Reading the Tools, Writing the Image

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During the 1970s, Steina and Woody Vasulka helped define the parameters of video art. Like other artistic work that emerges at a juncture between established and new media, their work is infused with the rhetoric of its origin. This retrospective of their invites a reconsideration and allows us to speculate, by means of textual analysis, on underlying theoretical formations in their tapes.

The Vasulkas' video was conceived in the context of late 1960s rhetoric that celebrated involvement and exploration. In these terms, individual videotapes did not so much have intrinsic worth, but emerged as the by-product of a largely intangible generative process. Recordings were imagined as supplemental, analogous to the notes of physicists or anthropologists exploring an unknown domain. The central invisible concern remained the exploration of the electronic field, forever deferred and absent to the viewer of tapes. This rhetoric of process helped by pass critical methods of formalist analysis and authorial style still strong at that historic moment, particularly among art critics and curators who were beginning to address video. It functioned to legitimize apparently inconsistent styles, enabling the shifts from abstraction and logical systems to camera realism and expression that seemed to characterize the Vasulkas' work.

These rhetorical strategies, many of which are enunciated in the Vasulkas' statements about their work, functioned to suggest an orientation for the still amorphous field of video. But as so often happens, the narratives that surround and allow the original production of new work may

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foreclose a theoretically informed viewing. In retrospect, the tapes have several concerns embedded in their existence as dynamic texts, which are inadequately articulated by the rhetoric of presence and process that originally accompanied them. Accordingly, textual analysis provides a more productive access to the Vasulkas' tapes than the often mythologized notion of artists at the electronic frontier.

This essay addresses several concerns sustained in the tapes and installations the Vasulkas have produced over a period of two decades. A common feature of much of their work is the juxtaposition or interplay of conflicting modes of representation inherent in the video apparatus. The means of setting these conflicts in motion vary, occurring in projects that otherwise seem separate and dispersed. It might now be useful to consider how these projects cut across periods, tools and styles. We will discuss how the Vasulkas' work functions to write "live" images, read electronic tools as texts, rethink machine logic, ground representation in contemporary neurophysiology, appropriate the panopticon as metaphor and transform art history into an analogy of programming.

Writing the Image

In part, the Vasulkas' work seems to continue the modernist project of questioning illusionistic representation. Much of their work substitutes abstract pattern for an unexamined experience of camera imagery as live unmediated presence. Jacques Derrida argues that the desire for "presence" is a central myth of western civilization. By presence, he means seeing specific meanings as fully and naturally inherent in representation. Meaning is thus constituted as truth. If western culture can be characterized in

this way, then these myths reach a peak of development in the technology of "live" television. "Live" camera illusionism perpetuates nineteenth-century assumptions about perception as a passive, direct, and unproblematic receiving process. These assumptions in turn operate to embed ideology and desire in the appearance of the "natural." In contrast, images generated entirely by video synthesizers do not appear natural. Even camera images that are processed by synthesizers depart from traditional concepts of realist or expressive representation. Both move closer to theoretical concepts of moving imagery as a mode of writing. An interest in imagery as writing is already suggested by the title of the Vasulkas' early work, *Calligrams* (1970), which refers to Apollinaire's poems that reshaped printed texts into images.

The idea of camera imagery as writing is one of the oldest concepts of mechanical reproduction, embedded in the terms "photography" and "cinematography," both neologisms derived from the Greek for writing with light and with motion. Yet these have been displaced by the terms "television" and "video," literally "seeing at a distance" or "I see," a direct equation of perception and technology as complete simulacrum. This equation unreflexively extends premodernist habits of thought, which often re-emerge in practice even when theoretical premises to the contrary are well known. In part, the Vasulkas' projects interrogate such unconscious habits: In works like *Soundgated Images* (1974) and *Time/Energy Objects* (1975), the Vasulkas have seemed to insist on an analytic understanding of the electronic signal or waveform as a model for visual representation. *Soundgated Images* channels the same signal to both image and sound so that we are invited to imagine the electronic waveform that unites them. *Time/Energy Objects* displays abstract forms in which we can visually

identify oscillator-generated sine, triangle and square waves as constructive elements. As such the signal becomes both the substance that enables writing and the evidence that such a writing has occurred.

