

# Audio/video creation scans Southwest landscapes

By REED GLENN

Camera Visual Arts Critic

"The West," an audio/video installation by Steina and Woody Vasulka at Denver's new Center for Idea Art, looks very much like a group of televisions on the blink — in an extremely controlled, artistic way. In fact, it is a curved wall of 16 TVs with spectacular cases of horizontal drift, double exposure, split screens, and dizzying motion — all portraying striking scenes of the Southwest.

On the 16 color Sonys, stacked up in two rows of eight, multiple images overlay and overtake one another. On each set, scenes shuffle slowly across each other, like a deck of cards, showing Chaco Canyon — pungent burnt-orange adobe ruins and towering canyon walls, green and gold cottonwoods — juxtaposed with scenes of stark white radar scanners — all against a cerulean blue sky.

Not just one image, but two, three and four slide simultaneously across the screen under, over and between one another in a cascade of colors, angles and speeds. The images even travel from one screen to the next in a continuous merging flow that seems to defy the physical boundaries of the separate sets. Walls of canyons and ruins flow by like a stream. With the use of infrared film, adobe bricks of Anasazi ruins are transformed into blue ice blocks. Often one image flashing across the 16 TV screens suddenly becomes two images, arranged in a checkerboard pattern — the same one on every other TV.

We zoom in to fractures in a massive globe-shaped boulder,

scrutinize the patterns in the desiccated desert shrub bark and golden blooms, revel in sheer cinnamon cliffs against blue skies, and wonder at the evolution of human construction, from ancient Anasazi stonework to arrays of modern radar. Interestingly, some of the crisscrossed structure supporting the giant radar dishes resembles patterns from gothic cathedral ceilings or Indian basketry.

Much of the strength of this installation comes from its scale. Although each image would be captivating by itself, the impact of viewing 16 simultaneously is very powerful — if not from the voltage alone. Because the screens curve around the viewer they give almost a 3-D effect.

The artists sometimes photograph reflected images from a mirror-surface sphere placed a few feet in front of the camera. This acts like a crystal ball, creating a separate image from the background. The sphere seems to rotate as the photographer walks around it. Sometimes, with blue sky and clouds scudding by, the mirrored sphere looks like the spinning earth as viewed from space, but set within the Southwest landscape. The effect is striking, beautiful and mesmerizing.

Through the mirror sphere — which distorts images like a fish-eye lens — we also enter a grove of cottonwood trees, the ground carpeted with their fallen green and gold leaves. Because of the distortion of the sphere, the cottonwood trunks arch over like the supports in a vaulted cathedral. As the sphere rotates, the leaves appear to

## Center for Idea Art: a crossover gallery

It doesn't look like much. Concrete floors and an exposed-concrete rafter ceiling give a rather industrial and temporary feeling. A few hard plastic chairs give little visual respite from the stark interior.

But this is a place for ideas and performance. No cushiony carpets invite you to shuffle along in search of sofa-matching paintings and kitchen art curios.

Ideas are rather minimal physically, so the decor of this Center for Idea Art seems appropriate.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, traffic roars down Denver's 14th Street and turns left up Curtis. The uninspired '60s architecture of the Executive Towers flanks the left quadrant, in juxtaposition with the gothic-arched Mountain Bell building on the right.

You feel as if you're perched in the middle of the intersection, but safely, and given the perspective of a bird. You can gaze down Curtis Street into an infinity of

traffic — the sounds of which are well muffled.

The Center for Idea Art moved to this uptown (downtown?) location in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts last July. Formed a little over three years ago, the gallery began in the warehouse and artists' loft section of Larimer Street in Denver, created by artists John Wilson, Brian Dreith and Ed Lowe. Only Lowe, now the director, remains.

The CIA's founders formed the gallery to show high-quality, conceptually based contemporary art: art that can be difficult to place in commercial and other galleries because of its format, concepts, attitudes or size; art where the emphasis is on ideas and performance rather than on marketable objects.

Since it formed, the CIA's goal has been to encourage experimental work by emerging artists, as well as to expose area audiences to nationally known performance artists. And, for the past three years, it has successfully done both.

Originally, says Mary Jones, assistant director and an "emerging video artist" herself, the CIA was more for the arts community than the general public. But now organizers hope to cross over to a more general audience with crossover art forms — a combination of visual and performance arts. "Now we're focusing on all of Denver," says Jones.

For starters, she hopes to attract people who attend events at The Denver Center.

It's difficult to operate a gallery that makes no profit through the sale of artists' work, so the CIA depends on grants and its membership program. The gallery has worked collaboratively with such diverse organizations as the Mayor's Commission on the Arts, Feyline Presents and the Colorado Dance Festival and has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities and the Denver Mayor's Commission on the Arts.

— REED GLENN

## Costello starts over

(From Page 1B)

out a savagely frenzied version of his tenderest ballad. No one present would have been surprised if he'd fallen over dead right there.

All in all, it was a fascinatingly morbid display of anguished self-parody from the Woody Allen of rock 'n' roll. But it was also a colossal dead end, and Costello knew it. His alienation was even more evident the following night when he and the Attractions played an unannounced opening set for Nick Lowe. The crowd screamed for old favorites but he ignored them and seemed far more interested in doing old country and blues standards than his own songs.

