

C/IAF HOSTS INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM DIRECTORS



l to r: CIMAM President Margit Rowell, and speakers Gianni Vattimo, Rosalind Krauss, and David Elliott. Photo: Lee Salem

The 1990 conference of the International Committee for Museums of Modern Art (CIMAM) convened in Los Angeles September 10 through 14, in a meeting hosted and organized by the California/International Arts Foundation. Eighty-two delegates from 26 countries attended the sessions.

CIMAM President MARGIT ROWELL opened the conference by noting that for the first time speakers from outside CIMAM had been invited, and that the CIMAM group has never met in the United States. She introduced the overall theme of the congress, "Modern Art Museums: Definition Between Past and Future".

GIANNI VATTIMO, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Turin and author of *The End of Modernism*, began the session, asserting that "the old logic of the individual taste is not a stable, and feasible, solution" for the museum. ROSALIND KRAUSS, Editor of *October* and author of *The Originality of the Avant-garde*, discussed the shift in attitude among American museums towards the notion of "museums as corporate entities." DAVID ELLIOTT, Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, maintained that "the art professional of the future will need the skill of the anthropologist to make sense out of what will almost certainly be a cacophony of voices."

The second day of the conference focused on "Realities of the California Scene," with talks by art consultant TAMARA THOMAS, video artist BILL VIOLA, architectural historian THOMAS HINES, and CONSTANCE GLENN, Director of the University Art Museum at Cal State Long Beach.

The topic on day three was "Enlightened Sponsorship", with JENNIFER VORBACH and KEVIN BUCHANAN of Citibank's Art Advisory Service, and ALBERTA ARTHURS of the Rockefeller Foundation. Speakers from the J. Paul Getty Trust were: MARILYN SCHMITT, The Getty Art History Information Program; DR. THOMAS REESE, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities; CHARLES J. MEYERS, The Getty Grant Program; MARY ANN STANKIEWICZ, The Getty Center for Education in the Arts; and DR. FRANK PREUSSER, The Getty Conservation Institute.

The final day's program centered on "Present Day Developments", and included presentations from MICHELE DE ANGELUS, Curator of the Eli Broad Family Foundation and LEOPOLDO MALER, Director of the Donald Hess Foundation. SAVELI YAMSCHIKOV, President of the

C/IAF INTERVIEWS

STEINA *and* WOODY VASULKA

Steina and Woody Vasulka are artists based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, who have participated in the development of the electronic arts since the 1960's. In 1971, they founded The Kitchen in New York City as a place to exhibit all performing arts media, including video and electronic music. Their videotapes and installations have been exhibited and broadcast extensively in the United States and Europe, and they each have been Guggenheim Fellows. Steina and Woody spoke with Sarah Tamor in November 1990, just after their first visit to Woody's native Czechoslovakia since the downfall of the Communist regime.

SV: We met in Prague in 1964, and decided to marry so that Woody could get out of Czechoslovakia painlessly. We went to New York: I didn't want to live in Czechoslovakia, and he didn't want to live in Iceland, where I'm from.

WV: I started to work in film, experimenting with multi-screen projects. In 1969 I got my hands on video, and it just took my heart away. It was all black and white, reel to reel.

SV: We would go late at night and watch the video feedback, you know, like you watch your fire, and see how it changed and didn't change. There were a lot of people exploring this new medium: Ira Schneider, Frank Gillette, Juan Downey, Nam June Paik.

WV: There was an exhibit at Howard Wise's gallery, Electronic Arts Intermix, called "Television as a Creative Medium." It had all the basic components of video, as far as genre and form of exhibiting.

SV: And there were the "Nine Evenings", a big art and technology exhibit, put on by "EAT": "Experiments in Art and Technology", with Billy Kluver. In retrospect, I realize the ground was very fertile. We just took it for granted. For us, this was just America. We didn't know that for the Americans, this was also quite miraculous! That it wouldn't continue like that never occurred to anybody!

SV: Then, in 1971, we started the Kitchen.

WV: It was very natural. There were several places that exhibited video art, but we were open to all media, electronic music, performance,



Steina and Woody Vasulka on location during production of *THE WEST*, 1982. Photo: Meridel Rubinstein

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dance, and so forth. It was a shoestring operation, in a kitchen in an old hotel, converted into theaters (the Mercer Street Theater). I'm still very sentimental about the place; it was quite hospitable. We invited Rhys Chatham to do a music program, Shirley Clark invented the Wednesday Open Screenings. Even Nam June Paik showed up there with his uptown crowd.

SV: We never auditioned anybody, and we managed to never turn anybody down. We had a strictly non-curatorial approach. But eventually there was too much interest in the Kitchen to accommodate more than 365 events a year.

WV: We hear that now there are auditions. I think if a new generation needs a new place, they should start over again, from the bottom. I'm not sentimental about these surviving institutions. I think they become a burden on the art scene, and eventually become despised. You see, our rule in the '60's was that no institution should last more than two years. This kind of renewal was stifled by the entrance of the professional curatorship. We always favor places that are run by artists anyway.

