

# Breaking the Box:

## The Electronic Operas of Robert Ashley and Woody Vasulka

CHARLES HAGEN



Robert Ashley, "The Backyard (T'Be Continued)," image from color videotape, 25 mins. 50 secs. From *Perfect Lives*, 1979-83.

Two phantoms haunt video art's uneasy dreams—television and art. For over 20 years the conflicting models offered by these fields have pulled at video artists, simultaneously attracting and repelling them. They have found themselves trapped between these opposing positions—in most cases relegated to the fringes of the art world while dreaming of (or dreading) TV's mass audience, political influence, and budgets which would allow them to do their work. By and large rejecting and rejected by both fields (though frequently yearning for the rewards each offers), video artists have formed their own community dependent on government grants, an energetic but thin network of exhibition programs, limited access to the general public, and a belief in the importance of their own work. Video art has always seemed a way station on the road to other places, to a destination somewhere between the transformation of art and the transformation of TV.

Television and art differ even in their implicit assumptions about the nature of contemporary culture, with TV celebrating a democracy-by-consumption maintained by the mass media, while art implies a view of society in which cultural products are in theory available to all, but which in practice remains economically and culturally stratified. The two models embody different attitudes toward the machine as well. TV treats video technology as a set of tools, while art treats it as a medium. Behind this difference in attitude looms the big issue, unresolved since at least the invention of photography in the 1830s—that of the relationship between technology and art in an industrial culture.

After an initial flurry of excitement in every corner of the art world over the possibilities of video, the new medium was quickly shunted out of the spotlight and relegated to the status of a "minor" art. Despite its exclusion from the central discourse, though, video artists have labored on. Early idealistic hopes that video could foster a revolution in communications and consciousness were followed by a period in which video artists extended formal minimalist questions to their medium. Mostly holed up in media centers, college art departments, and downtown lofts, many video artists of the mid '70s resembled philosophical art-engineers as they pursued investigations in which electronic and esthetic theory were mingled in varying proportions. Primary explorations of this sort continue today—just as many video makers have continued to make independent documentaries as alternatives to corporate television.

