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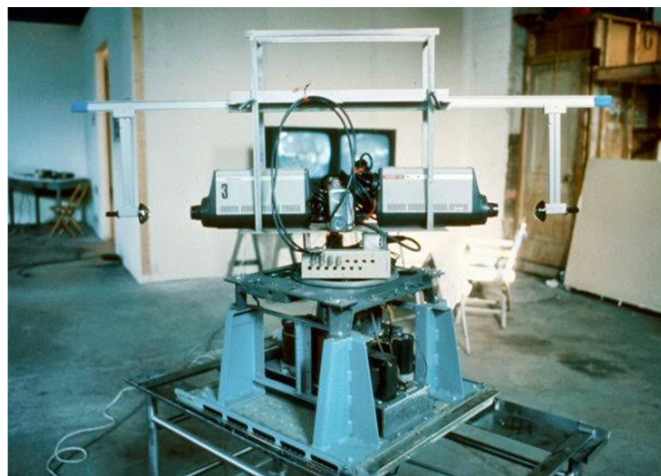
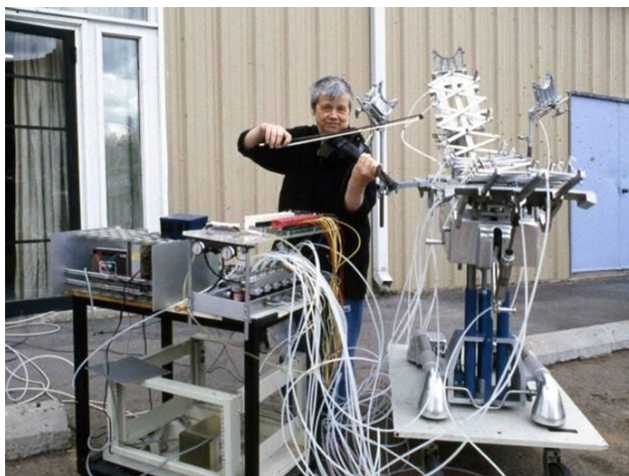
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2020-12-27 · On Screen

Machine Vision



The Vasulka Effect

dir. Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, 87min, 2019



Here is a remarkable and indispensable documentary by Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir about the Icelandic violinist Steina, and her husband Woody Vasulka. A film that had been shown in January 2020 at the Rotterdam International Film Festival and was off to a promising career before the pandemic struck. It is a moving and revelatory film about two artists who were about to be forgotten by media art history. It combines biography, never before seen archives, and a portrait of demise and rescue.

It is from the start a nomadic tale, of a classically trained violinist who goes off to communist Czechoslovakia to study music. She meets a young filmmaker, Bohuslav Woody Vasulka, who asks her to marry him and take him out of from behind the Iron Curtain. Which she does. While she had secured a place for herself with the Iceland Symphony orchestra, the two decide to move to NYC in 1965, where they will

become founding figures of video and media art, along with Nam June Paik, as well as the original founders of The Kitchen in 1971. Some of the Vasulkas' Kitchen archives, to which Ms Gunnarsdottir was given access, reveal commissioned footage at the time (as a means to make a living) ranging from a Jimi Hendrix performance to Miles Davis to a Rolling Stones press conference, as well as preserving performances by Jackie Curtis, Candy Darling and a young Patti Smith. There is a further musical bond between Steina and Paik: Steina was the trained musician while Paik had early ambition of being a pianist and a composer. This would lead him to Germany, to study with John Cage who in turn introduced him to the artists who ended up becoming the members of Fluxus which Paik rapidly joined. The Vasulkas were never part of a movement nor were they ever solicited by their peers.

Nonetheless, Paik, in a more art-oriented practice, and Woody and Steina in a more experimental and anarchic method, came upon a similarly singular intuition that would take their work onto very distinct paths. They both came to the realization that the signal at the core of video was what produced sound and image, and that its manipulation would affect both of them. The film has a few seconds of Paik and Steina discussing this. Video, as a creative tool, made its way into the hands of a new generation of artists and creators during the seventies. Its evolution as an art form would initially owe much to both of them. American and European artists, including Bill Viola, Gary Hill, John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald, Thierry Kuntzel, Robert Cahen, would each acknowledge what they owed either to Paik or to the Vasulkas, or both. But as Paik eventually encountered financial means that matched his

fame, with a legacy displayed in every major museum around the world, and a notable Paik Center near Seoul, the Vasulkas, who were guest professors (notably in Buffalo¹), and recipients of grants and fellowships, including Guggenheim grants, saw the distance they had skilfully nurtured with the art world suddenly increase. It would reach a point wherein they would continue to be occasionally invited by loyal admirers while being forgotten by far too many scholars and curators.²