SV: I'm sure the Kitchen has its niche, but it's a very different place from the one we started.

WV: It's a different era. We have not been involved with any of the Kitchen's activities whatsoever. We are not even remembered there, which is fine with us.

ST: You mean they don't have your names on a gold plaque somewhere?

WV: No, they always say the Kitchen was started by two video artists, but they don't remember the names!

ST: How long did you stay in New York?

SV: From '68 to '73. We were invited to Buffalo, New York, for 12 weeks, and we stayed for six years.

WV: We went to participate in the media program at the university, and there was an interesting group of filmmakers there: Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, and Tony Conrad. We got involved in depth, and I first realized there was a true avant-garde in film. It was very productive, but in Buffalo you do your time, so we said, ok, it's time to leave. Santa Fe was the first place that came to our mind. This was in 1980.

ST: During all those years, did you go back to Czechoslovakia at all?

WV: Yes, actually, I happened to be there to witness the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the so-called friendly Warsaw Pact. None of us could believe it could have lasting consequences, but then it plunged into this deep depressed period of what they called "normalization." I could never share that fully, because it was very far from my state of mind. So I stopped visiting. I returned only a few times since then.

ST: Was your family still there?

WV: Yes, but my niece defected, so the family wasn't unified. We talked casually on the phone all the time about these two worlds. But so far as artistic tradition, I lost that in the '60's because of completely different interests in cultural direction. Going from this socialist regime which in a way promoted an indirect metaphorical language, something that was substituted by a riddle, to the situation of New York in the '60's, when everyone was talking about the materials, and structure, and organization: this kind of a new material time and energy world. The reality of the media completely took me over and I dropped this cultural heritage. Willingly, of course, gleefully.

SV: There was always totalitarianism and political repression, when I was studying in Prague, but you could live blissfully unaware of it, going on with your studies and intellectual life. Only on the periphery was there this distant danger about saying this or that: maybe this would land you into trouble. It was not an everyday reality. But in the '70's, this so-called "normalization", the cold hand of totalitarianism was everywhere. We understood that through computer networks, they could throw up road blocks at a distance and prevent any dissidence instantly. This was so uncomfortable that we used to run out as fast as we came in.

WV: But actually, as a teenager in the '50's and '60's, I was brought up in a purely spiritual environment. It was all about ideology, even if it was called Communism. It had no stain of commercial interests. It is still astonishing to me how very pure a world that was. It dealt only with aesthetic and political or ideological content. Not concerned with the reality of the market economy, or competition. In some ways, it was a privileged position for those who were not jailed or persecuted. I find that paradoxical, that in this regime, which from the United States was viewed as purely oppressive, in fact was an

open space for ideologies to be practiced, at least until the '60's. I'm grateful that I lived in a situation in which the market forces were not essential.

Also, I was never truly interested in the fate of my nation because I knew my destiny wasn't there, so I never really took it seriously. At my first opportunity, I left, and became what's called a cosmopolitan: a very negative word in the Communist vocabulary. And I don't have much sympathy with those that stayed home, because what is home, anyway, in the tradition of a free-thinking modernist? This is all absurd sentimentalism, this nationalism and folklorism, home and family, children and dogs. So I was glad the regime gave me this spiritual discourse, but it wasn't a place where I wanted to live, so it helped me to leave, in a way.

We were the generation living in the shadow of the revolution. I recall my teacher, Milan Kundera (who we saw probably once, I can't say he was my teacher, but he was supposed to be our teacher of literature in the film school). I knew his background, since we are from the same hometown. He had to denounce his revolutionary romanticism of his poetic years, when he was purely associated with the new left. He had to denounce his creative work. My generation didn't have to do it; we were born into a more sober situation and we didn't have to commit ourselves politically. We could stay aloof and skeptical, and we were spared this inner pain of self-denunciation.

ST: Tell me about your visit in October 1990. You had not been to Czechoslovakia since the revolution of November 1989, right?

WV: I had not been back there actually for about 3-4 years. It was a completely different atmosphere, a breakthrough. I was so elated: this nation had lived through 40 years of nightmare. It was a different world. Prague was full of people. I don't recall ever seeing people walking on the streets, just full of people and intimacy and joy. Suddenly it was free. And all these cliches become absolutely real, and you realize you are witnessing a change in history that happens very seldom.

SV: Prague reminded me a little of the late '60's in New York. It was quite exuberant. When I lived there in the '60's the older people used to describe Prague as this unbelievably exuberant city, with gypsies entertaining on street corners,

like instant circuses, and that's what it was like. People would break into spontaneous dances. Most of the people dancing were these old ladies, who definitely didn't remember they were old anymore! It was open and inviting. You immediately understood that this is an arts and cultural center, much more than Vienna, or even Berlin. There is just something geographically and culturally about the place. I give it a great chance if they don't blow it, that they will have themselves the East-West cultural center.