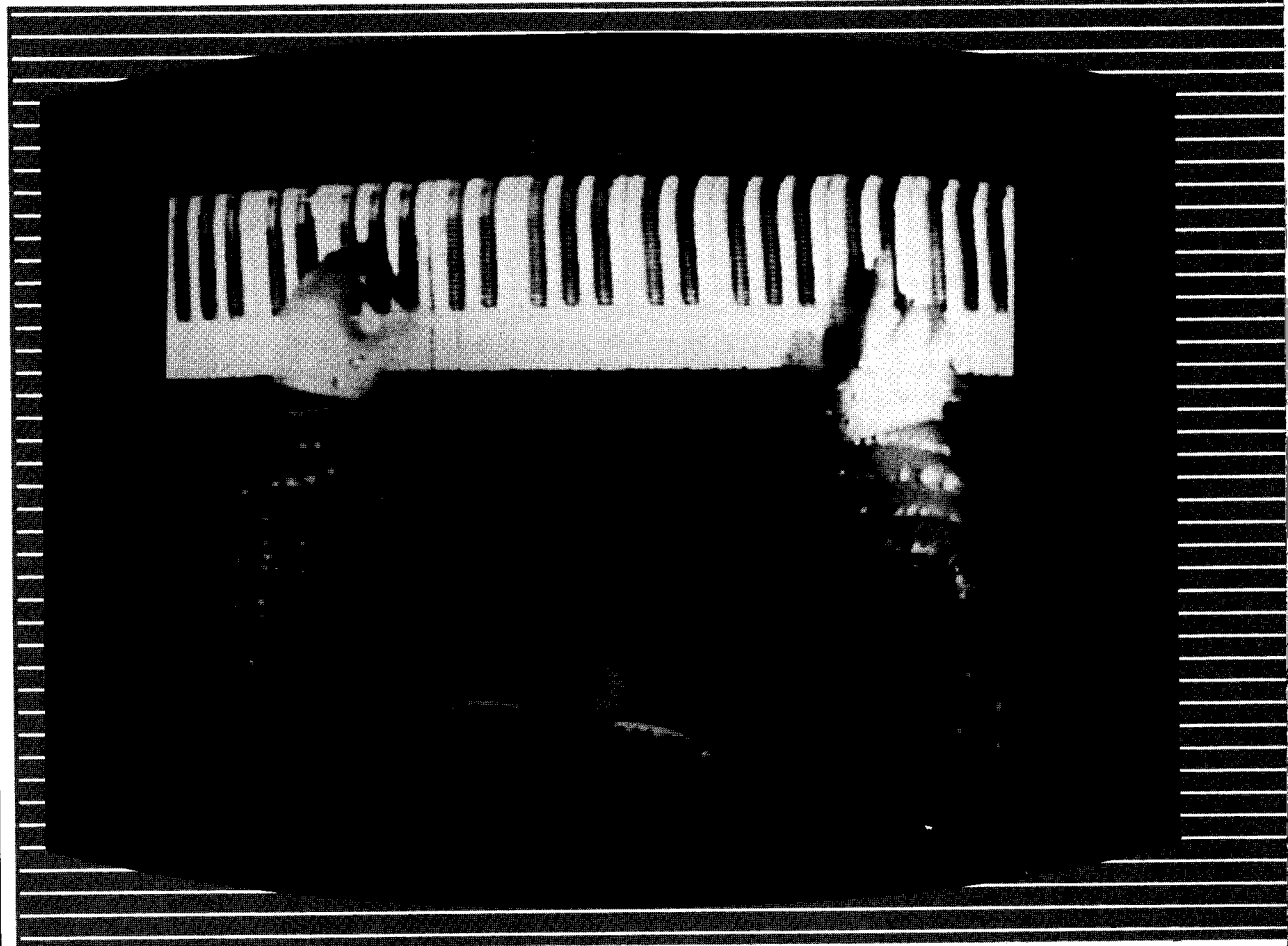
Meanwhile, though, the world has moved on. A technological and economic revolution is transforming electronic media—but it's a very different revolution from the one dreamed of by video artists twenty years ago. TV, once a monolithic force, threatens to dissolve in a shimmer of different forms, thus depriving video artists of a convenient and familiar target. However, corporate control of both old and new media remains strong. Video artists in the '80s find themselves in as precarious a position as ever before. Not only are they confronted with funding cutbacks and a continued marginal position in the art world, but the profusion of new media forms has forced many of them to question their claims to represent the future of video—claims often used in the past to justify their marginality. Many now wonder

whether the parade of advancing technology simply passed them by.

But at this critical turning point in video's short history a number of important artists are coming forth with ambitious projects, some of which have taken years to produce, that both sum up long periods of work and at the same time propose new trajectories for the future of video. Two recently completed, long-awaited works—*Perfect Lives*, 1979–83, the seven-part TV production of Robert Ashley's epic about traveling musicians in the

ords and live performances in the U.S. and Europe. It was completed as "an opera for television" (as its subtitle now announces), produced by Carlota Schoolman for the Kitchen and in association with Ashley and Britain's Channel 4, and directed by John Sanborn. Finally, in 1984, the work was broadcast to British television viewers on Channel 4 for seven nights in a row, each program lasting 25 minutes, 50 seconds.

Ashley calls *Perfect Lives* "a comic opera about reincarnation," and that theme is woven throughout its



Robert Ashley, "The Backyard (T'Be Continued)," image from color videotape, 25 mins. 50 secs. From *Perfect Lives*, 1979–83.

