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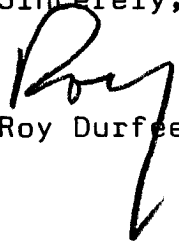
Dear Steina and Woody:

I have been anxious about how to address so much in so little space. In general, I am satisfied with the enclosed, and only one day over deadline! I look forward to your comments.

If you are satisfied, or even pleased, an additional \$100 would be a nice bonus. I would also like some sort of contractual agreement with the folks in Switzerland to clarify payment of their share, and assure me of several copies of the printed product.

Repeated viewing of your works has served to heighten my enjoyment of them and sharpen my interest in seeing more of your work and that of other practitioners. Thanks for the opportunity to participate.

Sincerely,



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NECESSARY RISK

ROY DURFEE

From the very beginning of their work together, the Vasulkas have invited and even encouraged us to see and hear differently. Two decades ago, that difference may have been as much in object of attention as in anything else. Surely, PARTICIPATION (1969-71) is a document of a period and place shared by the Vasulkas with an entire generation of performance artists in many media. As violinist and filmmaker respectively, Steina and Woody Vasulka may well have taken the videopak up initially as a playful diversion which also provided them a tool for interaction and personal participation in the social and cultural activities of their Manhattan environs. Shortly, however, diversion became obsession and the process began whereby the video lag trails feathering a Jethro Tull performance video in 1969 would become part of the expressive vocabulary of THE COMMISSION fourteen years later.

The forces moving this progression would seem to have been Steina's very basic curiosity about the image-making and perceiving processes themselves, and Woody's modernist commitment to tear down the illusionist expectation societally ingrained by motion pictures and television. Deconstruction of the video process through home experimentation led to the

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early awareness of a vast creative potential found in the distance between lens image and electronic image. More essentially, the ability to internally generate images from voltages and waveforms, vibration and feedback, liberated the imagemaking process entirely from the outside world on which the illusionist, lens-organized, aspiration is based.

Idiosyncrasies of the video medium industrially perceived as limitations to be tuned out of the imaging process became the very vocabulary and syntax of the Vasulkas' imaging process in the decade of the '70's. As committed modernists, they set their prior pastimes of concert music performance and industrial filmmaking aside to take the video work directly into their home, where they set about converting their series of living spaces into the very stuff of art. Just as film was becoming increasingly industrialized and costly beyond personal means, the basic video tools could still give a completely personal dimension to imagemaking. Superficial similarities with other artforms were consistently challenged by the properties of the medium itself. Steina still refers to this initial creative time as "the euphoria of radicalism."

Euphoria is not a necessary precondition for innovation, as the Vasulka's later works will attest. All of their work, however, draws from the expansive formal parameters defined in those early years:

- 1) the malleability of the electronic image;
- 2) the mobility of the lens and its image;

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- 3) the existence of visual planes within the video image;
- 4) the electronic unity of sound and image;
- 5) the objectification of the image unit; and
- 6) real-time creativity.

Infused with a sense of humor and elevated by a jointly nurtured unification of work with play, these initial "discoveries" triggered a run of sleight-of-hand imaging exercises only hinted at by the work available here.

A persistent fascination with windows was telegraphed early with EVOLUTION (1970), in which homo sapiens walks directly from the stone age to a Tad's \$1.59 Steakhouse by way of passing in the lens image from the plane of a window surface to the plane of the street outside that window. Even as the lens pulls back to glimpse the reflected space inside the window, an exercise in sound-generated imaging emphasizes the essential flatness of the electronic image.

The glib allusion to the filmic format inherent in the horizontally drifting window panes of EVOLUTION gives way to the crumbling two-sided frame which borders the early images of GOLDEN VOYAGE (1973), dramatically figuring the decay of rectangular imagery. The initial three-channel animation of GOLDEN VOYAGE simultaneously articulates separate visible planes within the image while emphasizing the inherent flatness of the medium, as does the prior work. Even so, the basic bread animation of GOLDEN VOYAGE prefigures the more epic grandeur of ART OF MEMORY (1987).

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The development of video art resembles no artformal development more closely than that of electronic music, in which the sound-making potentials of the medium were subject to extensive analysis prior to musicmaking. Readily aware of the relationship and enamored of the demonstrable manifestation of sound as waveforms, the Vasulkas acquired an audio synthesizer early in their work together. Subsequent experiments encoded sound as image and image as sound, enforcing a perceptual symbiosis unfamiliar to most observers and perhaps obnoxious to many.

