INTERVIEW WITH WOODY VASULKA, SANTA FE, NM
CHRIS HILL

FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT OF A 90 MINUTE INTERVIEW WITH VIDEO ARTIST WOODY VASULKA FROM 5/92. THE INTERVIEW FOCUSED ON THE VASULKAS' 1970'S INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE FUNDAMENTAL ELECTRONIC ARCHITECTURE OF THE VIDEO IMAGE, THE IDEAS CIRCULATING THROUGH THE ART AND TECHNOLOGY WORLDS AT THE TIME, AND THE ART "SCENES" THEY OBSERVED AND HELPED TO CREATE. WOODY AND STEINA VASULKA CO-FOUNDED THE KITCHEN IN 1971, AN ARTISTS-RUN, MULTI-DISCI-PLINARY SPACE IN NEW YORK, AND TAUGHT IN SUNY BUFFALO'S DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDY FROM 1974 TO 1983. THE INTERVIEW WAS CON-DUCTED BY CHRIS HILL, CURATOR OF A VIDEO HISTORY PROJECT EXAMINING THE FIRST DECADE OF VIDEO APPEAR IN THE STUDY GUIDE WHICH WILL ACCOMPANY THE SURVEY OF EARLY VIDEO IN THE U.S. TO BE PRODUCED AND DISTRIBUTED BY THE VIDEO DATA BANK (CHICAGO) IN LATE 1995.

CH: You came to the U.S. from Prague in 1965. What artistic agendas did you bring with you? What did you find here?

WV: My major education was in Czechoslovakia. I had a film school education, where we learned a coding system to disguise, metaphorically, criticism of the government. I was of course infected by the modernist movement, which was left-oriented, and especially affected by early avant-garde—like Mayakovsky, Vertov and those around early cinema. They were the major influences on an entire gen-eration. My generation felt the euphoria of the post-WWII war new world order, which was left and progressive... The Soviet Man's ideal was to give a lesson in brotherhood and social justice to the West.

My coming of age in the 1950's happened when there was a crisis on this kind of thinking. We all had to develop strategies for how to criticize the government pictorially, or determine how the narrative system could survive but remain critical. We had to develop this metaphorical lan-guage. I didn't have time to go back to materiality... to the machines, the cogs and wheels that modernists had prac-ticed through the Bauhaus and elsewhere...The major nar-rative interest at the time was similar to Hollywood's—illusionist—to portray a social situation. I was interested in the early modernists' preoccupation with machines, but my interest remained dormant while in Europe.

When I arrived in New York this wasn't the agenda at all. The 1960's were in progress. A version of the structuralist movement was emerging, but I was skeptical because we had a real avant-garde in Europe. The American avant-garde seemed like a second hand attempt. I took me awhile, a couple of years, to recognize that the new ele-ment in the American avant-garde was technology, espe-cially electronics... I was disoriented...

So there were two influences at that time. The first was the social avant-garde, not so much the art avant-garde but the sexual or transsexual avant-garde, which Steina and I were completely struck by... So we went around with a portapak and shot endlessly—theater groups, performances, and various events, dialogues [which is documented in their tape *Participation*, 1969].

The second influence was of course technology. I had started with light. I still felt that light and shadow were the agenda, the typical filmic agenda... So I started to work with stroboscopic lights as discrete events. I understood that there was something in the discreteness of the frame, a flash, a quantum. Then I encountered video and under-stood that with video there was a different principle that would negate film or extend film or restructure film. I gave up film overnight. I went into working with video, which was completely undefined, completely free territo-ry, no competition intellectually—on the contrary, it was rejected right from the beginning by theorists and philoso-phers of film. So it was a very free medium. And the com-munity was very young, naive, new, strong, cooperative, no animosities, kind of a welcoming tribe. So we ganged together west coast, east coast, Canadian west and east coasts and we created overnight a spiritual community.

This movement was mediated by two influences. First, the portapak, the first ever portable system which was com-prised of a camera cabled to an open reel-to-reel 1/2" videotape recorder, which made this closed circuit '60's experiment in television/video into a national movement. And second, the possibility of generating images by non-photographic/filmic means. No longer was the camera carrying the narrative codes. It was a very optimistic peri-od. Between 1969-73 I produced synthesized images, either using feedback* or various other techniques or video instruments. Steina gave up her violin career and went full time as well. We happened to like the same way of making pictures. But later in the '70's when all of the ideals about the new vocabulary and the new syntax had tempered down, video migrated toward the gallery, festi-vals, closed circuit special purpose, distribution...and back into the middle territory between the camera and the new principles of imaging...