Midwest, and *The Commission*, 1982–84, by Woody Vasulka, a work based on an incident in the life of the 19th-century violinist Niccolò Paganini—sharply illustrate the possibilities and the contradictions that video artists currently face. In many ways the two works are remarkably similar. Both employ operatic form, and both rely heavily on electronic manipulation to transform the images. Nevertheless they are aimed at audiences of vastly different sizes, with *Perfect Lives* consciously seeking television's mass audience while *The Commission*, disavowing the familiarity of TV, implicitly accepts the limited, specialized audience of video art.

In the scope of its ambition and the sheer scale of its production, *Perfect Lives* is a milestone both in video and in music, a brilliant collaboration among a host of important artists. Over the course of nearly a decade Ashley's epic has taken a variety of forms, including rec-

spiraling narrative. The seven parts of the work parallel the stages of the soul's journey after death as related in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, while the cosmic monism of the 16th-century philosopher Giordano Bruno—according to which there is no absolute truth, only an infinitude of ways of viewing the world—provides another recurring theme. Framing this metaphysical meditation, though, is pure Americana—"These are songs about the Corn Belt," as Ashley states at the start of each episode. In the opera's story, two itinerant musicians (Ashley and pianist "Blue" Gene Tyranny) visit a small town in the Midwest, become involved in the perfect crime—taking all the money from the bank and then returning it at the end of the day—and end up fleeing to Indiana with a pair of eloping teenagers. Ashley assembles these and other incidents into an intricate narrative architecture involving stereotypical small-town locations and pairs of characters (Jill Kroesen and David

Van Tieghem) at various stages of life.

Ashley's text, alternately lyrical and farcical, trite and obscure, mystical and vernacular, combines with his deadpan singsong delivery, Tyranny's elegant bar-piano improvisations, Peter Gordon's syntho-rhythms, and Kroesen and Van Tieghem's performances to produce a hypnotic, deeply affecting experience. But now *Perfect Lives* has become something else—"an opera for television." As such it reflects a recurring dream among many artists, and particularly in video: of creating a work uncompromising in substance and form that will reach and affect a nonspecialized audience. It now must appeal to the television audience and the corporate managers, whether in commercial or public TV, who set themselves up as the representatives of the audience.

The TV audience is an abstraction, a hypothetical composite of the velleities of "the public." No one knows for sure what the TV audience will like, and so programmers attempt to intuit its desires beforehand. Since few video artists have been able to get their work on TV (other than at odd hours when only a handful of people have been watching), those interested in reaching that vast, faceless audience haven't really had to produce anything that would keep viewers from flipping over to *Dynasty*. Advocates of what is now called "artists' television" argue that instead of pandering to the current television audience they are working for a future audience—an audience that they will help create. Such idealistic arguments deflect critical judgment in the present by appealing to the judgment of history, but this is simply the standard argument used by artists in every medium who find themselves, whether for reasons of style or geography, excluded from the dialogue of their day. In attempting to translate *Perfect Lives* from its performance version into a work for TV, Ashley and his collaborators moved beyond such pallid self-justifications and accepted the challenge of producing a work that would capture that audience now, not in some vague future, while remaining true to the complexity of the narrative and the music. In other words, they undertook the task of producing something that would truly be "an opera for television," and not just canned culture like *Live From Lincoln Center*.

For each of the seven episodes of *Perfect Lives* Ashley gave Sanborn, as video director, conceptual and visual "templates"—sketches and notes indicating the significance of that segment and its position within the overall work. Sanborn then attempted to develop video equivalents for the various moods of Ashley's tale. He uses three kinds of master shots, with the first two establishing the framing story of the work and at the same time reflecting its origins in performance. In one, Ashley appears in his role as lounge singer standing behind a microphone before an invisible audience; in another, a low-angled closeup along a piano keyboard, Tyranny's hands are shown as he plays. Finally there are the shots of the story itself, with the various characters appearing in Midwestern landscapes and small-town scenes acting out stylized, semiabstract stagings of events in the plot. These basic shots are stitched together with various wipes, dissolves, switching, and other editing devices. In his own work (and his collaborations with Kit Fitzgerald), Sanborn has become known as a master of

the wide range of editing effects that advanced electronics and computer control have made available in video; for *Perfect Lives* he developed a seemingly endless roster of these devices, which rush by relentlessly. They range from the mundane—keying one image into another, for example, either as background or in a window within the main scene—to the spectacular: in one, a cube whose sides are slightly separated from one another spins in video space; on every face, both inside and out, is a different image from earlier in the tape.

