are set in a single row, horizontally, at the end of a narrow gallery. But the artists allow any number of configurations — vertical stacks, pairings, and so on. Why this is so, is hard to imagine. The spectacular scenes of the New Mexico desert which are captured here by Steina Vasulka's camera are ideally suited for this lateral arrangement.

In such a precisely worked-out piece this denial of responsibility for basic presentation smells of a musty avant-gardism, of a time when everything was daringly provisional. Those days are gone and the Vasulkas know it. Otherwise they wouldn't have made such an agree-



Disrupted Landscape/ The Vasulkas' "The West"

ably accessible work, a work that I think would make a terrific piece of public art.

Even with its slow pacing (the no time/all time of the '70s) and its complex structure it is a video that can be assimilated on a first showing by most audiences.

The subject matter is instantly appealing. Steina includes haunting images of the ancient ceremonial sites of the Anasazi people, ances-

tors of today's Pueblo Indians, which are interspersed with shots of a massive radio-telescope installation consisting of giant radio signal dishes and tall, blank concrete structures.

These scenes, combined and inter-graphed by a mechanized camera as they are reflected on a rotating mirrored sphere which looks very much like a giant version of the

"sun globes" that people used to set out in their gardens. This complex system allows the artist to abstract her subject and disrupt the natural orientation of the landscape.

The 30-minute tape falls into four "movements" which are seamlessly joined. The first sequence is based on rotations of various kinds. The sphere reflects mountain plateaus, which spin slowly as though we were a hovering bird looking down from a great height. A sense of weightlessness is projected and the images perform their movements with something like the speed of the earth making time.

The color, with its electronically hyped intensity, further heightens the artificiality of the scenes. The landscape is cut and divided by fiery saturated oranges, luminous dye blues, and greens unearthly in their brilliance.

And all the time while we are watching the sphere, the camera watches us, a strunken, distorted reflection from the center of each screen.

After the languid rhythms of this sequence we are slowed even further. One of the big white dishes now fills the screens and the color momentarily settles into a washed twilight blue. Across this static image walks other images of dishes — smaller, clearer, and obviously with somewhere to go.

Just when we've had about enough of this somnambulant pace,

the artist shifts to a broad panning of unbroken horizons and stretches of railroad tracks so that we experience the sensation of rapidly sweeping by the landscape. In the context, this is pure frenzy. It's nicely regulated by the frames of the monitors which look like the frames of windows from a fast train.

The final sequence is divided into segments like postcards that appear to move the length of the six screens, exchanging places or, like dark curtains, revealing and hiding a brighter landscape inside.

The accompanying electronic music by Woody Vasulka has an ethereal, other-worldly quality. It is just the quality we would expect for this journey into a place that merges nature, ancient man and modern man in one "timeless" arena. It is too obviously appropriate, the kind of music to push our psyches into some zone beyond the pale of human influence.

Whether this lyrical and pleasant tape can stand repeated viewings and close analysis is open to question. I have my doubts. I saw the piece three times, and by the third time I felt that I had more or less exhausted the work.

"The West" was originally produced for the State University of New York's The Arts on television. Since its premiere in Albuquerque, the installation had been shown worldwide. It will continue at the center through Feb. 20.