

Industrial, 1969 SONY CV PORTAPACK



Steina and Woody Vasulka with portapack equipment, San Francisco, 1972. Photo: Warner Jepson.

THE INTRODUCTION of the portapack into artistic formulation was paramount. In the late 1960's the use of video was confined to close circuit installations, a very elegant solution to the use of video in the gallery. With the invasion of tape on the scene it took some time to settle the problem of exhibition. Speaking to Steina about reel to reel machines Bruce Nauman put it more directly: "I almost dropped video when tape was introduced; when the tape ran out there was no one in the gallery to rewind it, thread it and run it again."

It was an entirely different story for the socially engaged. The portapack was considered a revolutionary tool, almost a weapon against the establishment. Overnight it dissolved the hegemony of documentary films. A vast number of genres sprang up (including the notorious 30 minute single take), and the documentary branch was never the same again.

The middle ground was also interesting. With tape new networks of distribution were quickly established. Video became truly international. It was easy to duplicate, mail, and view. With the introduction of the video cassettes in 1973 it became even easier, and harmonized with the exhibition purposes of video. By the mid-1970's video as art was fully entrenched in the galleries, with many developed genres, forms and concepts.

Only a few people tried to develop the so-called "abstract" genre. It failed in the first decade entirely. We and other people dealing with early synthetic images used tape primarily as extended studio material (input), and secondarily as a method of documentation of these new processes and phenomena unexpectedly popping up in front of our eyes.

Woody Vasulka