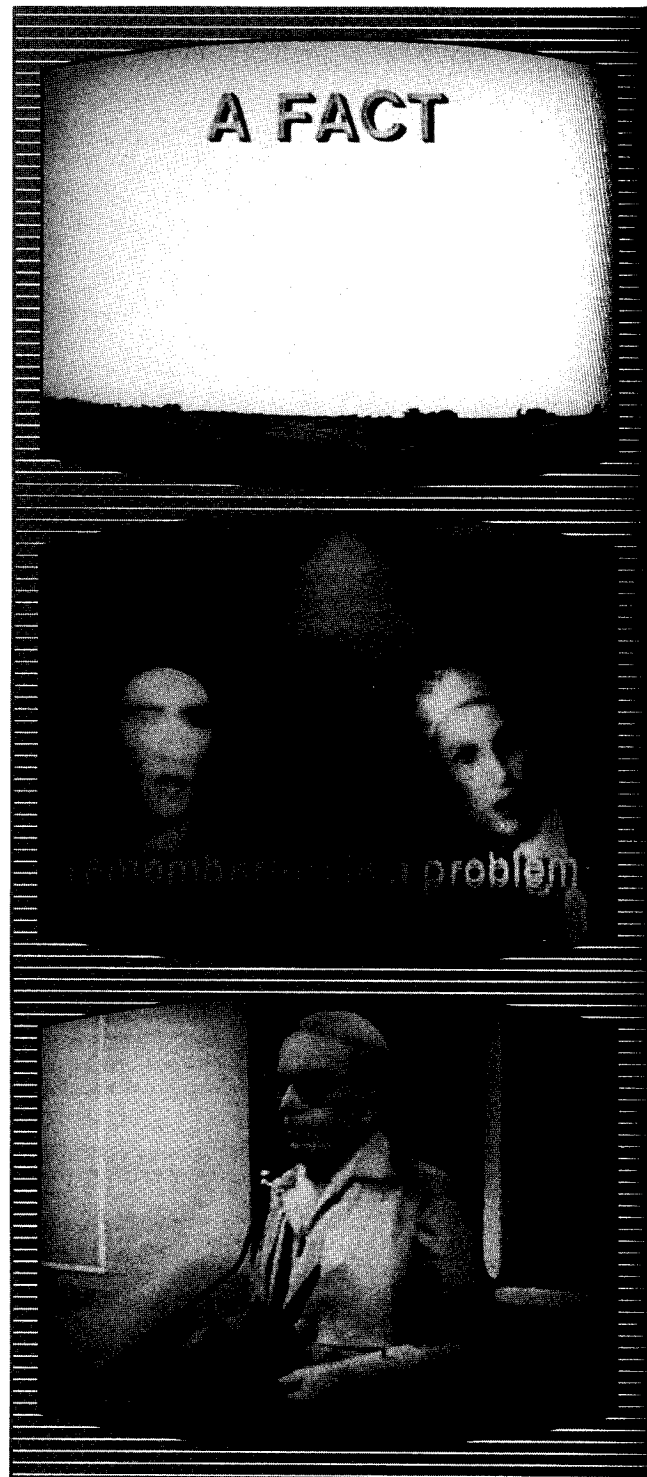
Some of Sanborn's effects convey moments in the story with particular vividness, deepening the meaning of the text and music. In "The Park," for example, the opening episode of the work, Sanborn uses a simple wipe to establish both the lyrical mood of the section and the generalized, abstracted quality of the whole story. As the camera pans horizontally across a bright green treescape, Sanborn introduces a horizontal wipe, moving across the screen in the same direction, to a slightly different shot of the same scene. At first the change is almost imperceptible, but this subtle shift breaks the strictly limited point of view of the camera image and gives the shot a surprising vitality. Other effects, though, are pure flash. In one, for example, video images that appear to have been tilted back into the space of the screen stream along a highway toward the horizon. This can be seen as related to the road, and the image of driving, that takes a prominent part in Ashley's tale, but the impression one gets is that it has been included simply for its own sake. A few of Sanborn's electronic tropes—the spinning cube, for example—are so breathtaking technically that they tend to distract us from the work and instead make us wonder simply how the effect was achieved.

