An Instrument of Infinite Complexity

BY KEN AUSUBEL

Editor's note: Santa Fe resident Woody Vasulka is a nationally known video artist and, along with his wife and coworker, Senta, isa pioneer in the field of video art and computer video. Born in Beno, Czechoslovakia, in 1937, Vasulka studied electrical engineering and hydraulic mechanics at the State School of Industrial Engineering. Then he entered the film-making program at the prestigious Academy of Performing Arts in Prague where he began to produce and direct short films. In 1963 he emigrated to the United States and worked in New York City as a free-lance film editor for several years.

In 1965, he began to experiment with electronic sounds, strobe lights and video. In 1974 he was appointed associate professor in the Center for Media Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. At this time he began his experiments with computer-generated and computer-manipulated video images, which resulted in the construction of a new form of video art now known as The Vasulka Imaging System.

On Wednesday, March 16, Vasulka's newest work, a video opera titled "The Commission," will receive its premiere at the C.G. Reyn Gallery in Santa Fe. Based loosely on the life of Niccolò Paganini, the legendary 19th-century violinist, "The Commission" marks the first time that Vasulka has applied his video-imaging techniques to a narrative structure.

The following interview was excerpted from a longer one conducted by Santa Fe video-maker Ken Ausubel.

Ausubel: Were you always interested in machinery?

Vasulka: My father had a workshop and was a metal worker. I grew up during the war in Czechoslovakia. We lived across from an airfield. My first interest as a kid was to take machines apart. I was especially close to the airport because I could take the most complicated machines of that era—the German fighter planes—and play with them. My youth was spent in these graveyards of airplanes. You could find everything there that would drive your fantasy crazy. Europe was a huge junkyard after the war. You could find everything from human fingers to weapons in the dump. As kids, we roamed through it. This basically set the scene.

Eventually I began to realize—I'll let me paraphrase Korean video-maker Nam June Paik—that if you make a simple tool, you'll use it for a while like a child uses a simple toy, then throw it away, because you will soon exhaust the challenge. But if you make a tool that is infinitely complicted, it will fascinate you for the rest of your life. What I've been trying to do is to invent tools that contain more mystery than I could possibly imagine. That's what characterizes our better tools—this ability to be invented by the tool rather than being served by it.

Ausubel: How did you get into video?

Vasulka: That's a long story. After the war, the art scene in Czechoslovakia was dominated by socialist realism [the official Communist Party aesthetic that forbade any style of art or literature that deviated from strict realism with mutant overtones]. Any notion of any kind of experimentation with medium was theathore of the avant-garde of the 20s, though the avant-garde of that time had been left, by the 1950s, as merely a mostly predictable blueprint. It was associated with the most reactionary thoughts and suppressed experimentation. I'm talking about the Czech situation.

We, as a generation growing up in a film environment—like the film school of which I was a product—were concentrating on the opposite of experimentation. We paid no attention to what's called the 'medium basis of information,' or undertaking a formal investigation of a medium for its own sake. We were interested in what ideologies are interested in, which is larger mythological or narrative systems. As a group in film school, we followed the metaphorical approach. Maybe you could disguise political opposition through metaphor.

But when I came to the States in 1965, I discovered there was a whole generation of practicing film-makers who called the structuralists who paid close attention to what the European avant-garde of the 20s did. But these artists extended much further the idea about the material of the medium: film, surface, motion, elements, information within a frame. Suddenly, I came to recognize the materiality of the medium—the medium has its own truth. All this prepared me for video.

Then, in 1968, I began to experiment with video in New York. About that time it hit me that this is the medium in which I wanted to work. I was interested in this metaphorical concept—that an image is an energy system.

Ausubel: What was the nature of your early work with video?

Vasulka: The nature of our early work was nonfigurative or nonrepresentational. We generated images through electronic systems. We produced numerous tapes that included this aspect of video—what some people call abstract video. But that is just a transposition of one aesthetic term from abstract painting to this electronic environment.

Right from the beginning, we felt challenged by television as a perception system. We weren't interested in aesthetic results. You see, film travels at the rate of 24 frames per second, but with video you have 60 "fields" per second. Video encodes many more changes than film, and you can build devices that can work with a single field. You see the abstract concept of light and in the development of computer video?

Vasulka: In the early 70s, we happened to be with a group of people who were working with video and, they made an effort to bring video and the computer into a union. We had only one way of doing it. We built a separate small computer next to the general-purpose computer, and we made a time-link between them, in which they communicated synchronously, even if that is not an innovative idea, because it's not a new idea. Video is a medium that exposes you to a certain set of brightnesses and time and an image of particular energy on the time raster, which is not in variables. Suddenly, the abstract concept of light or location of light in time becomes extraordinarily practicable. Through this medium we could enter a perception of light and time as a means of expression.

Ausubel: Then you consider yourself an artist?

Vasulka: In a way I don't think so. In my own personal terms, it's not my ambition. I don't want to live with the necessity of being successful, and that's what art is.

Ausubel: So experimentation is integral to your work?

