WOODY VASULKA - INTERVIEW

1) How did you become involved with video? Describe the nature of your early work, its intent. Your documentary work?

2) You are most often called a video artist? What does this mean? What do you call yourself? What is the role of the artist?

3) Your work is an unusual blend of craft and technology, a marriage of many crafts - how did you arrive at this? How did your background and past influence this merger? Equipment design + building?

4) Experimentation is integral to your style? Some work constitutes 'sketches', and appears to be delving into perception and cognition. Is this true? What can we learn from this? Vasulka Imaging System?

5) Other work is 'opera' - what are you working on here?

6) What was your role in the development of computer video? What do you see as the possibilities of this?

7) What is your concept of audience? What do you hope for others to perceive from your work?

8) Much of your involvement in the past has been in the university and academic world in New York and back east - since moving to Santa Fe two years ago, how is your work changing? Is it related to your move?

9) How do you see yourself within the video/media community? Has this changed since moving West? How?

10) You seem to have abandoned teaching - why?

11) What do you see as the liberating potential of video, if any?

12) In general, you seem to oppose the conventional narrative structure - what do you mean by this?

13) What motivates your work? What sources, if any, do you consciously draw from? Cicero? 'Story of a Petit-Bourgeois', etc.? Do you view your work within any political/social context?

14) Is there anything else you'd like to discuss that we've missed here?

PREFACE: WOODY VASULKA

Woody Vasulka is a nationally known video artist. Along with his wife Steina,

he pioneered in the fields of video art and computer video.

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Woody studied Metal Technologies and Hydraulic

Mechanics at the School of Industrial Engineering. He then entered the

Academy of Performing Arts, Faculty of Film and Television, in Prague, where

he began to produce and direct short films. He emigrated to the U.S. in

1965, where he freelanced in New York City as a film editor for several

years.

In 1967 he began experiments with elctronic sounds, stroboscopic lights

and video. In 1974 he became a faculty member of the Center for Media Study

at State University of New York at Buffalo, and began his investigations into

computer-controlled video, building the "Vasulka Imaging System".

With Steina, he founded "The Kitchen", a legendary New York City media

theater. He has participated in many major video shows in the States

and abroad. He has also given numerous lectures, published articles,

composed music and made many videotapes. He is a 1979 Guggenheim Fellow,

and has received grants from the National Endowment.

Woody and Steina moved to Santa Fe ~~two~~ 3 years ago, and presently maintain

their video studio here. Woody is completing production on a video opera

he has created, entitled "The Commission".

Ken Ausubel (KA): How did you get into video?

Woody Vasulka (WV): Growing up after the war in Europe in what's called the

Socialist Realism, any notion of any kind of experimentation with media was

like a notion of the avant-garde in the 1920's. Politically, the avant-garde

was leftist, and the situation I grew into was already the bankruptcy of the

left, or the association of the left with the most reactionary thoughts and

the suppression of experimentation. I'm talking about a Czech situation.

All the modern Czech literature, poetry, painting, and also media, film

and first electronic works were astonishing. But the war and the

political situation rendered it useless.

We as a generation growing up in a film environment, like the Prague film school of

which I was a product, were rather concentrating on the opposite. We

didn't pay any attention to what's called the "MEDIA BASED information".

We were interested in what ideologies are interested in, which is the

larger mythological or narrative systems. As a group in film school, we

followed the metaphorical approach. Maybe you'd disguise political opposition

through metaphorical genre.

But when I came to the States, I discovered that THINGS WERE DIFFERENT. THERE

was a whole generation of practicing artists called

the Structuralists who paid very much attention to what the European

avant-garde did, and much further extended the idea about the material

itself: film surface, motion, elements, information within a SINGLE frame.

Suddenly came this consciousness of the materiality of the medium or materiality

of the message - the message is the medium, the medium has its own truth.

All these conditions prepared me for video. As I encountered video, it

was basic work with electronic materials.