What finally determines the overall visual quality of *Perfect Lives*, though, is not the impact of any one device, but the cumulative experience of the vast array of technical manipulations Sanborn uses. Some are analogous to filmic punctuation (dissolves, wipes), while most involve the manipulation of the entire video image as if it were an object—twirling it out into video space, placing one window on top of another, butting images together to form a corner. Effect after effect comes at the viewer in a relentless onslaught; every few seconds something happens, not just in the dramatized scenes, but to the image itself. Successes and flops, the effects flow on indifferently, without pause, producing a visual texture that is not so much dense as busy.

Techniques of this sort have become a staple of television; computer-controlled editing, which has become widespread only within the past three years, has made it even easier to manipulate the video image as if it were an object, bending it, splitting it, spinning it, and so on. In TV, though, this kind of image-manipulation is seldom used to convey specific meanings, but instead is employed to create moods of surreal fantasy or sci-fi futurism. High-tech corporations, especially, use computer-controlled effects to associate themselves and their products with the romantic mysteries of space and science; lasers zipping through the night are more appealing than assembly plants in Taiwan. Overuse has quickly diluted the impact of these devices; when shots of rows of used cars come spinning up at you out of

deep space, all you can conclude is that the glorious future implied by these techniques won't be much different from today.

It's in rock video that these effects have been used most extensively. Typically, peppy computerized visual effects are used to pump a false energy into forgettable stagings of banal stories. Rat-a-tat cuts, multiple windows, flipping and twisting images hide the lack of vis-



Left column, top: Robert Ashley, "The Park (Privacy Rules)." Center: Robert Ashley, "The Supermarket (Famous People)"; "D," the Captain of the Football Team (David Van Tieghem), and Isolde (Jill Kroesen). Bottom: Robert Ashley, "The Church (After the Fact)"; "R," the Narrator (Robert

ual or narrative substance. Used in profusion the effects lose their meaning as narrative punctuation, and thus serve another purpose—they don't impinge on the music. In most cases the kinds of image manipulation used in these tapes are all fizz, window dressing, modish without the bother of being substantive.

Video artists have long used electronic image-manipulation for a variety of purposes—whether in Nam June

## THE PROBLEMS



Right column, top, center, and bottom: Robert Ashley, "The Market (Famous People)." All from *Private Lives*, 1979-83, images videotaped, each tape 25 mins. 50 secs.

Paik's Zen dada works, Ed Emshwiller's electronic surrealism, or Stephen Beck's minimalist-meditative color geometries. But in a host of recent tapes, video artists have turned eagerly to the computer-generated effects and editing control techniques that now pervade TV. Some artists use these techniques critically, turning them back on themselves to lay bare their emotional subtexts—and their ultimate banality. In her two versions of *Pop-Pop Video*, 1980, Dara Birnbaum reedited taped commercials and TV shows to reveal the primal sexual implications underlying the way these techniques are used on TV. Gretchen Bender, in one section of her multimedia work *Dumping-Core*, 1984, deflates the pretentious futurism of electronic corporate logos by stringing dozens of them together and reducing them to absurdity. Other artists attempt to reclaim the potential of the rock-video format from its devaluation and professionalization. In *Dragging the Bottom*, 1983, for example, Julia Heyward transforms the now-familiar devices of music video by using them to convey the oneiric overtones of her pop-mythic love plaint.