Vasulka: Yes. Yet I respect art, and all the values of my life have something to do with that. If I could psychoanalyze myself, indeed, I would probably find that it is indeed, I have some kind of desire to produce art. Yet consciously, I'm trying to walk the thinnest line between art and non-art. People sometimes call my work "technological determinism," that is no longer matter and the driving force is not a curiosity about the medium. I do want to find out if there are any codes or patterns that are common to the devices that are used on art, but this is definitely not a part of an aesthetic system.

Vasulka: Some of your work appears to be looking into areas of human perception and media. Vasulka: Some of your work appears to be looking into areas of human perception and media.
Infinite Complexity

(Continued from Page 19)

Vasulka: I wanted to work with the larger symbolic narrative systems that are integrated into general cultural archetypes, like opera. I asked myself: Is there an application of those primary video codes—which you arrive at by experimentation, investigation or just pure visual joy—that you can possibly apply to this more established genre? This opera was a rather formal exercise for me in which I took certain imaging structures from past work and transposed them into a narrative context.

Still, in the work I'm not really saying anything through thought or conscious, spoken ideas; the meaning of the opera is still communicated in the sense of the medium. I don't like thought-produced meaning; I prefer an image-produced paradox that subverts thought. Perhaps the opera will work, perhaps not. That is another question. It was done as an experiment.

Ausubel: Much of your work in the past has been done in the academic worlds in the East. Now that you've come to Santa Fe, do you see your work changing?

Vasulka: As long as I was involved in discovering or summarizing the phenomenology of electronic imaging, I was able to teach. In many ways I was excited about teaching when I was discovering those codes. But when I moved on to application, innovation ceased and my involvement with my work became more personal. This work could not be communicated with such excitement because it became doubtfull and insecure. When you start working, talking or trying to impose on someone else your own creative dilemma, it's a brutal and oppressive act. I was totally absorbed in what I was doing.

In general, I don't like to work. I don't want to get involved in any job. If I can avoid a job, I will. Not being involved in a job is very natural where I come from. Here in America there is a moral code that says a job means dignity. The idea of being lazy here is devasting. Where I come from, most of the fairy tales are about lazy people. A lot of the state of well-being is based on being extraordinarily lazy. To be able to sit without guilt and to stare into the sunset and just be heated by the sun. That's permitted. Here, of course, one gets under the spell of the rush of society. In the early years here, I submitted myself to that wonderful rush. Then I found out that it's not very interesting. So I'm trying to get away, as much as possible, from phone calls—even from getting up from bed.

Ausubel: Would you agree, then, with Paul La Fargue, Karl Marx's son-in-law, that people have the right to be lazy?

Vasulka: The whole idea about activity and morality is very much a Western thought: There's no relief for people accused of being lazy. In my eyes, they are heroes. They submit themselves to the deepest possible torture. Any activity takes you into the area of optimism again. That's why people in the West like to travel or develop all sorts of activities: they hope to prevent death, improve finances, become mentally more healthy. True, it's profitable to be active, but the opposite is much more challenging.

Coming to Santa Fe is a retirement from my duties. I found out that this isn't a community to compete in, but one to contemplate. It's a privilege to be able to contemplate your life, but it's more difficult to contemplate than simply produce.

Woody Vasulka's video opera, "The Commission," will be presented as a benefit for Tone Roads West, a four day festival of poetry and new music, at the C.G. Rein Gallery (122 W. San Francisco) at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 16. Tickets, which are $8, can be reserved by calling 988-1878.

TONESRoads WEST

Santa Fe as a year-round music center is growing by the proverbial leaps and bounds. What is most interesting and encouraging about this development is that much of the activity is composed, performed, and organized by local musicians, in the teeth, as it were, of Santa Fe's often spectacular but seldom indigenous Opera and Chamber Music Festival.

Most active of the hometown types is the indefatigable Peter Garland, who at 30 is not only a composer and publisher of Soundings, one of the most useful and distinguished music journals in the world.

Sze, Carolyn Forche, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Simon Ortiz, Carol Celucci, Harold Littlebird, Leo Romero, and others.

In an unrelated musical offering, California composer Lou Harrison will bring his puppet opera, Richard Whittington, to Santa Fe's Armory for the Arts on March 10 and 11. Harrison was doing puppet opera when the Muppets were only a gleam in Jim Henson's eye. Garland himself has written a puppet opera about the conquest of Mexico, which he hopes to present in 1984.

In April, fashionable composer Philip Glass will perform with an eight-member ensemble at Santa Fe's Lensic Theater on April 14.

NEWS continued:

but also organizer of Tone Roads West Poety and New Music, taking place in Santa Fe from March 16 to 20 (see the ARTimes Calendar for details).

The music programs will be highlighted by the benefit world premiere of The Commission, a video opera by Santa Fe's Woody Vasulka. From the Diary of an Edgewalker, Labyrinth, and a world premiere to be announced, all by local composer Joseph Weber, will be performed as will compositions by Jackson MacLow and Garland, and a multi-media performance by Charles Amirkhanian and Carol Law.

Other Tone Roads West events include poetry readings by Mei-Mei Berman-brugge, John Brandi, Joy Hario, Arthur