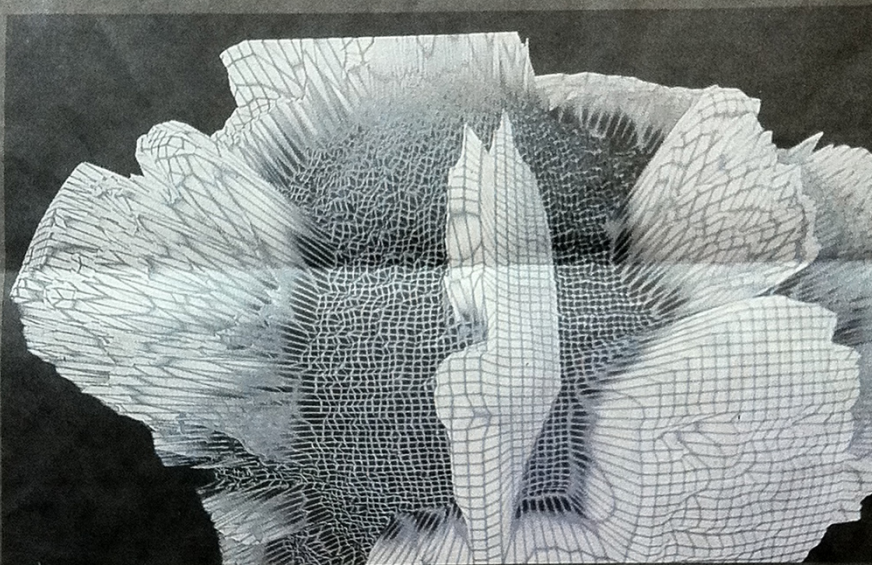Colors blossom within a spherical space in a still image from "Järmärk," an interactive video installation by Woody Vasulka, Steina and Rob Shaw, on view at Axle Contemporary mobile gallery.

Digitally transformed images pulse through spherical space in a still image from "Järmärk," an interactive video installation by Woody Vasulka, Steina and Rob Shaw, on view in Axle Contemporary mobile gallery.

MEDIUM OF MOTION

INTERACTIVE VIDEO EXHIBITION FOCUSES ON FACES

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am a long-standing admirer of and erstwhile collaborator in the exhibition of the video art made by Steina and Woody Vasulka. They rocked my world in 1973 during a foray to The Kitchen in New York City, where I saw their installation of video as environment that made me question my presumptions about space and time. I did not meet these pioneers of electronic arts in person until they moved to Santa Fe in 1979.

My initial contact was a 1972 snail mail request to include one of their early videos in an exhibition at the Toledo Museum of Art. Without any back-and-forth, they responded simply and efficiently by sending the asked-for video by return mail. This early work was a video of an everyday object — a French baguette — that appeared to drift in an electromagnetic field. It was a radical departure from the art-making processes that had been at play for thousands of years as exhibited in the museum's 35 galleries.

The Toledo Museum of Art is one of the USA's major encyclopedic collections of art and displays the evolution of art from Egyptian and Greek sculpture through Renaissance discoveries of perspective into modernism and the camera eye. At that time and continuing today, the

Art Issues

MALIN WILSON-POWELL

For the Journal

implications of Steina and Woody Vasulka's investigations into making art from a wholly new dimension — energy organized in waveforms — remains mostly underappreciated.

To view the artists' current iteration of their ongoing, lifelong development of 3-D objects rotating in dynamic, dimensional space, you can visit the mobile art gallery Axle Contemporary. The interior of this polished metal panel truck that moves to convenient parking spaces throughout Santa Fe during the run of their exhibitions has been transformed into a darkened neutral cube where visitors can interact with lively, sophisticated computer programs unlike any commercially developed computer environment.

If you go

WHAT: Järmärk; Woody Vasulka, Steina, and Rob Shaw

WHERE: Axle Contemporary mobile gallery. Twitter or Facebook to find updates on current location, or get location updates via SMS by texting "follow AxleLocator" to 40404.

