

# Video Art

VICTOR ANCONA



Victor Ancona is a marketing communications executive and award-winning photographer, cinematographer and graphic designer.

## STRANGE BREW: What's Cooking At The Kitchen?

New York City's thousands of restaurants offer a dazzling variety of cuisines, running the gamut from Big Macs and Nathan's hot dogs, to steak au poivre with red wine sauce or potted squab. New Yorkers and visitors alike, however, crave a menu of a different sort when visiting The Kitchen in the SoHo district of lower Manhattan. The Kitchen Center for Video

and Music is, as its name implies, a contemporary art center specializing in the arts that incorporate video, music, and performance art, singly or together.

So why Kitchen? "There's a short history attached to the name," Robert Stearns, executive director, told me as I interviewed him amid the click-click-click sound of the electric typewriter played by Eric Bogosian, assistant to the director and peripatetic booster and publicity maven of the center. "Video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka met Howard Wise as soon as Wise incorporated the not-for-profit Electronic

Arts Intermix, and the notion of having a space for artists to show videotapes was born. This was in January of 1973. With the help of Andy Mann, a space in the old Broadway Central Hotel was cleared out—literally the kitchen of the hotel—thus the name. It stuck, and it stuck hard, but we have problems with it," said Stearns.

Bob Stearns, who became involved in the project about a year and a half after its start, related how the Vasulkas' energy, devotion, and equipment helped the fledging center to grow under the aegis of Electronic Arts Intermix, with Howard Wise overseeing fiscal matters.

A month before the Broadway Central literally collapsed in August, 1973, The Kitchen fortuitously left the hotel and, after arduous negotiations, moved to its present location. The facilities are now housed in a large loft space on the second floor of 484 Broome Street, a building designed by Alfred Zucker and built in 1891, now designated a landmark by the New York Landmark Preservation Commission.

Until the summer of 1972, the Vasulkas were responsible for the overall direction of the center, considerably helped by Shridhar

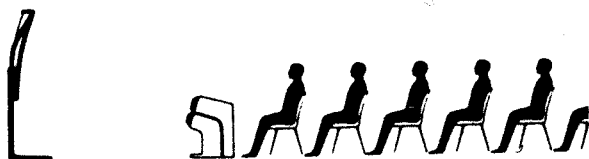
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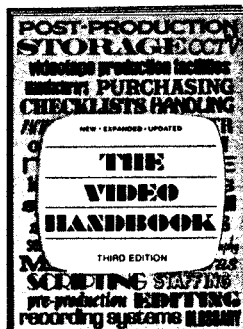


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Bapat, who acted as video program director. Bob Stearns, then working with Paula Cooper at her gallery, often helped Jim Burton and Rhys Chatham with the music programs at The Kitchen. When the Vasulkas left the city, Howard Wise realized the need for organization, direction, and financial accounting for The Kitchen. He offered the directorship to Bob Stearns.

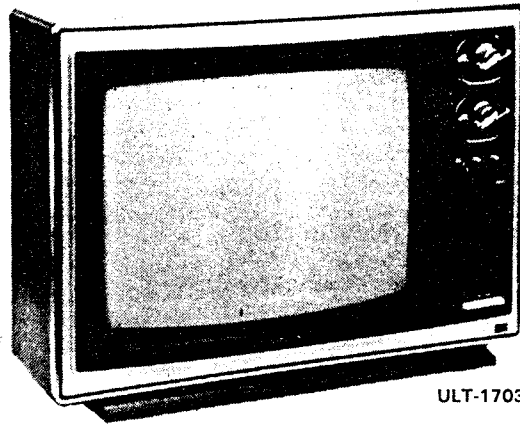
In January, 1974, Stearns brought in Carlota Schoolman as video director. Besides Ms. Schoolman, the staff includes Michael Shamburg, video assistant, Garrett List, music director, and Rhys Chatham, music assistant. Music directors are changed each year by choice because Stearns prefers active composers who would prefer to limit their time at The Kitchen lest it interfere with their output. "It helps to cycle the music sensibility among different people with different attitudes and keeps the program from being locked into one ideology," said Stearns.