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

WV: The basic introduction to the video work was through the concept of the electronic image being made out of a certain organized energy. The nature of our early work was non-figurative or non-representational, generated internally through electronic systems. We produced numerous tapes which include this aspect of video, which people call "abstract video", but that is just a transposition of one esthetic term from abstract painting to this electronic environment. That wasn't our goal. Our goal was to create reality, a certain reality that would testify to its own electronic complexities.

KA: You also did some documentary work at that time?

WV: In those days when we started doing video, the idea about video was total and unified. There was no division between video art and documentary. It's rather the idea of the alternate culture of the 1960's. In fact most of the people working in video in the beginning would do all aspects from electronic to feature works. The genre wasn't specifically segmented. It happens with every new art form or medium. The totality of the investigation overwhelms the division of the genres.

We would work on specific electronic image-making at night and next day we would go and record all of what we define as alternate culture events that legitimate media would not be interested in at all, from homosexual theater to street scenes to rock 'n roll to political speeches on   Union Square, since we lived right there. So it was a free medium, totally insignificant in the Establishment's context.

KA: You're most often called a video artist. Do you accept that?

WV: It's a term through which you make a living. Long time ago we didn't need that at all. Video artist already indicates a set of limitations.

WV: (continued) It's basically a marketing scheme. Sometimes it's up to

others to coin these terms. For their own handling of thoughts or ideas,

they devise the world. Video art was coined by the galleries, because they

had to handle the product. But it really doesn't mean much at all. Personally

it's not my ambition to be a video artist. I'm very grateful that I could

find some medium in which I could be a practical philosopher. The other

labels I'm pragmatic enough to use because it raises money through these codes.

KA: What do you mean practical philosopher?

WV: The whole idea, not only of esthetic terms like Structuralism but also

of purely philosophical terms like time and energy, was rather abstract to

me. I could practice through film certain Structuralist or Modernist ideas.

But video is a medium which exposes you to a specific problem of time and

energy. Suddenly energy becomes a certain set of brightnesses, and time

becomes a location of that particular energy on the time raster, which is

the frame in video. These two things become so practical that suddenly

the abstract notion of light or location of light in time
BECOMES A CONDITION FOR DEFINING OF THE CRAFT OF ELECTRONIC IMAGING
is extraordinarily. Through this medium, I could
TREAT
time and energy as means of expression. Later
DID
the computer another part. Certain values,

what you call "real world" or "analog world", are translated into man-made

binary code, and these are astonishing conclusions which one not only reads

about, but can practice.

KA: Do you not consider yourself an artist then?

WV: In my own personal terms it's not my ambition.

In the process of experimentation, there are two conclusion: either it succeeds

WV: (cont) or fails. But if it's art, it has to succeed. There's no failed art. I don't want to live in the necessity of success, and that's what art is. It can appear many centuries later but still has to be a success.

KA: So experimentation is integral to your work?

WV: Yes. Yet I respect art and all the values of my life have something to do with that. If I would have tried to psychoanalyze myself, indeed on the bottom there is some kind of desire to produce art. Yet consciously I'm trying to walk the furthest circle around art. People would sometimes call me a "technology-determinist". That is, no longer esthetically driven. What fascinates me is where there are esthetic crosses the technology. I am driven by the curiosity, I want to specify any codes that can be specified, which sometimes borders on interest in art, but they are not exclusively part of an esthetic system.

KA: Were you always interested in machines?

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

Electronic technology is a craft like any other craft. It is not that complex at all. I would demystify immediately this idea of high-tech being

WV: (cont) something unreachable. Many people treat video as a black box

and use it only as input and output, but that's their own ideology about the

system. My conclusion is that working with technology or video has the

same set of rules as any other craft. The craft becomes transparent. It

becomes just a utility.