WV: Of course, my experience was different, because I had to go into my past, meet all my friends, and I felt certain obligations to the school I was in, so I accumulated some pain as well as euphoria. Some of my friends have "normalized", and become opportunistic: some had talent, some didn't. Also I realize the luck of technology because we as individuals here in the U.S. have tremendous access to technology, even own technologies that they long for. So in fact, I'm looking for some kind of enlightened sponsorship, someone who would sponsor at least some of the facilities at the film school I studied in, or elsewhere.

ST: Apparently during the revolution, they had enough access to equipment to be able to tape the demonstrations, and then play those tapes back on street corners so that more people would be aware of what was going on.

WV: I think this small format individual video production was essential, otherwise, the revolution probably wouldn't have happened in these countries. But there is a whole confusion about what is video and art, because the revolution reinforced Lenin's doctrine that the media (he used to call it film) is the most important art form. And suddenly, video is the most important art form, so we have the repetition of the political cliché. I would like to introduce the other possibility, in which this kind of political activity is not reflected directly, by what I would call the "vulgar" means, into the aesthetic processes. But again, I'm outside, I can't criticize. It was so important, so moving - I think people still cry seeing it. But I can't share that directly.

SV: It started as a communication revolution, because the communist government signed a treaty that they would not interfere with the radio signals coming in to Czechoslovakia. This turned out to be a big mistake, because people called up the stations outside the borders with reports that were sent back in. That was the beginning of the breakdown of the whole system, that was how most people inside Czechoslovakia, in the countryside, found out about Havel, because he spoke on these stations. I was there in October 1989, and the revolution happened in November. The artists were the only

ones who were a sort of organized opposition. So when things started rolling, they of course rolled through the film and video and theatre faculty, and that's where they had the fax and xerox machines. The spontaneous organization came strictly through the artists. That was the case also in Germany and Romania, but not in Poland. That was a blue collar revolt. But in the other countries, it definitely was an intel-



Still from *THE ART OF MEMORY*, 1987, by Woody Vasulka.

lectual and artistic revolt.

ST: Tell me about Berlin.

WV: I met other people who were in Berlin at the same time, and they were disgusted, so I just have to tell you my reaction. I was impressed by Berlin, but why was I impressed? It was a few days before the official unification day. The barriers were all lifted, I could hardly see the Wall. I saw still this unbelievable mixture of Russian soldiers guarding certain monuments, but I also saw that there are still names of all those Communist leaders, these heroes of my past, protagonists who will disappear very



Still from *LILITH*, 1987, by Steina.

shortly, I'm sure. When I was a kid they fed us with these vocabularies, these galleries of names I saw in these decayed streets. So Berlin brought me into this kind of state of contemplation.

In the East terminal, I saw this devastation, these skinheads shouting Nazi things, and I saw these Russian women, and I heard over the

loudspeaker, "The train for Leningrad is leaving in three minutes:" this nightmare of the city, and I realized that the city was always like that. It was the refugees from the Polish territories between the wars, then it was the war. I walked through the city and saw this emptiness: it's a place where you can think about the world on different terms. I somehow found it comfortable: it may be just perverse, but the city gave me privacy, even if it was now full of Poles and gypsies, and Czechs carrying all kind of packages around. The city has a reason, and a future. It's the gateway to the East and I was touched by the destiny of Europe.

Prague in that sense is different, it's not European in the sense of politics. It's a local politics with maybe world aesthetics at times, but Berlin has this unwritten page. This is the city which will decide, probably, about this next century and Europe. So I got that kind of a glimpse of the future. Also because the territory between the cities was not built up so there were tremendous spaces there. The whole East, which inherited those official 19th century stone edifices - it's a monumental kind of place for thoughts. That was what impressed me probably.

ST: What was the mood of the people in Berlin?

WV: It was strange, from the intellectuals, my friends, the artists that lived in this paradise of West Berlin, in this radical place, suddenly they have to share the city with the Poles, and the gypsies, and they find it very uncomfortable, and I was entertained by that. I see my generation finding its comfort in this aberrant Socialist pocket and they're very unwilling to risk the comfort. Maybe I would have said the same thing if a bunch of gypsies would come to Santa Fe. But in Berlin, it was proper, it fit.

One friend, Arnold Dreibratt, an American composer working there, drew me the map of the Berlin I should walk, so I walked through the most depressing parts of the city, which I'm very grateful for. I saw this glimpse of how Berlin might have looked in the '20's. West Berlin is completely glittery, like any other Western city, crowded, full of glitz and emptiness, and full of the same products you can find anywhere. But I don't want to be nostalgic about Socialism. On the other hand, I'm really still kind of a European I realize, and I wanted

to see Europe as it was before the war. I see this as a moment in which, somewhere between the wars, there was the pause which decided in a way about all of us.