Soon after that, Costello took some time off and played a series of solo acoustic shows with T-Bone Burnett. The two also collaborated last year on a zippy raveup single, "The People's Limousine," under the name the Coward Brothers. Then Costello legally changed his name back to Declan MacManus, put the Attractions on hold and started recording his latest album with one of the unlikely casts of musicians in rock history.

The result is the much-anticipated *King of America*, by The Costello Show featuring Elvis Costello (Columbia), as honest a presentation of himself as MacManus can produce after a decade as Elvis Costello. He has been well aware of his own image and how he manipulated it all along, even if nobody else was. *Get Happy*, his 1980 quasi-soul album, includes "The Imposter" (the moniker under which he has since released records in England), featuring the immortal line, "When I said that I was lying, I might have been lying." Clever double talk, but it was beginning to make sense, and he found that an alarming prospect.

By now, Costello/MacManus desperately wants out of the whole myth, the crippling strait-jacket that others' expectations have imposed on him, and if it means disowning everything he's ever done, fine. "This time he means it," read the ads for *King of America*, and that he

does. Side one, track one: "It was a fine idea at the time, now I'm a brilliant mistake." Side two, track seven: "And now you say you've got to go, well if you must you must, I suppose that you need the sleep of the just." Yeah, and you can read me the riot act while you're at it.

*King of America* is a tough one to call, as it is so obviously a transitional work. While this album doesn't live up to its promise, it's at least a big step in the right direction. And if nothing else, it should have every Costello fan pulling out all his or her albums for reassessment and reassurance.

With Burnett's characteristically minimalist production, and session contributions from Elvis Presley's TCB band and jazz greats like Earl Palmer and Roy Brown (the Attractions show up on just one track, "Suit of Lights"), *King of America* comes off as a bit contrived in its attempt to "sound American." At just under an hour, it certainly doesn't lack ambition, either. Still, it's a relatively honest attempt to start over from scratch, and the spare, stripped-down accompaniment nudges Costello into the vocal performance of his career.

Much of the material is written from the perspective of an immigrant making his way into American life, particularly "Brilliant Mistake," "American Without Tears," the boozy rendition of J.B. Lenoir's "Eisenhower Blues" and "Jack of All Parades." As is to be expected of the hyper-literate Costello, memorable throwaway lines abound: "Now we don't speak any English, just American without tears"; "She said she was working for the ABC News, it was as much of the alphabet as she knew how to use"; "All the vultures tuning in on you, and they're hungry...."

But Costello bares it all on an unlikely cover of the Animals' classic "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." He brings a haunting urgency to the song, screaming the chorus with hoarse desperation. Yes, it could be that Declan MacManus really is just a misunderstood soul whose intentions are good, and has been all along.

## Benefit for Big Brothers Inc. stars Titus, Denver Symphony

DENVER — George Orwell didn't tell us that there is also a Big Brother whose watchful eye is focused on good deeds.

Big Brothers Inc. is a local service organization that provides father figures for boys and girls from fatherless homes.

It's appropriate that famed opera baritone Alan Titus should come to Denver today for a gala concert to benefit Big Brothers. Titus, a native of the city, benefited from this program as a "little brother" in his own childhood.

Titus went on to gain a Grammy Award for his recording of "The Merry Widow."

The concert is intended not only to raise funds, but to raise community consciousness about Big Brothers as well. The organization currently has 500 fatherless children on its waiting list.

Titus will join forces with the Denver Chamber Orchestra, conducted by James Setapen, at 8 p.m. in downtown Trinity Church for this special event.

The program offers Gounod, Verdi, and lots and lots of Mozart. Admission — including a post-concert reception — is \$18. For information and tickets, call 377-8827.

— WES BLOMSTER

change from green to gold, from left to right.

The audio portion of "The West" is almost subliminal. Rather than hearing what we normally think of as music, we hear an all-encompassing vibration reminiscent of the soundtracks of science fiction movies. To me, this was like the imagined sound of the great cosmic motor humming — eerie, timeless.

These artists have succeeded in capturing the beauty of the Western landscape in an exciting medium. And it has taken them the past 20 years to perfect some of these techniques.

Steina, born in Iceland, originally studied violin and played in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Woody was born in Czechoslovakia where he studied industrial engineering. Later he studied film and television at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he met Steina. The couple moved to New York City in 1965 and became interested in mixed media art, which at the time was strongly influenced by the writings of Marshall McLuhan.

McLuhan identified two media of communication: hot media, which "extend one single sense in 'high definition' — for example photographs and television; and cool media, which demand a high level of participation or completion — such as

printed matter.

Captivated by the whole movement, the Vasulkas experimented with the new "hot medium" of video. They were well-known in New York City as the founders of "The Kitchen," a mecca for video artists in the '70s. Techniques they helped evolve include altering video signals inside the television monitors, using specially designed equipment (a Horizontal Drift Variable Clock) to control horizontal drift for special effects, and creating images with video-activated sound. They based much of their early work on various manifestations of electromagnetic energy.

In addition to "The West," the current exhibition includes a large screen set on which earlier videos created by the Vasulkas run continuously.

"The West," an installation by Steina and Woody Vasulka, continues through April 14 at the Center for Idea Art, located in the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, 1000 14th St., Denver. Hours are noon to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1-4 p.m., Sunday. The Vasulkas will lecture on their work on March 26 and 27. Admission for the lectures is \$2.50 free for members; otherwise, admission to the CIA is free during gallery hours. For more information, call 629-7813.

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