One must foresee the area in which the tool can be useful for the longest

period. If you make simple tools, you'll use them for a while like a

child uses a simple toy, then throw it away because you will outgrow the

challenge. If a tool is infinitely complicated, it will fascinate you for

the rest of your life. What I've been trying is to conceive tools that

contain more mystery than I could possibly conceptualize. These are what

we call "open systems", which can be looped through, around, reentered,

fed back. That's what characterizes most of the better tools, this ability

of being inspired by the tool rather than being served. In electronic

systems it's possible.

KA: Some of your work constitutes sketches, and appears to be looking into

perception and cognition - is this true?

WV: Right from the beginning, rather than achieving esthetic conclusions, we

felt challenged by television as a perception system. In film you have

24 modes or dynamic phases. Suddenly with video you have 60! Any event

encodes many more changes than film, and you can soon build devices that

that can look or work with a field. We could change the color of each

field, getting into layers, or what we called perceptually induced mixes.

Then there are various harmonic movements. We found that certain frequencies

are sensitive to certain changes. We discovered that because we worked

with higher frequency ranges than film.

There are other perceptual systems and cognitive interpretations like when

WV: (cont.) we entered the computer: a particular event like computer—or digital feedback that correlates preceding and succeeding events. If you cinematically arranged it into a sequence of images, which video does, there are certain processes that are natural to our perception. When you "AND" end one image with another, which is a logical combination, you find out that your vision interprets logical tables. Actually they are cognitively interpreted, and make sense even if they are derived from logic. It's not only the challenges of video's materiality or its codes, but it's also a basic pleasure in seeing the images and changes.

KA: How about your opera?

That I would say is the competitive part in which one may want to enter the larger symbolic narrative systems in which they are integrated into general cultural archetypes, which opera has become.I asked if there is an application of those primary codes that you arrive at by experimentation, investigation or just pure visual joy. Is there a possibility of applying them to these more established genres?
You don't really say anything by thought. It's still translated in the sense of the medium. The medium has to express something which is maybe not the thought, though it could be guided by thought processes. But the performance of it is on the level of media. I would give up any thought-produced meaning for image-produced paradox that would subvert my thought. In this case of the opera, it was a rather formal exercise in which I took certain imaging structures from the past work, and transposed them into the narrative context. If they work or should work, this is a different question, but it was done to experiment.

KA: What was your role in the development of computer video?

WV: We happened to be within the group or generation of people who worked with video and made an effort to bring video and computer into a union. We had one way of doing it in which we built a separate small computer beside the general purpose computer, and we made a time-link between these two in which they communicated synchronously. Even that is not an innovative idea because it's natural to these technology systems to copulate. What we have done was coined as video art. We made sense of a basic set of rules, and our images were one of the first testimonies brought into the context of what's called video art. Computer systems and environments ~~are so rich that they are~~ *HAVE BEEN* embedded mostly in industrial *UNTIL NOW.* and scientific environments. Yet they are not communicated among each other. *BUT THERE IS A NEW, MORE DEMOCRATIC ERA NOW. I AM TALKING ABOUT PERSONAL COMPUTERS.* Our contribution was to define computer and video in the context of art. Up until now there is still an unresolved problem of whether there is in fact computer art. Sometimes for us the most unbelievable images are not the art-initiated but those that are mathematically or numerically initiated. One has to question or see where the challenge is. Where is the radical image? Not where *is* the successful image. *IS* .

KA: What are the possibilities of computer video that intrigue you?

WV: What intrigues me about computer and video is mostly the changes between time and other problems, and also those modes that cannot be foreseen or fantasized through the best fantasy synthesizer which is *LAYMANS:* the human brain. There is something outside the ~~human~~ brain, like mathematical *INDEED* systems, whcih *which* are ~~also~~ a part of human cultural consciousness, yet they can bring astonishing surprises to works with computers. This untapped wealth is the pool of unmatched fantasy, fantasy that cannot be produced by plainly human fantasy, *CONFINED IN A PICTORIAL TRADITION.* Computer is such a large participatory system. It encompasses all the

WV: (cont) branches of knowledge. I see it as a unified tool, the first

time in the history of the sciences and humanities to provide the code as

a unified form of expression. Computer or digital code is an on-line

language for all those relationships.

