Video Art Turns to Abstract Imagery

By DAVID L. SHIREY

"Video is an art unto itself, with its own reality, visual language and its own conception of time and space," says Woody Vasulka, one of the increasing tribe of "video artists" who maintain that their medium is as much an art form as painting, sculpture and film.

For almost 10 years, artists ave been using video equipment as an element in sculptural constructions or as a means of making documentaries and recording happenings, events and performances of various kinds. More recently, they have begun to create films on videotape that are devoted to abstract imagery.

To show what's been accomplished in the newer work, Mr. Vasulka, with a group of other young video artists, is presenting a "Video Festival" at The Kitchen in the Mercer Arts Center, 240 Mercer Street. Running through Thursday, from 8 P.M. on, it offers a rich diversity of films by artists from all over the country.

Like a rapid succession of moving abstract canvases, the films show what seems to be an infinity of shifting, shimmering patterns in black and white and in color. In art critics' terminology, one might say that the styles of the films are related to everything from surrealism through geometric and lyrical abstraction to color field painting.

Because of its variety, the festival provides an opportunity for the public to become better acquainted with this electronic form of expression and to observe the different directions it has taken. Although a part of the work is tediously repetitive, displaying little imagination, there is enough inspired talent to warrant a visit. One of the most exciting aspects that the programs generate to the layman is the feeling of discovery, the impression of experiencing a new phenomenon.

Visitors to The Kitchen should not expect a well-appointed theater for the projections. They will be confronted rather with a loftlike room, honeycombed with wires, videotape recorders and a roomwide battery of TV monitors.

One of the most remarkable films was made by Stan Beck, a young Californian. His work is an outstanding visual creation of dynamic spirals and floral shapes in brilliant colors. Accompanied by the sounds of gurgling water, a baby's crying and shattering glass, the shapes move in and out of space on the screens like a languorous abstraction of ballet, creating a splendid variation of formal arrangements.

Created by Distortion

A New Yorker, Aldo Tambellini, has created stunning abstract patterns of black and white that shift about rhythmically. The works of Korean-born Nam June Paik offer a romantic, abstract expressionist type of design, created by distorting conventional TV imagery. In their own works, Mr. Vasulka and his wife, Steina, who is also responsible for organizing the feestival, use all of the TV monitors to create the illusion that a succession of geometric patterns is moving from screen to screen.

Some video observers have called video art kinetic painting. They have compared the screen to a canvas, the electronic equipment to brushes and the color devices to the palette. Others note the kinship of video art to film. Mr. Vasulka, who is considered the informal "dean" of The Kitchen, maintains that video offers immense possibilities for the exploration of imagery.

"Video is cheap," he said. "The low cost of videotape puts the artist at ease and encourages him to experiment more extensively. Extensive experimentation will lead him to many random and important discoveries."

Use of Magnetic Fields

Video artists employ various complex techniques to produce their imagery. One of the most common is "feedback," a method in which the artist points his camera directly at the monitor screen, deriving various images through camera manipulation. The artists also use devices such as the oscilloscope, or use magnetic fields to distort images into new patterns. They also feed material into computers for the creation of new designs, a process that Mr. Vasulka says "helps the artist enlarge his repertory of video imagery."

According to Mr. Vasulka, video art is still in its infancy. "We are still talking about techniques," he said. "We haven't begun to talk about esthetics." He added that no useful language about video had yet been developed and that video artists were still grappling with technical terminology such as "texturizing," "colorizing" and "scintillation."

"What is special about video art at this time," he said, "is that it isn't yet trapped in rigid rules. There are not yet any clichés and the artists haven't yet had time to develop the maniacal egos one finds in the other arts. All the video artists are like one big family learning from one another and thinking about video's big future."

The New York Times

Mr. and Mrs. Woody Vasulka in The Kitchen in the Mercer Arts Center, where the "Video Festival," films of abstract imagery, will run from 8 P.M. on, through Thursday.

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