Yet the Vasulkas' use of abstraction always alternates with, or is tied to, a return to camera imagery. Late modernist aesthetics, such as articulating the pure characteristic features of the video medium, are now taken for granted. The camera image returns in a different context, precisely because it is known and seen to be a signifying construct, one means among many to generate an image. A tape like *Time/Energy Objects* not only visualizes the signal, but also plays with the constructed illusion of three-dimensional objects on the flat video raster. The blank white screen of video's 525-line display is magnetically reshaped by the Rutt/Etra scan processor into simple geometrical forms.[1] The minimalist aesthetics of the objects so represented are tied to 1960s concerns in painting, music, and the other arts, but the new interest in how an illusionistic image can be seen in itself as constructed shifts the tape's stance into the postmodernist 1970s. The camera image in the context of the Vasulkas' abstract work becomes one more means of generating objects through signal manipulation. Even the sensuous landscapes of *The West* (1983) set the camera image against a subtle but vivid use of synthesized color unique to video. If pure abstraction never becomes completely central to the Vasulkas' work, neither does camera illusionism ever appear quite enough. The play between the two, together with the disjunctive values they represent, replace a hierarchical valorization of modernism or nineteenth-century styles.

Further, this tends to be true whether Steina or Woody are credited. Part of the narrative that surrounds the Vasulkas' long-standing collaboration is that Woody moves toward the abstract while Steina returns

to the concrete. Woody will become a purist at a certain point, insisting on only processed imagery as in *C-Trend* (1974), while Steina will return to easily recognizable camera imagery as in *From Cheektowaga to Tonawanda* (1975). Yet both these tapes involve processed imagery that fuse camera material with abstraction, and the difference between their aesthetics might be better characterized as parallel principles in different domains. Even this is problematic, since Woody embraces camera imagery in his later narrative work and they collaborated on the purely abstract *Noisefields* (1974). It is perhaps more appropriate to abandon any and all easy polarizations of their aesthetics as ephemeral and anecdotal, in order to recognize shared operational principles and complex as well as distinctive aesthetics.

Reading the Tools

One of the established tropes of the Vasulkas' video has been the notion of tool exploration. They have both tried out new tools (e.g. digital imaging devices beginning in the mid-1970s) and rediscovered the old (e.g. introducing a deliberate horizontal drift into cameras long capable of such activity, but from which such drift was conceptually excluded). In both cases, they sought effects not yet discovered or fully developed. Yet in retrospect, there is a figure embedded in this project somewhat different than its apparent novelty and innovation of visual design. The underlying assumption here is that tools are not self-evident in their use or in their internal organization, and that tools require an activity not unlike that of reading. Tools themselves in the Vasulkas' work *become texts*, with an internal logic that is far from unproblematic.

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Much of the Vasulkas' tool use seems driven by an interest in discrepancies between different levels of organization within the machine. These discrepancies are normally concealed in commercial television production, which prescribes a central aesthetics of camera illusionism to unify otherwise disparate styles. All anti-illusionist aspects of electronic imaging are relegated to the domain of technical problems or to transitions between programs. The tools themselves are manufactured to automate this ideological demand for illusionist effect, and to efface all internal contradictions. The Vasulkas reverse tool organization from this automated set of conventions to an open-ended multiplicity of possibility and purpose. For example, *Evolution* (1970) marks their first use of deliberately induced horizontal drift as a compositional strategy, while *Digital Images* (1979)[2] investigates the capacities of digital synthesis to control the individual pixels that form a video image. In these tapes and others like them, the implication is that such image-generating capacities are internal to the machine and contradict camera norms.

Machines as texts can be read in terms of their plural constitutive elements, from signal pattern and raster design to horizontal stabilization and pixel units. In the Vasulkas' reading, each element can be deconstructed to generate distinctive compositional possibilities not predictable by conventional practice. The tapes in a sense become print-outs that allow us to read the machines that generate them.

Rethinking Machine Logic

The Vasulkas have often referred to the underlying code by which images are constructed or inscribed on the monitor surface. Woody, for

example, has said. "You have to master the code. ... The code should be controled and finally specified by creative people, artists." [3] But we might generalize this interest in the code or signal to other parallel processes of depersonalizing, mechanizing, or programming image production. This area of concern might also include the Vasulka practice whereby one person "sets up" a system (i.e., programs it) and the other runs or uses it; this is the story they tell about the production of *Noisefields,* and also of other tapes.

Also, their commitment to "real time" image synthesis, as in *Digital Images,* paradoxically fits this project. This commitment limits computer processing to the programming of moving imagery, rather than reconstructing motion through slowed computer generation of separate video frames (or fields).