Projects such as SOUNDGATED IMAGES (1974) and NOISEFIELDS (1974) may have served essentially as formal exercises, but with VIOLIN POWER (1970-78) Steina began a procedural approach which continues to inform her art today. In the latter work, Steina demonstrates "how to play video on the violin," posing one function for the impending MIDI revolution and prefiguring the polished performances of VOICE WINDOWS (1986) and VOCALIZATION ONE (1988).

VIOLIN POWER also illustrates two other characteristics of Vasulka video projects: an informal and highly personal approach to the requisition of lens images as malleable material, and the nearly performance project premise of real-time creativity in which a process is initiated that in its very occurrence becomes the work. Emphasizing robotics as well as programmed functions, real-time creativity figures as set-pieces within demonstration videos such as CANTALOUP (1980) and ORBITAL OBSESSIONS (75-77) and was the basis of Steina's Machine Vision

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works, including URBAN EPISODES (1980). The complex real-time activities of ORBITAL OBSESSIONS effectively convert the Vasulka's Buffalo, New York, loft space into the interior image of video; their teakettle becomes an object of art.

Steina's fascination with the phenomenology of seeing as well as the malleability of image has taken her to the streets and sidewalks of Iceland, Manhattan, Buffalo, Santa Fe and recently Tokyo for the raw materials with which to create her art. Illusionist images akin to conventional motion pictures are objectified and incorporated into the complete video spectrum of activity, from the flickering flip-flop of FLUX (1977) through the five video generations of Doris Cross saying a few sentences which became LILITH (1987).

Development of the Digital Image Articulator with Jeffrey Schier in the late '70's facilitated in a major way all of the foregoing exercises with the possible exception of the lens mobility so important in Steina's work. Documentaries such as CANTALOUPE and ARTIFACTS (1980) demonstrate the ease of flattening a sphere digitally, deconstructing an image mock cubistically, or multiplying an image unit into electronic wallpaper. Followed immediately by mature works like SELECTED TREECUTS (1980) and IN SEARCH OF THE CASTLE (1981), the digital exercises opened the way to later masterworks such as LILITH and ART OF MEMORY.

The occasion of a gallery retrospective precludes the need

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for intense description but invites speculation regarding recent work, future implications, or the response of posterity. The most recent works at hand, VOICE WINDOWS, LILITH and ART OF MEMORY, are strikingly easy to look at when compared to the rigorously didactic and utilitarian works of the mid-'70's. Moreover, access to computer graphics, advanced robotics, MIDI technology and state of the art imaging tools threatens the sometimes rough-edged dialogue with tools that has informed much of the Vasulkas' best work. To mention the decidedly narrative implications of Woody's last two works is to pose the question of modernism in the midst of memory-making, radicalism amidst ritual.

After shattering the imperialism of the camera image in the '70's, have the Vasulkas set a post-modernist course for the '90's? Is narrative aspiration or literary allusion grounds for expulsion from the avant-garde? Do installations, of which the Vasulkas have created six in this decade, betoken an essential conservatism?

The answer to any implication of incipient classicism in the Vasulkas' work is found in the continuity of vision and aspiration traceable from the earliest experiments to the latest projects. Steina has continued to explore the inner and outer space of the video image in manners both improvised and programmed. If the ground-skimming videocam of "Low Ride" (SUMMER SALT, 1982) seems a model for David Letterman's Late Night Crash Cam, it only serves to demonstrate that some people like to see and hear differently. Meanwhile, VOCALIZATION ONE, in which Joan Laszlo

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Barbara's voice sounds are inscribed on flattened video images of New Mexico, poses a future form of real-time live performance video descended directly from VIOLIN POWER. The need to innovate endures.

For Woody, that need is manifest in the "electronic narrativity" of THE COMMISSION (1983) and ART OF MEMORY, two works of shattered narrative that continue to refine and inventory the rhetorical devices available to the video artists. If experiments in the '70's served to distinguish the electronic imaging capabilities of video from the photographic norm of film and television, experiments in the '80's have focused on the uniquely electronic ways in which cognition can be advanced. While rejecting the illusionary theatre of the movies, Woody has adapted the ancient mnemonic device of Cicero, the evolution of which into a Renaissance "memory theatre" is detailed in Frances Yates' The Art of Memory (University of Chicago, 1966), as a formal device in his latest work. In the classical art of memory, images are mentally placed in distinct and clearly defined locations within a remembered structure as reminders of facts or ideas. From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, the preferred structure for such locations was a theatre.