More often, though, video artists have used these techniques simply for the sheen of technological wizardry they exude. Sometimes the gimmicks seem to be used for their own sake, following the implicit logic that if a tool exists it has to be used. There's even an element of technological bullying about the displays of empty virtuosity in some of these tapes, with the tricks of the equipment trotted out simply to overwhelm the audience. In contrast to this sort of technolust for ever more spectacular effects produced by ever more expensive gadgets, a few artists have tried to adopt techniques appropriate to the work at hand. Bill Viola followed his highly acclaimed *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)*, 1981—produced in Japan with advanced cameras and technical assistance from Sony, where Viola was a visiting artist—with *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 1983, a tape made with unsophisticated black and white equipment recalling in both its subject and its process the endurance-performance works of early video.

In an interview in *Wedge* no. 2, Fall 1982, Ashley noted that

Commercials are based on the same techniques as *Perfect Lives*. So all I'm trying to do is make a half-hour commercial. . . . Commercials are what people watch when they watch television. They not only watch, they love commercials, because of that technique. So if you make a half-hour commercial, you're satisfying them.

There's a kind of shrewd truth to this argument, but in making it Ashley sidesteps some important considerations. People who watch TV in fact have little choice but to watch commercials, and lots of them—unless they have VCRs, in which case many simply fast-forward past the commercials, not even pausing to marvel at the electronic wonders they contain. Moreover, the appeal of commercials is based on more basic factors than their use of spectacular techniques. These compressed narratives, thirty-second scenarios of desire fulfilled and moral order restored, provide instant catharsis. In a longer form, though, the weight of narrative structure demands more meaning than these evanescent effects can provide. Removed from the supporting frame of

commercials' ministories, these techniques are revealed as essentially narrative punctuation. Nevertheless, Ashley's desire to capture the perverse fascination and real power of TV's most characteristic manifestation is understandable. Sanborn, too, looks to TV as a model for his work: "I think video art is usually just incompetent television," he told me in an interview.

Although *Perfect Lives* has been presented on TV in Britain it has yet to find a broadcast outlet in the United States, and has thus far been shown only at the Kitchen in New York and at other video-art venues. As an "opera for television," it has failed to find or create any audience other than the one it probably would have attracted in any case. Until it can do so it will remain, in its own terms, an ambitious failure.

While Ashley, Sanborn, and many other video artists have been working toward TV, a few have approached questions of narrative from the investigative direction of the minimalist video of the '70s. Woody Vasulka has spent more than a decade developing (with his wife, Steina) a vocabulary of video space through which (as he explained in an interview) he has attempted to "identify the codes" of electronically generated imagery. During the '70s he produced a number of tapes and theoretical articles that he grouped under the heading of "Didactic Video," in which he explored in an extremely systematic way the results of various kinds of image production and control. Like many other video artists he has argued the importance of building new electronic tools to produce new kinds of images. In the late '70s he designed and built (with Jeffrey Schier) a device called the Vasulka Image Articulator; this device allows a user to digitize two or more separate video inputs and then transform them. During this period Vasulka was so intent on his tool-building that he would occasionally sign, in solder, the circuit boards he was working on.

Vasulka has long argued for the possibility of producing an "electronic reality" that would be "more convincing than camera reality," and in his work he has tried to discover such a reality—"to confront the camera obscura principle with other principles—numeric, or archetypal, or something else." In his adherence to identifying basic codes of video and his dream of transcending the camera image, with its implicit culturally bound values, Vasulka reflects a Modernist faith in science and the transformative powers of technology. At first he regarded *The Commission* as simply a formal experiment in applying various effects to narrative material, but in the end he didn't carry through with his plan to analyze this question systematically. "In the romantic setting" of the story, he says, the use of the overlays—serving the narrative, rather than proving a theoretical position—"seemed enough." In fact, it is Vasulka's willingness to compromise his idealistic but chimerical esthetic goal, his reluctant acceptance of the possibilities of narrative and even of theater, that makes *The Commission* significant.