WHEN: Through May 3. Closed Monday.

CONTACT: Matthew Chase-Daniel, 670-5854; or Jerry Wellman, 670-7612; or info@axleart.com.

A viewer's face undergoes a digital transformation in a still image from "Järmärk," an interactive video installation by Woody Vasulka, Steina and Rob Shaw, on view in Axle Contemporary mobile gallery.

Exhibition Explores Face-Time on Video

Titled "Järmärk" by Vasulka in reference to warm-weather carnivals that plied the roads and small towns in his native Czechoslovakia, when you enter Axle's darkened booth, you will find a chair placed in front of a small camera on a tripod with a large flat screen behind it. Each visitor and any companions will see themselves on the screen before they embark on interacting in "real time," i.e., simultaneous digital transformation of the image. The back-and-forth relationship is remarkably natural and intuitive between the flesh-and-blood movement and those as a computer-generated object in electromagnetic space.

On my two separate forays into "Järmärk's" magical mystery chamber, there were different control mechanisms: The first time, a viewer-operated joystick was up and running; and, the second time, the keyboard was in the hands of physicist Rob Shaw, Vasulka's current collaborator in this digital floating world.

There are at least three programs now available for exploration by the viewer. Each visitor's face is translated on the big video screen into moving topographical 3-D images. Everything is in constant motion, as a nose transforms into an extreme peak, or a mouth becomes an animated entryway to deep space. Each face is constantly morphing and distorting, squeezing and expanding. My experience included two primary modalities — the face as black-and-white patterns and topographical grids, and the face as luminous upward thrusting streams of delicate colors. On my walk to Axle's location at a public parking space on Guadalupe — in front of Site Santa Fe and the Santa Fe Farmer's Market, one of their regular places — I kept passing the lovely blooms of spring. The truly remarkable color program has an energetic, fresh petallike quality both in the vitality of their bursting and blossoming, but also in their tender blush tones. The electronic waves seem to be alive with pulses and shimmers.

It is wonderfully weird and mystifying to be seeing your own image become an object that is rotating in a way that is unframed. It is unframed because the space is almost always curving. If the program does produce a planar grid of your head, this object floats and turns with the graceful, eerie quality of the baby adrift at the end of Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

For more than three decades, Steina has concerned herself with spherical space, an interest Vasulka characterizes as fighting the frame. She has not been interested in the X-Y-Z hierarchies of the white cube. After all, we do live on a round planet that is in constant looping celestial movement. Steina's work always makes me wonder, How did we get so square?

Steina and Vasulka are monumental, worldwide innovators in the field of video and electronic art.
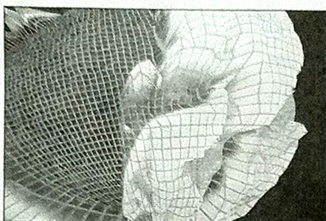
Digitally transformed images pulse through spherical space in a still image from "Järmärk," an interactive video installation by Woody Vasulka, Steina and Rob Shaw.

Vasulka initiated the original differentiation of electronic vibrations in sound and image waveforms from the predictability of photographic and cinematic narrative conventions. They are artists with specialized, aesthetic styles who are formalists.

Over the decades, they have found savvy scientific collaborators who helped build experimental analog machines and write adventuresome computer programs to realize their signature aesthetic intentions. Rob Shaw, their collaborator for digital experimentation during the last few years, is a multitalented 1998 MacArthur Fellow who has updated earlier analog "real time" video manipulations into digital algorithms. He not only brought the beautiful color to these programs, he was also able to write the code — without skipping a beat — to fulfill one of Steina's longstanding desires.

As you watch the surface of your face turned into an object rotating majestically in space, Shaw has managed to build an image that has a back side, which shows what is behind the frontal topography.

In its metaphysical origins and lifelike self-generating imperfections, the experience of "Järmärk" is utterly unrelated to our current exposures to digital technology in the dead, polished space of corporate video games and airless animation. This is what can happen when artists master industrial-strength tools.