Amidst the tables and alcoves of the American Southwestern landscape in which the Vasulkas live, ART OF MEMORY objectifies and locates filmic images of mankind's evident self-hatred of the twentieth century: images of The Bomb, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution and World War II. The images, situated

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among the mesas, represent a memory theatre for the planet, immensely personal perhaps to Woody, but eminently accessible to most of us who are not recent graduates of American public schools. An epic, almost operatic, work, ART OF MEMORY attempts to both exercise and exorcise memory, manifesting collective guilt while deconstructing the collective memory theatre of our time, newsreel journalism.

ART OF MEMORY uses waveforms to shape images and cut masks. At the time of its completion in 1987, Woody expressed its limitations this way:

If I had command of a computer I would insist that transitions not be at all filmic, with mask and insert, but a continuous transformation in time and space without the brutality of the filmic cut. I am in personal rebellion against the cut. (Quotations and attributions herein derive from the author's interviews with the artists in April and October of 1987 and August, 1989.)

With one major and obvious exception, ART OF MEMORY avoids more traditional filmic editing by using a series of filmic wipes which transform and occasionally black out the image. Recent acquisition of computer imaging capability is Woody Vasulka's latest step toward an internally modeled imaging capability, liberated from the outside world, but articulate within it. He worries about the quality of his new tools, speaking of a need to subvert their industrial quality and make them personal, the same need to "get inside the black box" which provoked the works to date.

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An upshot of recent encounters in Japan and Europe has been an experimental interest in the interfacing of sound with robotics, bringing MIDI technology to a theatre in which movement could be controlled by voice or other sounds. The physical articulation of space initiated by sound alone, what Woody would call an "electronic opera house," poses an alternative to high definition television as the medium of the millenium. As a project, it ascends in a direct exploratory line from SOUNDGATED IMAGES, through the robotics of various Machine Vision works, and beyond VOCALIZATION to a speculative future.

"To see and hear differently" would seem to be a Promethean ambition. This is especially true with a medium that epitomizes in its industrial format the homogenization of vision in the world, much like the homogenization of history manifest in ART OF MEMORY. Within that tension, however, lies the greater challenge and the greater opportunity. The Vasulkas like to relay Luis Bunuel's remark that "we came to change the world but, unfortunately, we only changed the art." The subtext, of course, is that "we tried."

To paraphrase a bumpersticker common in these parts, the duty of the modernist as evidenced in the works of Woody and Steina Vasulka is to "Reject Much (and) Obey Little." Precisely destined to be rejected and disobeyed, the basic premises of the aesthetic status quo must give way to new ways of seeing, imaging, hearing and understanding. The physical and spiritual

quest for these new ways is the life work of the modernist artist. In the context of such a quest, the video products of the Vasulkas emerge as a personal memory theatre containing lexicon and grammar for electronic imaging of a highly evolved and immensely personal nature. That imaging process, in its power and cogency, subverts the dominant paradigms of television and computer graphics and warrants critical articulation outside the glossary of art-critical and film-descriptive terminology.

Science fiction, social thinkers and systems planners see electronic technology as both surveillance and salvation in a world running on information. Indeed, home videomaking capability today threatens to usurp the traditional place of music at children's birthday parties, and audio synthesizers have far surpassed the now historical popularity of the piano. The traditional uses of the modernist are today sometimes rendered by the populace, an irony emphasized by the recent massive explosion of consumer electronic goods. Software design approximates the contemporary arts of memory.

Artistic diversity, as window on, mirror for, or participant in the natural diversity of evolution, is seldom addressed by science fiction, social thinkers or systems planners. New ways of seeing, hearing and understanding are only sustained by the collective efforts of artists for whom innovation, creation and invention are personal objectives. Steina and Woody Vasulka are such artists. Their works, collectively and individually, aspire to new understandings of image and sound as manageable energy fields within the electronic process. Their personal

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projects articulate phenomenological and cognitive concerns which may stimulate new life yet among the living. If not, they will have left their work in code, an acceptable and necessary risk for art in the 1990's.

Roy Durfee is an arts and environment writer currently residing in Albuquerque, New Mexico. For many years he worked in the field of arts management, most recently as executive director of the New Mexico Jazz Workshop Inc.. Currently he is at work on a book posing biocentrism as a human alternative.