The director shows throughout the film how the Vasulkas, like Paik, led a nomadic life, taking them from Europe to NYC and to Santa Fe in New Mexico. For those who were fortunate to visit the couple at their extraordinary adobe house in its heyday, the images of recent travels there by the filmmaker are achingly revealing of the dire conditions they were living in. Woody's illness is never addressed in the film nor does it need to be; the 'then and now' images tell us everything. And then there is Steina's aura and determination which illuminates the film from beginning to end, from the young woman who takes Vasulka to the west, to the artist who finds her own voice in the midst of all the technological apparatus that surrounds them, making her a key pioneer of ecological media art, to the eighty year old woman dancing outside her home. One telling moment of her presence is when she needs to go to NYC, and for the purpose of the film she returns to The Kitchen, which had moved a number of times over the years. In the process it became a well oiled and scheduled machine. As she meets the new director, Tim Griffin, who gives her a grand tour and introduces Steina to a colleague/staff member who has no idea who this old lady is, all we see in each shot of that sequence is Steina, all we hear is her accented voice which never changed. She explains that

when they founded The Kitchen, the program would be made daily depending on who came to perform that day. The new director responds with prestigious names (Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson) and Steina closes with 'it was a different New York then'.

As the film draws to the end, we are privy to a conversation with Don Foresta, their generational champion who was among the first to program American video art in Paris in the seventies. We see a frail Woody replying 'not too much and not no money', after listening to D. Foresta explaining how one venue wants to exhibit their work *though* the curators also have their own ideas as to how they want to show it. Steina adds a remark expressing how she feels about the role of curators. And yet there is the happy Icelandic ending, thanks to a young Icelandic curator who 'discovers' their work, manages to get the government to fund a 'Vasulka Chamber' in Iceland (the Czech Republic will later mirror this by celebrating Woody in Brno), and introduces them to a committed and trustworthy gallerist in Reykjavik. It leaves the spectator exhaling with relief while reflecting on the reality that no patron, no major venue or institution offered them 'shelter' for their remaining years.



The Vasulkas were fortunate to have a number of scholars who wrote

remarkably about their work, in America, notably Gene Youngblood, but also in Europe, especially in France where key video and media critics and professors, video festival directors, included them both in their curriculum and programs. It would have been interesting to inquire as to why it took so long for this recognition to happen. After a successful opening in the final minutes of the film, Steina slaps Woody on the chest and finally declares him an 'artist'. Who lived long enough to see this happen, before his passing in 2019.

[1] The video and media program that the Vasulkas devised at the University at Buffalo, New York, attracted artists such as Tony Conrad and Hollis Frampton. Dan Graham and Gary Hill would also teach there, as would noted Canadian media artist Sylvie Bélanger, who passed away in 2020.

[2] They would never bask in the legitimacy of a curator such as Hans Ulrich Obrist who places Nam June Paik within his pantheon of artists. It is likely however, and only a matter of time, before this happens to Steina. In the hope that The Vasulka Effect inspires someone to make a companion piece that will focus on the works and their process.

S.



Interview with director Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir

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Director Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, photo by Unnur Magna

1-You studied video art and media in San Francisco, and you worked with Skip Sweeney, Lynn Hershman Leeson, you met John Sanborn and other artists. Why didn't you want to become a video artist? Was being a documentary maker your goal from the start?

When I came to the USA I had a vague idea to become a journalist or a photographer. I first studied at UC Berkeley but I did not feel so good in this huge school. I started pursuing photography and I loved it. I then realised that often my photos were like a picture documentary. I was only 21 when I came to the USA and it was a bit overwhelming I guess that is not so strange now that I look back at this young kid from Iceland. I had come to San Francisco area

because I thought it was a gay mecca and I was interested in the gay movement. I remember Tom Ammiano had influenced me as I had seen some articles about him as a one of few openly gay teachers in the beginning of the 80's. He later ran for the SF board of Directors and mayor of San Francisco. I moved to video and film from photography and I really liked video because of its immediacy and I was really good with the technical aspects of video. I became a technician and I worked for Skip and later had a base at Skip's and I enjoyed meeting all these really creative creatures such as Lynn and John and Marc Huestis, and that was enough. I shied away from video art because a lot of it was very pretentious. I am more interested in issues, gay issues, feminism.... shining a light on injustices of the world. So I ended up as a documentary filmmaker. This is what I have been doing for 30 years.... I finished two very important projects, *The Vasulka Effect*, and *People Like That*, which you could say is my Magnum Opus. It took 27 years from start to finish. I documented how gay civil rights progressed here in Iceland. I also had a daughter with my partner in 2018, Another very important project :)

2- Besides Lynn Hershman Leeson, were there video artists working within a feminist framework that made an impact on you?

Well through SFAI (San Francisco Art Institute), BAVC (Bay Area Video Coalition) and Video Free America I met many artists. As far as feminists go, some were well known. I could name a few, like Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Ann Ethredge, Barbara Hammer,

Paula Levine, and Lynn Kirby. The Bay Area was so dynamic and I really enjoyed living there and revelling in the scene there.

3- As you encountered more and more of the Vasulkas' work, what was your impression? Were you yourself also interested in the capabilities of media technology?