CH: You've talked about the utopianism as being a char-acteristic of these times. What were its components?

WV: First there was an image that came through drugs, video synchronous forms—feedback, mandalas. This idea that you can perform entire metaphysical principles, was an idea that had appeared at the end of the 19th century in the West, when the influence of Eastern metaphysical prin-ciples came through Germany, France, Switzerland. There

* an effect which usually appears as infinite mirroring/tunneling, obtained by pointing the video camera at the monitor itself.

was an interest in channeling a stream of new conscious-ness though Western culture. The idea emerged of a new society that would be based on a new model. It was not based on Marxism, which describes an antagonism of classes, but rather on a drive for personal enlightenment, which of course communism incorporate in some ways, as a kind of pseudo-religious possibility... So this idea of the possibility of transcendence through image as an actual machine-made evocation created a counterpoint, or a bina-ry union between image and mind. Some though of this as a healing process or meditation, or others, like us as a restructuring of one's consciousness.

The war [WW2] had wiped out these interests [in Western European cultural thought]. Suddenly in the U.S. they reappeared in the period of the 1960's. The synchronous image—its performance, its form, its behavior and one's own self-processing, self-improvement or self-alteration. This seemed like an ideal tool. If you read or talk to peo-ple who constructed the video machines or to those who discovered the processes accidentally doing work, they reported this immediate identification with the image. And so along with these other conditions—alternate lifestyles, the anti-war movement, easier economical set-ups for producing these machines and for living— this no cash economy was really something very unique, and our generation tool great advantage of it. Suddenly there was the possibility of changing this society, not only through drugs and communal life and anti-establishment move-ments, but also through technology—and there were other advocates like Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan and Timothy Leary who pumped this ideological stuff into the whole situation. So the utopia, a restructuring of soci-ety...seemed possible...

I think it's interesting, but we now know how far from reality such a realization was. But I think it is known to be the first left, social antagonist movement, after the European social utopian movements, based on the resolu-tion of class differences which would result in some kind of harmonization of capital and worker...

CH: One thing in particular about your work, especially in the 1970's, is its examination of sound and image, not as equivalences, but in the same terms, common units, fundamentals from which to build a vocabulary perhaps, or with which to challenge cinema...You and Steina both respectively represent formal education in music and image structuring. Say something about your work with sound and image.

WV: 90% of people that developed video synthesizers had former interests in music...Each of their instruments at least contained circuits which were modulated by sound...What was referred to as the "synthesized" image is now called "abstract". It doesn't have its own genre of presentation. It never developed what we envisioned as an autonomous poetic form. MTV has achieved some-thing related in a very crude form, as a mercantile inter-est... All we were pointing to was the simple fact that sound could influence picture. Everything is defined sim-ply by frequency, or voltage change in time in a wave form organization. So the organizing principle of this new

material, voltages and frequencies, was a unifying code under this new synthetic possibility.

None of us would introduce new compositional principles. Music was very strong in composing, and the syntax of film was strong in composing with narrative units... In our case we never pretended composition. All our works are linear, in the form of demos, bringing certain artifacts or phenomenology's out... This was our fate, to bring those processes and take them from the technological envi-ronment to the aesthetic arena, to make a transition between these two points.

American art is still very alien to me... I like the people. I like the practicality. I like the way they bring new systems out and new structures out, and those social interests should be supported. I still don't understand why Americans support forms of innovation and experimenta-tion. I have no clue, because they never use it practically. For example, it never appears in television. There's always a small enclave somewhere, yet it's understood to be an essential part, at least until now, of creative activity. So I'm very grateful for Americans letting us do this...

CH: About the raster [the video screen, where the video image is "written" by an electronic gun]...how were you attracted to using specific "instruments" to explore the (de)structuring of the video frame?

WV: ...I would never touch Nam June Paik's instruments, which were to perform social critiques of the image. He would take a famous person and distort him. It was a Fluxus idea to attack the bourgeois ideal of proper deliv-ery of the image. It was a subversion, a contextual subver-sion. This would not be permitted in my ethical interests. I'd rather wrestle with the gods... So we tried to avoid completely the social context of iconic presentation. Eventually it crept in another context, in the context of the "scene"... which also broke rules. But we never associated these social events with the TV tube. It wasn't only us, it was also the religion of those others working with the sig-nal to disregard the existence of the TV sets which were so dear to Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik...

We were never interested in television. We didn't know it, we didn't grow up with it, we didn't like it...We never had to associate or dissoci-ate ourselves from what's called American TV...