The work is based on a real incident in which Paganini, the embodiment of the notion of the Romantic genius, was given a commission by Hector Berlioz, who was acting as go-between for a wealthy music publisher. This anecdote has an ironic overtone in video, a field largely dependent on grants and other such "com-

missions." Although Vasulka brings this connection to light by casting video artist Ernest Gusella as Paganini and Ashley as Berlioz, he never draws the parallel explicitly. The 11 sections of this 45-minute-long episodic work present the story of the commission, but they are also about romantic myths of genius, which plagued Paganini even after his death—because he was regarded as demonic the Church refused to allow him to be buried in sanctified ground, and so his corpse was repeatedly dug up and reburied.

In each section of *The Commission* Vasulka uses a different "overlay" to change the structure of the image itself. In one segment, for example, he fractures the image into tiny digitized tiles, then uses a device called a frame buffer to store and release successive frames at a jerky pace, producing juxtapositions in which

moments in the action lap over one another on the screen. Elsewhere he uses another piece of equipment, a Rutt-Etra scan processor, to combine electronic wave forms with the video signal, giving a three-dimensional quality to the scan raster—the pattern of lines that make up the screen image itself. At times the scan lines seem to undulate independently, like ribbons rippling in video space.

The work has major flaws—the story is skimpy, and the audio track has none of the subtlety or ambition of the combination of Ashley's text and Tyranny's music. Vasulka asked Gusella and Ashley to write their own dialogue, within guidelines he gave them. While Ashley's part is typically rich, Gusella's is merely adequate to his role. Vasulka's bridging texts, moreover, are clunky, and sound as if they've been cribbed from an encyclopedia.

Vasulka feeds the voices of the characters and the off-screen narrator through a vocoder/harmonizer, which gives the sound a generic choral quality. While this makes the voices more "operatic," the pseudoexalted tone makes the duller passages of the narrative unintentionally funny.

To a large extent, though, the visual and performance aspects of *The Commission* redeem these failings. Trained in filmmaking at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Vasulka emphasizes an essentially filmic mise-en-scène staging to counterpoint the effects he achieves through editing. In one episode, for example, Ashley, dressed in plantation whites and Panama hat, picks his way tentatively across a cactus-covered hillside, in an action that expresses the fastidious organization man he presents Berlioz to be. In the central scene



Woody Vasulka, *The Commission*, 1982–84, image from color videotape, 45 mins. Niccolò Paganini's son (Ben Harris) and Niccolò Paganini (Ernest Gusella).

in which Berlioz gives the impoverished Paganini an envelope containing the money for the commission, a low camera gazes up at the envelope passing from hand to hand, in a shot that deliberately evokes the touching fingertips of God and Adam on the Sistine ceiling. The ironic apotheosis of the exchange heightens the effect of this climactic moment.

Vasulka's overlays work within the context of the staging and filmic treatment of his story. Overall, he says, he tried to "take an overstylized reality and upset it into electronic reality, by just a small degree." But in fact the overlays are effective not because they point to some hypothetical essential video reality, but because they extend the dramatic meanings of the scenes. For example, Vasulka uses the scan-processing technique, in which the video raster is shredded into ghostly strands, in a scene in which Paganini's corpse is laid out on a table before burial. The intimations of decay and evanescence in both the scene and the electronic processing are further heightened by the draped plastic sheeting that surrounds the set, and through which part of the scene is shot. Occasionally the electronic overlays in *The Commission* seem merely added on, like filters, but more often they mesh with the story and the staging, broadening the meanings of the overall work.