Looking at their work I was first impressed by the really huge difference between the two individuals as the artists Steina and Woody. The Vasulka trademark was an old legacy I think it came mostly from their collaborations in the 70's. I was also surprised to find that they were much closer to experimental music really than I previously thought. That was a surprise. I would say 50/50 video and sound/music.

Like I said I am good with technology and I loved the immediacy of video which made me good in working with it. I used what I learned and applied it to my work as a filmmaker. But I think my intentions were always clear. After a nice conversation with Steina we agreed that she was happy with 100 monitors and one member in the audience but I wanted one monitor and 100 people in the audience. That is how it still is. When I was in art school people assumed I was on a track to become a video artist. I did not understand why people assumed so. I did a course with Jody Gillerman and Donald Day and they like many other assumed I was there to study video art... I asked why they thought so. and they started talking about this video artist from Iceland – Steina. I said Steina who? So I was on the scene long before the curator we encounter later in the film... :) I got to know Steina in San Francisco in 1987 when New

American Makers showed their work. I was curious about this supposedly great video artist. We struck up a friendship and in 1992 I was pissed off that no-one knew about her nor Woody in Iceland. I made a short tv program about Steina. After that we kept in contact. In 2013 I was passing through Santa Fe and they were dealing with their archives and were basically broke. I was a bit shocked and after leaving I thought now would be a good time to make a film about them. Important artists in the twilight of their career. I had no idea how things would turn out. I applied for a script writing grant and I came back one year later with my sound recordist Árn Ben and we started filming and recording.



4- You mentioned to me that it took 3 to 4 years to make the film. Could you comment on the funding process for the film?

The Icelandic film fund was instrumental in us being able to make the film. The project evolved after I first started working on it. I felt like I understood Steina as an Icelander and I thought I was only

going to make a film about her but after the first shoot it became clear that it would make no sense to do that. The Vasulka trademark is so strong and Woody was such a huge part of Steina's development. I got a seasoned co-producer on board who ended up being the main producer, Margrét Jónasdóttir, as I wanted to concentrate on directing and shooting the film. When I had changed my mind about the focus of the film that now included Woody, we were able to reach out to the Czech Republic and we found a co-producer there, Radim Prozháska. The film was also co-produced by one Swedish producer, Simon Klose, and a Danish Producer, Vibeke Vogel. Through them we had funding from SVT and DR, the national broadcasting corporations of Sweden and Denmark and from there we could get Nordic Funding. We thought about finding US money but we really didn't need it. BBC also came in with a good presale and it has aired on BBC ARTS. Steina handed me everything. 12 discs. 8TB each. —The Pandoras Box, I called them. I went through some of it and then I let my editor Jakob Halldórsson loose in it. Funnily enough we had talked, Steina, Woody and I, in the beginning, about going to New York and walking into the Kitchen and no one would know who they were. But Woody was out of it by the time NY came around and it almost happened like I had envisioned it. Steina was a bit reluctant to go to NY but I knew I had to film there. She suggested doing it in blue screen :) then the opportunity presented itself when a large Whitney show came about. I think Steina left the Kitchen intellectually very early on, she never looked back so she did not comment. The Vasulkas just moved on.

5- How did you all address Woody's illness? I would think that he wanted to keep going. Was there a discussion about it and what was your method of shooting around it?



At the beginning it was not an issue. I knew he had also prostate cancer and he would explain to me that he was now "a girl" as he was taking hormones. We would converse lightly about it. His memory lapses increased as we went along and he would just play along. He was always on as soon as the camera was on. We did not address it in particular but we made a decision to reveal it as it happened in real life. My editor and producer wanted to put it up front but I thought it should not taint the whole film but rather allow it to come forward towards the end. They, The Vasulkas, trusted me with it; Steina is also not at all co-dependent or controlling so that

was good for us. I think the balance was ok in the end. We could have shown a lot more stuff but it made no sense as I wanted to expose him as the brilliant mind that he is/was. This was also an issue with historian, critic and professor, Gene Youngblood. We tried to film with him 4 times. And each time we were in Santa Fe he was ill and unable to participate. Regretfully. I also had some concern for Woody and Stein's house and what it would become. My vision is that it should be preserved. Not sold. Also not a museum but somehow a working space, a place to experiment for those who are interested. But we shall see.

6- Are there other video and media artists you would want to focus on in a film?

Well when I talked to Americans they said it would be much easier to fund a film about the whole movement. But I am not sure if I want to make that film... :)

7- Has the film been in various festivals/ has it been broadcasted/ have any institutions acquired it?

The film has had a pretty good showing at festivals: It had its world premiere at Rotterdam International Film Festival last January. Unfortunately Covid has impacted us. It's been shown in Sweden, Holland, Finland, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Latvia, UK, Iceland, Buffalo NY. The New York Doc Fest was great and we have a great distributor in the USA, Juno Films, so I would expect there might be some sales to TV there. National Gallery of Art,,,, the USA

distribution is just off the ground. The film is now starting to be broadcasted on TV in Europe, Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, UK – BBC, Czech Republic, Slovenia and more.

Interview by S. November–December 2020

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