KA: What's your concept of audience for your work?

WV: The concept of audience is cultural conditioning. Certain societies

demand a success in the sense of large audiences. For many people the only

way to communicate is mass communication. Europeans are very aware of

people that did not succeed in their lifetimes. It's almost a leitmotif

in which the lifetime success means doom - they are usually forgotten

instantly. ~~Those that work in their own time, even if they get fifteen~~

~~minutes, could still alter the living consciousness. They may disappear,~~

~~but they have seeded the conditions for some evolution.~~

The audience is probably always necessary for performing arts. But once

you work on anything that is coded, ~~even~~ letters ~~like~~ /IN literature or

poetry, or/film GRAIN IN and photography, you are free of the relationship. If

the code is durable it will survive. This kind of security in one's coded

work is the basis of durable participation in culture.

I have the privilege now that I can try to speak to people who are involved

on a rather professional level. It's very much like musicians practicing

fugae. I send a message to someone who would fully share that. A general

audience also shares these things, but it's a rare occasion that it's

synchronous with the thought that you have. I don't want to be at the

mercy of popular culture. Then you have no time to develop more intimate

codes, which will probably later be more popular.

KA: Much of your involvement in the past has been in the university and

    academic worlds back East. Do you see your work changing in Santa Fé?

WV: As long as I was involved in discovering or summarizing the phenomenology
of electronic imaging, I was able to do the teaching. In many ways I was
excited about teaching when I was discovering those codes, but then when I
moved to application, or working in the context of a certain genre, it was
not an innovation of a common but rather a personal context. These things
cannot be communicated with such excitement because they are doubtful,
insecure conclusions. Once you start working, talking or trying to ~~experience~~ *IMPOSE*
~~with~~ *ON* someone your own creative dilemma, it's brutal and oppressive. I was
totally absorbed in what I was doing, and I've never been interested in
convincing someone about an esthetic principle.

In general, I don't like to work. I don't want to get involved in any job.
If I can avoid ~~any~~ *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 a job means
integration or dignity. The idea of being lazy here is devastating for an
individual to be accused of. Where I come from, most of the fairy tales
are based on lazy people. A lot of a state of wellbeing 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 this wonderful rush. Then I found out
that it's not very interesting. So I'm trying to get away from as much as
I can - phone calls, even ~~from waking up from~~ *getting out of* bed. It's underlying the
question of teaching. One has to be preconditioned and have a passion for
that activity. I don't think passions are dividable.

KA: Paul LaFargue, Karl Marx's son-in-law, wrote a pamphlet called "The
Right to be Lazy". He wrote it while in prison for political organizing.
His premise is that the world is so embroiled mostly because people are
much too busy with needless activity. We'd be better off if we were lazier.

WV: The whole idea about activity and morality is very much Western thought.

The creative undoing is that in which you face only your own thought or

existence. It's in fact painful. There's no relief for people accused of

being lazy. In my eyes they are the heroes. They submit themselves to the

deepest possible torture. Any activity takes you into optimisitic area again.

That's why people in the West like to travel, or develop all sorts of activities

in which they prevent death, improve their finances, become mentally more

healthy. It's a profitable involvement being active. But the opposite

is more challenging.

Coming to Santa Fe is a retirement from the duties. I found out this isn't

in which

a community to compete, but rather to comtemplate. It's a privilege to be

able to contemplate your life, but it is more difficult to contemplate than

simply to produce.

KA: What do you see as the liberating potential of video, if any?

WV: These things are very much come to your mind when you start working

with a medium like computer or video because they seem to be so free. They

give you the power of the individual to deal with a medium which was so

for so long   _seems_

centralized. The decentralization of this power and knowledge seems to

_is_

be important. The whole doctrine of alternate media is based on this

possibility, creating alternate informational systems and alternate

everything.