Paik and others under-stood that there was the TV signal and in addition there were interference possibilities. In the 1960's that was known. We tried to specify that those arti-facts (image interferences) were our interest; the other part of TV was not. American art is always interested in the confronta-

tion with TV. TV became the centerpiece of the avant-garde. It still is. It's the monster breathing down everyone's neck...

CH: I want to get back to this idea of feedback. It was a machine artifact that also had resonance in social ideals. And there is this notion in your work that the work should be in a dialogue—between the maker, the tools and the audience. You have soundtracks telling the viewer what you're doing... You founded the Kitchen so that there could be such a place where this could happen.

WV: There are 2 components to the idea of feedback. First what's surprising about feedback is that it cycles without your presence. Feedback is an autonomous system, almost like an organism.

Second, regarding our bringing things out in a didactic fashion. Probably this comes in part from scientific projects that were aetheticized...We all engaged in explanations. We wanted to know how to make it make sense, to develop a vocabulary, we wanted to formulate it. There were clichés about information...Both of our upbringings are socialist and concerned with knowledge. We were interested in the transmission of knowledge from on place to another; that was the mission of the time. The mission was not to compete with paintings, it was to get this knowledge and bring it to people ... perhaps that's utopian, creating a Don Quixote syndrome...

CH: One of the features that distinguishes even your narrative work of the 1980's (*The Commission*, 1983, *Art of Memory*, 1986) is that the tools you use to interfere with the image are visible, also in Steina's landscape work of the 1980's (Lilith, 1987). It's not an easy discussion—how you use these tools. You can't expect a general audience to understand how those instruments affect the image without orientation. But as soon as an audience does start paying attention to what's in the tapes it's clear that you're not hiding anything. And maybe you do have this in common with the people who went out in the streets with portapaks to work with others to develop their own voices, to represent themselves on TV. This sensibility seems to have been lost with the generation of artists, in the 1980's and since, who gambled on TV, because TV will not reveal itself to you, and certainly it will not reveal its commercial structure.

WV: ...In order to present illusionist work (like narrative) there has to be the means to present it which are real, mechanical. This is also true of showing an image which is abstract in form. Its image is not there to deceive you but to reveal the means of making it. It's honesty, I'd like to think. The system is a participatory process in which tools give you abstract material, and you're there maybe to form it, but the tool and you have the same significance. We always called what we were doing as dialogues (with the tools). Sometimes we said that the tools were our teachers...

still from *Violin Power*, Steina Vasulka

We realized that tools, and later the computer, incorporated art; they were the art stars...We were completely infatuated with how the tools actually emulated artist-thinking, especially within the modernist tradition, minimalism...This may be an exaggeration, but we saw the tools produce structures that we didn't invent...This education was perhaps the most powerful experience of this period. We got this strange education and we felt the knowledge had to be disseminated. So we became didactic and we sent it all over. And at one time there was this great dialogue. Today it's not about transmission of knowledge. It's about something else.

CH: Steina was talking about open forum common in the 1960's in the U.S. — like you could walk into the WBAI radio station in NY and converse on the air... Was the Kitchen like this?

WV: No. The Kitchen was a live audience test laboratory (LATL). Maybe also with practical purposes, like testing new microphones, etc..... It was taken over by the "scene." We were not dogmatic about it, so the Kitchen became a presentation space for performance, music, theater, and video. Video was always there but not dominant. There were open screenings each week..

CH: You describe it as including an audience as part of the sender/receiver paradigm.

WV: Running the daily operations were Dmitri Devyatkin and Shridhar Bapat. There was a religion about disseminating information.. it was an activist period. Everyone was trying to disclose the utmost secrets of systems, systems' thinking and performance.

CH: How did Howard Wise's gallery function?

WV: It was an inspiration... In the late '60's he exhibited technology and art. His track record was amazing.

But he'd closed down his gallery before the Kitchen opened and had re-incorporated as Electronic Arts Intermix, which became the sponsor when we went to the state council (NY State Council on the Arts) for money.

still from *Lilith*, Steina Vasulka

The Kitchen was an interesting phenomenon; it was symptomatic of this period. We fixed up the space... and then it stood empty for two weeks and we got paranoid. Doesn't anyone want to use the space? Then it started filling up... Musicians wanted every Monday, then Tuesdays too... We felt so lucky—little did we know that musicians had no other place to work out of except for the Kitchen.

NY always makes what it needs. The Kitchen became self-programmed. They'd came and we'd say, yes, here is a time for you. And anybody actually could perform there. It had a vast repertoire.

Chris Hill is a video artist living in Buffalo NY. Video curator of Hallwalls for 11 years, ending in 1994, she is a very active and vital part of Buffalo's art community and is currently teaching in the Media Studies Dept, at SUNY Buffalo.