INTERVIEW WITH WOODY VASULKA, SANTA FE, NM

CHRIS HILL


CH: You came to the U.S. from Prague in 1965. What artistic agendas did you bring with you? What did you find here?

WV: My major education was in Czechoslovakia. I had a film school education, where we learned a coding system to read cinema. We couldn't make movies, because...in any case, I was of course infected by the modernist movement, which was left-oriented, and especially affected by early avant-garde critics, like the film group No Wave. I came from an early cinema. They were the major influences on an entire generation. My generation felt the euphoria of the post-WWII new world of art and progressive...The Soviet Man's ideal was to give a lesson in brotherhood and social justice to the West.

My coming of age in the 1950's happened when there was a crisis on this kind of thinking. We all had to develop strategies for how to criticize the government pictorially, or determine how the narrative system could survive but remain critical. We had to develop this metaphorical language. We didn't have time to go back to materiality...to the machines, the cogs and wheels that modernists had practiced through the Bauhaus and elsewhere...The major narrators were still the theoreticians—like Walter Benjamin—to portray a social situation. I was interested in the early modernists' preocupation with machines, but materialism remained in Europe.

When I arrived in New York this wasn't the agenda at all. It was video progress. A vision of the structuralist movement was emerging, but I was skeptical because we had a real avant-garde in Europe. The American avant-garde didn't seem to be as active as before. It took me a couple of years, to recognize that the new element in the American avant-garde was technology, especially electronics...I was disappointed...

So there were two influences at that time. The first was the social avant-garde, not so much the art avant-garde. The second was of course the technological avant-garde. I had completely struck up...So we went around with a portapak and shot endlessly—theater groups, performances, and various events [which is documented in their tape Participation, 1969].

The second influence was of course technology. I started with light. I still felt that light and shadow were the agenda, the typical filmic agenda...So I started to work with strobe lights as discrete devices. I understood that there was something in the discreteness of the frame, a flash, a quantum. Then I encountered video and understood that with video there was a new principle that would negate film or extend film or restructure film. I gave up film overnight. I went into working with video, which was complex. I understood completely free territory, no competition intellectually—on the contrary, it was rejected right from the beginning by theorists and philosophers of film. So it was a very free medium. And the community was very young, naive, new, strong, cooperative, no anomalies, kind of a welcoming tribe. So we ganged together the west coast, east coast, Canadian west and east coasts and we created overnight a spiritual community.

This movement was motivated by two influences. First, the portapak, the first ever portable system which was comprised of a camera cabled to an open reel-to-reel 1/2" machine...I was interested in video experiment in television/video into a national movement. And second, the possibility of generating images by non-linear means, by playback, which I had seen in an experiment carrying the narrative codes. It was a very optimistic period. Between 1969-74 I produced synthesized images, either out of feedback from other television/radio instruments. Steina gave up her violin career and went full time as well. We happened to like the same way of working...We thought of sound and image as equivalences, but in the same terms, common units, fundamentals from which to build a vocabulary perhaps, and without the problem of the fine art context. None of us would introduce new compositional principles. All our works were linear, in the form of demos, bringing certain artifacts or phenomenology of out...This was our fate, to bring those phenomenological experiments from the technical environment to the aesthetic arena, to make a transition between these two points.

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WV: Running the daily operations were Dmitri Devyatkin and Shridhar Bapat. There was a religion about disseminating information. It was an activist period. Everyone was trying to disclose the secret secrets of systems, systems' thinking and performance.

CH: How did Howard Wise’s gallery function?

WV: It was an inspiration... In the late ’60’s he exhibited technology and art. His track record was amazing.

But he closed down his gallery before the Kitchen opened and had re-incorporated as Electronic Arts Intermix, which became the sponsor when we went to the state council (NY State Council on the Arts) for money.