In 1974, The Kitchen Center for Video and Music cut the umbilical cord tying it to Electronic Arts Intermix and started life on its own. The nonprofit, tax-exempt cultural organization, Haleakala, Inc., was formed to run The Kitchen. It is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, private foundations, corporations, and individual memberships.

Haleakala (House of the Sun) is the name of the largest dormant volcano in the world, located on the island of Maui, Hawaii. Bob Stearns's father, a physicist, worked atop Haleakala for four years, at the Lockheed observatory. "Haleakala is a huge mountain, 10,000 feet high, and when you stand at sea-level and you see the summit on one constant slope, it's grant," Bob exclaimed.

"The name (Kitchen) sticks well once you know us, but it's still deceptive to anyone on the outside, and the deceptiveness of the name sounds like a kind of in-group, which might inhibit the growth of our audience," Stearns said. The confusion even extends to foundations where Stearns spends considerable time explaining that The Kitchen is not a restaurant! "The name to me," said Bob, "is outdated. It has a 1960's antiestablishment ring to it. It's too cute." But whatever its name, the Kitchen is a Mecca for an ever-growing number of enthusiasts interested in the contemporary interaction of the arts.

There is always something cooking at The Kitchen. A year's schedule consists of 14 exhibitions, 25 screen-

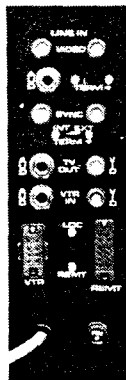


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ings and video performances and 39 music concerts. By appointment, individuals may use the free facilities of The Kitchen's viewing room to watch their own tapes, or study the works in the center's collection and archives. The collection consists of videotapes that were specifically made as artworks, while the archives document live performances or concerts held at The Kitchen. As the center's brochure tells it, The Kitchen "exhibits art like a gallery, presents performances like a theatre, offers music like a concert hall, collects art like a museum, and could broadcast

like a radio or television station."

With an installation of a cable-tv link at The Kitchen in February, 1976, attempts have been made to schedule exhibitions and videotapes for viewing by the more than 80,000 subscribers of Manhattan Cable Television. As a result, an independent organization, Cable SoHo, made up of local art centers, group and individual artists, has been formed to bring about the realization of an regularly scheduled arts program to reach the wider community. The proponents of Cable SoHo are excited over the possibility of

eventually having their own channel on which entertainment and informational tapes, as well as art tapes made by independent producers, are regularly telecast and FM-simulcast.

The Kitchen's touring program, still in its infancy, dedicated to increasing the awareness of video and contemporary music, aims at creating an interchange between artists and the public in museums, schools, and community centers.

Video artists are chosen to show their work at The Kitchen either by invitation or through selection from submitted proposals and, in order to schedule new work, artists are not asked to show more often than once every two years, except for rare exceptions.

Individual memberships this year have hovered around the 450-500 mark, with a 25 percent growth in proceeds from membership donations. Even though director Stearns would like to see the membership roster grow, he contends that it is a fair representation of a dedicated group of supporters, considering how many cultural institutions vie for the public's attention and time.

A fifth-generation Californian, Stearns started undergraduate work in oceanography at the University of California at San Diego, although he had been interested in art as a youth. After a one-year stint studying architecture at another university, he returned to UCSD to earn his B.F.A. in art and art history, where he managed a number of large museum exhibitions before graduation. On a short visit to New York while a student, Stearns thought the city was a great place to live, but not to visit.

Besides heading The Kitchen Center for Video and Music, Bob Stearns is assistant to the director of the Great Lakes College Association Arts Program, in which 12 private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest conduct off-campus programs, one of them being an arts apprenticeship program in New York City. "Approximately 70 percent of the students return to New York and become professionals in their chosen field," said Bob, pointing to his assistant, former Oberlin theatre student Eric Bogosian, as an example.

Trying to make The Kitchen an arts organization that is united in terms of purpose, services, filling the artists' as well as the public's needs, and making everything balance together into something that really works as an enterprise, is Robert Stearn's challenge. The art and intellectual fare ladled at The Kitchen should not be missed, especially if you hunger for the latest in video art.

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