The nearly simultaneous appearance of two such major works as *Perfect Lives* and *The Commission* demonstrates the ambition and richness of contemporary video. In attempting to move beyond past video art, Ashley, Vasulka, and their collaborators have accepted the responsibility of developing new forms to expand the nature and function of the medium. In addition, each work addresses problems central to video's future. Video artists have always wrestled with the question of audience: whether to accept their work as intrinsically tied to the specialized—and tiny—audience for art, or to seek television's mass audience. *Perfect Lives* is an accomplished, far-reaching attempt to produce work that can appeal to both. However, in their overconcern with the structures and style of television Ashley and Sanborn clearly show that the question of audience is a trap, a delusion, which deflects attention away from the work itself and the meaning it provides. "The audience" is an abstraction, a fiction of marketing. Audiences are composed of individuals of all sorts, with widely varying tastes; there is not one audience for art or television, but many. The spell of technology and its role in video—a question posed by Vasulka's work of the past decade, and restated in *The Commission*—is another crucial issue in contemporary video. It too can be a trap, one in which the work itself, and the experience of artist and viewer, are neglected. Machines have neither values nor intentions, but are simply tools.

The real challenge facing video artists is to extend the capabilities of their still unfathomed medium. The art world first embraced video in the late '60s because it seemed styleless and immediate, qualities well suited to a period in which many artists saw their work as recording essentially real-time, real-world events. In its casual, almost dumb everydayness video appeared to offer direct access to experience. Compared to the elaborate craft required by film and photography, video technique seemed almost simplistic. Video was a pushbut-

ton medium that let you see what you'd shot immediately, and demanded no editing; in fact, editing seemed antithetical to its limpid transparency. Video seemed to combine the intimacy and directness of the snapshot with the enormous political power of television—providing a link between the individual perceptions of the artist and the social structures of a mass-media culture. Many regarded it as the culmination of the Modernist search for a medium that would provide an objective basis for subjective experience, the fulfillment of the Constructivist dream of an art that would transform society as it transformed consciousness. Painters, sculptors, performance artists, photographers, filmmakers, dancers, all turned eagerly to it. Of course, video has proven to be both more and less than the panacea that would solve the problems of art and its relationship to

a place where the mind and the eye—the rational and the intuitive, the intellectual and the sensual—can play and propose other worlds or other ways of looking at the world. Combining an almost infinite degree of plasticity with an illusionism of the greatest possible intensity, video space seems to provide an electronic tabula rasa for the imagination. Color, form, space, and time can all be recorded and manipulated directly in the video image; the use of the camera makes available the tools of photography, while sound and narrative add still other dimensions of potential meaning.

Video's wealth of formal and technical choices, though, brings with it the danger of succumbing to empty wizardry, and as a result of failing to pay critical attention to the meanings that follow. Corporate TV in all its forms establishes an approved collective uncon-



Woody Vasulka, *The Commission*, 1982-84, image from color videotape, 45 mins. Niccolò Paganini with, in background, Hector Berlioz (Robert Ashley).

contemporary life.

Overlooked in the interpretation of video as a way of correcting the presumed shortcomings of other media was the great richness of video's pictorial and narrative capabilities. In their pioneering use of advanced electronic techniques in complex, fragmented narrative, *Perfect Lives* and *The Commission* significantly expand the formal means available to video artists, and suggest the tremendous visionary possibilities of the medium. The challenge of Modernism has always been its recognition of pictorial space as the place of imaginative possibility,

turning the individual dreams of the society inside out and broadcasting them to the world, with commercials inserted at regular intervals. Video artists who want to transform television (and art)—and not just gain access to its audiences or its machines—must first address the task of creating new imaginative realities. In doing so they can give form to our deepest needs and desires, as a first step toward realizing them. ■

Charles Hagen writes frequently for *Artforum*.