

September 11–October 25, 1987

International  
Center of Photography

# *Video*

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## FEATURE

### ART OF MEMORY

Woody Vasulka

a work in progress

36 min., 1987, color

continuous screenings

Gorgeous or garish (depending on your taste), a vista of Southwestern canyons looms behind a winged figure who broods in black silhouette like a gargoyle on Notre Dame. Is he/she Icarus, the embodiment of doomed human striving? Or the Devil presiding over a red stone Hell, or Kali, Goddess of Destruction? Black-and-white newsreel footage of cavalry and flaming buildings is processed into moving, multi-screen polyhedrons; the sky behind the figure suddenly crawls with geometric "rain." Then comes the voice of Robert Oppenheimer, genius of the Manhattan Project, on seeing the first explosion of the atomic bomb: "I remembered a few lines from the Hindu Scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: 'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.'" A strong start for this videotape.

"Ours is a century of experiment with political and religious forms—and with death, which was almost as devastating as the Black Plague," says Woody Vasulka. "Oppenheimer was not only a scientist—he understood the guilt of the atomic age." But though *Art of Memory* began, the acclaimed video maker says, with "an informative idea, it gradually became more impressionistic...."

Thus, the foremost theme and raw materials of Vasulka's work-in-progress are from World War II and its rehearsals, the Spanish Civil War and the Russian Revolution. Documentary film, photographs, songs and slogans roll against the primal desert landscape. But their identification is not essential, the video maker insists. They only provide "authenticity" and encourage people "to synthesize their own experience." Likewise, Vasulka's mode of composition was not dramatic or conventionally filmic (with narrative buildup and climax) but musical: "I worked with the opening and closing of each shot, with duration and sequence, to produce not a construction of events but a panorama of associations."

Vasulka's overriding theme is not World War II or the Bomb but indeed the "Art of Memory." For memory's compulsions and malfunctions lie behind the urge that viewers experience to pigeonhole his clips (did you get the UFA, Goebbels' propaganda news bureau, or the anarchist Durruti of the Spanish Civil War?) Memory seeks to reconcile the blurry banal photograph of historic figures with the mass destruction they helped engineer. Memory jumbles the crises with the stretches of boredom typical of war reportage. Vasulka remarks: "History is secondary—the

information is common knowledge. This is an exploration of method and interpretation."

The methods he explores are video's advanced technology and its editing. What fascinated him was "taking two-dimensional documentary images and leaving the frame, putting them in three-dimensional, object-like forms." He says: "The image is no longer truth-in-a-window. Truth is subordinate... to this form." Vasulka's computer-generated forms convey literally how memory distorts the shape of events, and how permeable is the photograph as a container of supposed truth.

Optically dazzling, Vasulka's high-tech maneuvers are central to the expression of his theme. Without such technology, his smooth juxtaposition of found footage and New Mexico landscape, of timebound and timeless, and his moving-picture solids would have been virtually impossible. But these are not analogue and digital exercises for their own sake. Here, rather, is an extension in video of the grand ambition of such 19th-century painters as Thomas Cole, in his "Course of Empire" series depicting civilization from dawn to twilight: convincing "realistic" detail engages the viewer's identification and recollection, while the sublime setting given to it locates human tragedy on a cosmic moral plane.

Explorations of the technical capabilities of still photography are on view concurrently at ICP, in the retrospective of Ralph Gibson's camera art. Gibson and Vasulka are interested in dramatizing the special traits of their cameras and the modes of presentation particular to still and moving pictures—the book, the newsreel. But they move in opposite directions. While Gibson uses framing, closeup, enlarged detail and black-and-white to freeze and abstract objects, flattening flesh into pictures, Vasulka exploits the fluidity of video, its multiplicity of simultaneous stimuli and its space-time evocations, making pictures into flesh. The image processing in *Art of Memory* continues Vasulka's investigation of the video signal as a plastic, temporal medium, as electronic energy organized as frequencies, unconfined by the Box (the video "frame"). And it extends the application of electronic imaging codes to narrative of his most recent tape, *The Commission*, 1982-84. In tackling the Big Subject largely via found footage, it also marks extended ambition on

Vasulka's part—for on the Bomb and appropriation, few general viewers or postmodernist observers can remain neutral.

*Note:* The six minutes of silence at the end of *Art of Memory* demonstrate that it is, as titled, a work-in-progress. Exhibited in Tokyo in August but seen in the United States for the first time at ICP, the videotape will be finished in substantially this form and length by early 1988, to appear in a retrospective of Vasulka's work being presented at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens.

*Art of Memory* received support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Western State Regional fellowship, and the New Mexico Arts Division. Its principal performers are Daniel Nagrin, Klein, and Doris Cross (voice).

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Vasulka began to direct and produce short films during his studies in the Film and Television Division at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. He emigrated to the United States in 1965; two years later began to experiment with electronic sounds and stroboscopic lights; and in 1969 turned to video. A faculty member from 1974 at the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York, he began to explore computer-controlled video and built "The Vasulka Imaging System," a personal imaging facility. With his wife and frequent co-producer Steina Vasulka, he founded The Kitchen, the media and performance center, in 1971. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1979. The Vasulkas live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

*—program notes by Anne H. Hoy, Curator, ICP*

This is the third year of ICP's VIDEO-FEATURE series. The series is intended to introduce ICP's visitors to important new video, as well as video of mainstream interest, with the hope of bringing a new audience to this significant medium.

Consultants to VIDEO-FEATURE are Lori Zippay, Administrator of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, and Kathy Rae Huffman, Curator/Producer of The Contemporary Art Television (CAT) Fund, Institute of Contemporary Art and WGBH-TV, Boston.

VIDEO-FEATURE is made possible by a grant from the New York State Council of the Arts.