One of the highlights of the third Australian Video Festival was Woody Vasulka's astonishing new videotape The Art of Memory (1987). How does one begin to talk about this masterpiece of contemporary electronic image making? Vasulka's new work will, I suspect, revolutionise future conceptual and visual trends in video art, and by the same token, expand the aesthetic parameters of computer art. Undoubtedly, Vasulka's presence in the history of image-processed video is a central one (shared by his wife and
Memory, Vasulka's visual framework employs digital mission are deployed to express (rather uncharacteristically) soundstocallitthat.b

All these strange images and sounds of destruction and loss, challenging our perceptual convictions, depend on Vasulka's ability to generate them through the computer, but at the same time digital images like the Rutt-Etra video synthesizer. I say 'unpredictable' because the Vasulkas have frequently testified how the dialogue between themselves and their imaging machines is at times beyond their control. To his admission of theirs may account for the surreal ambiguity of the video's unprecedented mobile audio-visual configuration. The Vasulkas' view of video experiments have unexpectedly enriched the expressive means of his art and determined his basic vision of the world. The surprising effects that colour the visual image are the result of Vasulka's ability to generate video images as a frameless continuum. Both critical factors shape the work's eye-catching plausible textual surfaces and its cumulatively engaging sonic registers.

Its novel visual representations of images within images, horizontal iris effects, space-time worms, of Nazis on parade, Italian fascists, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, revolutionary figures like Marx and Lenin, all these images are reinforced most effectively by Fascist and Nazi radio speeches on the videotape's highly atmospheric soundtrack. These images they may be regarded as a direct consequence of Vasulka's avoidance of traditional image making, which is mainly structured on techniques dependent on camera

experimentation. It is worth quoting Vasulka on this fundamental point:

"I can at least unleash some attacks against the tradition of imaging, which I see mostly as conventional. I often think of the pinhole-principle defined. This tradition has shaped our visual perception not only through the camera obscura, but it's been reinforced, especially through television. It's a dictatorship of the pinhole effect, as ironic and stupid as it sounds to call it."

There is ample persuasive imagistic and aural evidence in Vasulka's video of his departure from photo-realism. It is this anti-camera-obscura rationale that forms the experimental basis for the tape's unsettling contested images of authoritarian conformity, a war-devastated Europe, and vast eerie desert landscapes displaying distant vistas of deserted battlefields. It is this anti-camera obscura rationale that gives the viewer a direct legible penetration of the atom bomb. Vasulka has always been interested in making his image direct, as in the documentary self-portrait images of Self-Portrait (1975) and his positive understanding of the machine's potential. There is a direct legibility of electronic space in the vision of Vasulka's self-portrait images. The viewer is also given a sense of the electronic circuitry which makes up the image. The viewer is given not the illusion of seeing the machine but an understanding of its functions and the way it operates. The Vasulkas were fascinated by expressive video imagery which is not of any worthwhile theoretical value."


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