

The Vasulkas

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Today it's hard to imagine the excitement generated by the introduction of the Sony "Portapak" in 1969. Though not "portable" by today's standards, using half-inch reel-to-reel tapes (much like audiotapes, and only recording in black & white); the Portapak revolutionized a generation of artists' understanding of image and time. In comparison to the simplest 16mm sound sync setup with crew, the Portapak finally made spontaneous roving sound and image documentation technically feasible and as well as affordable, and the attraction of instantaneous playback or closed circuit room situations proved irresistible in an atmosphere still reeling from the upheavals of the sixties.

A number of artistic tendencies quickly emerged. The one-man media activist espousing global connectivity and individual empowerment used a political language now oddly reminiscent of the then unrealized global internet age. On the other side of the fence, the art-world community found a tool for autobiographical diaristic and voyeuristic investigations, as well as for an examination of real-time mirror situations, often realized in gallery spaces.

The Vasulkas, among the first to get their hands on this famous artifact, pursued neither of these routes. After passing the initiation phase of documentation, from rock concerts, to informal events at Warhol's Factory, and western American landscapes, they quickly turned their attentions to the medium itself, in an almost obsessive life-long attempt to understand the materiality and laws of what they themselves, early on, defined as the "Electronic Image". They understood a parallel relation between the electronic image and sound signal, both being monitorable by the same equipment and following the same physical laws, and they incorporated this relation in their aesthetic proposal, exploring the possibilities of an sound-controlled image (and visa-versa) to this day. By not participating in the commodity-based art environment which quickly overtook even the most "unsellable" art; they prioritized the creation of a support world around themselves, through a kind of subtle propagandizing of their interests among new generations and the persistent archiving of artistic results.

The Vasulkas have always been fascinated by the creation of new technical tools, and their work reflects a kind of playful discovery of a medium that continually reveals itself anew through new technologies of control and manipulation, whether analogue or digital. They have fostered and encouraged countless technicians, tinkerers, programmers and artists in a collective creative dialogue, always furthering a collective knowledge as a context for their own work. At the same time, they have experimented with a variety of support and educational structures, from the founding of "The Kitchen" in New York - one of the first informal "loft" presentation spaces - to their years as teachers at the Center for Media Study in Buffalo, to their retreat in an adobe studio/house in Santa Fe, New Mexico where they recently started a research and educational institute called "The Art and Science Laboratory".

With the work of artistic couples it is always difficult to assign separate roles. Theirs is a collaboration which seems to compliment their individual characters and backgrounds: Woody, a Moravian-born film school-graduate, has the curiosity and patience of an engineer and scientist; Steina, a classically trained violinist born in Iceland, carries an intuitive sense of musical and natural structure. Their enormous output of over thirty years includes years of collective experimentation, but they have also allowed themselves the space to develop their own interests individually. Steina, in installations, tapes and performances, explores a moveable optic eye in landscape and in the complexities of fundamental natural elements. She has developed a performance system in which her violin controls real-time image projection. Woody, investigating the digital image and navigation through a digitized environment, has been exploring themes of memory, the digital theater, and the "New Epistemic Space". They merge a European sensibility with the "do-it-yourself" inventive culture of the North Americans, creating an unusual mix in aesthetic approach and inventive spirit. Both are more interested in sharing the process and excitement of creation as the embodiment of their endeavor, rather than resting on the authority of any individual work.

That the Vasulkas appear in histories of video art and new media as "early pioneers" doesn't really tell the complete story. A "pioneer" seems to imply an early discoverer, after which other generations occupy the territory. But the Vasulkas are as productive today as they were in the early seventies, ever attentive to other like-minds, always in that process of research and experimentation which informs all their work.

Sometimes from moments of "finding" comes a lifetime of things to do.

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