But the visions of individuals are not always in synch with the direction

of society. Most of the electronic systems are developing into games, or

surveillance or military use. We have fewer investigators of the media

than the 1960's. That means the whole idea of a social change or a

decntralization of research, as we believed would happen, did not happen

toward

in that form. Society tends to organize socio-biologically more and

more specialization in which there are providers and users. This idea of

WV: (cont) an individual being renaissance or holistic - in the sense of developing systems, maintaining systems, using systems creatively and replacing the established systems - I don't find it valid anymore. So I find these ideas of the '60's extraordinarily unfulfilled. What I mean is to desire an alternate systems of production and distribution. But now it's all entertainment. There's still no informational basis. Also the values change. It was legitimate to produce a unique information through black-and-white video. Now I don't think there's any station, including public access, that would even think of producing such material. That means even the alternative values have changed, and are now all embedded in what they call "production values", if it's color or not.

KA: What sources do you draw on in your work?

WV: In Europe where I come from, the cultural environment is so dense, so dependent on literature and music. What you talk about with your friends is culture. It's impossible to grow up in film school or even industrial school without knowing the heroes of literature. Virtually everything you think about is derived from another source. Culture is what I would call accumulative. It's not the same way here in the States, which fascinates me. Every generation every five or six years starts from square zero. There's a vast reservoir of unaccumulated culture. Information is so decentralized. I had to divorce myself from the metaphorical language, from many narrative forms which were radical where I came from, because they were dangerously against the establishment, the Socialist establishment. I had to pay attention to the workers of the media and to the material basis which is in fact more leftist than any of those radical forms I experienced in Czechoslovakia, which were eclectic and reactionary, very traditional.

WV: (cont) Suddenly the sources for me became different ones. ~~The common consciousness and~~ THE innovation LAYS ~~lay~~ in different types of electronic tools, TOOLS, FOR EXAMPLE ~~like stroboscopic lights, electronic music and video~~. I had to rethink all my esthetics. That's why I had given up all the narrative modes.

KA: How do you view your work politically?

WV: I'm very much interested in political questions, mostly related to critiques of Socialism, which I know intimately. Marxism was just a dialogue with other moralistic systems. It was a severe critique of THE SOCIAL INJUSTICE OF HIS TIME. ~~human behavior, and sociologically, Marx is powerful just to unmask the~~ SAME ~~relationship between the classes.~~ It's A DIFFERENT ~~a moral~~ problem, NOW a decay of the revolutionary ~~class~~ into THE ~~a~~ bourgeois. It's a tragic event. So I'm aware of political aspects, but I would never try to integrate them into works of art because I think art is not such a closed system. I think art is much more modest, less pretentious. Political ambitions are more pretentious, and involve you in a moral conflict, especially the collapse of ideology, ~~which is one of the most tragic things I~~ TO WITNESS ~~have ever seen~~. I refer to the collapse of Socialism. I think the pain of any ideological system collapsing is the most devastating experience one can have. Not that I want to avoid it because each of us has ~~many~~ collapses of ideology during our lives, but its extremes are punishing because they involve the oppression or submission of other people. No one has in fact the power to inflict such feeling on each other. This is my moral code.

I have been careful in accusing the sytem of developing these tools that we call the oppression because there's such a huge collaboration of the population. It's the most devastating to me not that the Czars ruled, but the willingness of the population. The fulfillment of the bourgeois class

WV: (cont) is the fulfillment which the proletariat is following. It's

poetic, not really real that the prolestariat would find its own identity.

That kind of cooperation tells me that indeed humankind is not about certain

thoughts that are radicalized or carried through moral codes. It's much

more mass-oriented and likes the same rituals: the cars, boats, sports.

That maybe is the humaity there is. Individuals can maybe be heard but

they should not expect to be followed. This indirectness in which thought

is only a medium should be accepted. It is accepted in my mind so that

I can only moderate very indirectly the impact of what I'm doing. But there

is no direct message that I could put into a political message, even an

esthetic or radical concept. It's much more indirect.

END

KEN AUSUBEL W/ WOODY VASULKA