> WV: [I]f you involve the computer, the picture must be disassembled and assembled again, point by point, number by number, and this can take a much longer time than necessary to represent a moving image. So we say if a system cannot process or originate pictures as continuously moving, we lose *real time.* When we lose the illusion of continuous movement, we lose *real time.*
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> SV: It's the most important thing ... I would sacrifice any kind of image resolution, any kind of perfect image, rather than sacrifice *real time* [4]

For the Vasulkas, the choice is to sacrifice image resolution or detail rather than movement, in order to keep the image dynamic. Again, programs are written to encode imagery. The crucial factor here is the simultaneity of processing and recording that allows the entire process to remain visible, and avoids any "post-production" reassembly of material. Movement is the guarantor of this simultaneity. Realism is not the goal. The commitment to "real time" is not an appeal to an imaginary truth of presence that we discussed earlier as inherent in realism. It is something quite different.

"Real time" insists on locating this writing within the image, within moving figuration as experienced through time. The illusion of movement allows the tapes to indicate how video is a "writing apparatus" creating the illusions operative in representation.

Video practice can in this way be reoriented away from a metaphysics of pure presence in a way that other types of video programming can not. Commercial computer image-programming, as at George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, slows down the process to program frame by frame, and runs the series only later in a re-assembly process not unlike animation. This process maintains as primary the illusion of reality, the visual replication of a plausibly real world, even as it mobilizes all the artifice current technology can offer to engage in fantasy (science fiction, robots, imaginary beings, etc). The images that result, strange as they are in some aspects, appear and move according to familiar codes so as to hide their technological genesis. This practice conceives of programming as subservient to an illusionistic presence, as something that happens before and outside of the images we watch without leaving any apparent traces except as illusionistic magic.

Programming in so-called "real time" in a sense insists that the process cannot be so hierarchized, with programming or writing subordinate to an illusion of unmediated perception. Implicitly, it argues instead that writing or programming is internal to perceptual and cognitive experience. Nor are we simply concerned in their work with a modernist foregrounding of technique or of the reflexivity of the art object. Signifying practice is instead in the Vasulkas' work a continual and simultaneous play of perceptual experience and representational construction, of presence and absence, not a subordination of one to the other.

Perceptual-Cognitive Cycles

The Vasulkas' own, longstanding interest in neurophysiological experimentation concerning visual perception is one indication that we need consider how their tapes engage the perceptual and cognitive processes of the viewer. Their formal experimentation with the specific properties of the video image suggests we ask how the viewer is engaged by these properties in new and challenging ways.

Scientists now believe that we do not receive images as entities projected onto our consciousness, as believed in earlier models of perception that posited a retinal image transmitted periodically as a whole picture. Painting, photography and even film images offered analogues for this earlier model of perception. Their images seemed to present themselves to the eye as framed pictures, ready to be inverted as projections on the retina. Film projection even "mirrored" this process in reverse in its light projection of the image onto a screen.

Rather than assuming a matrix of perception that is comprehended only once it is received in full, contemporary cognitive theories of perception conceive of sensory and brain processes as entirely intertwined. No perception occurs prior to cognition. Cognitive psychophysiologists such as Ulric Neisser have argued that the terms perception and cognition are misleading insofar as they reinforce a notion of an absolute boundary between two separate stages and prefer a notion of a perceptual-cognitive cycle in which all impulses received from external sources are joined to cognitive processes.[5] The video apparatus offers a model for such interactive circuitry, that while not in any way as sophisticated as the human perceptual-cognitive system, can be more cyclical and internally

dynamic than prior modes of visual representation. Although the monitor can hold an image as a framed entity similar in many respects to the painting, photograph, or film frame, its internal temporal construction as a field of phosphors shifting at a rate of sixty cycles per second offers a more dynamic correlate to the retina's own cycles of diverse transmissions. Though television was designed to mimic conventional uses of the filmic apparatus, video has the capacity (already there in experimental filmwork) to dissect and deconstruct this entity of the image. In so doing it allows not only for the conscious perception of distinctive qualities of video, but a more self-conscious perceptual engagement by the viewer. The viewer looks at the means and limits of his or her own perceptions.

Noisefields, in an implied comparison to the perceptual play of op art and the "flicker" film, examines video flicker.[6] Solid color fields and snow flicker in alternation at field rate (sixty cps), within a space defined by a circular mask. Though individual frames (temporal units of image display) only have simple patterns, the tape as it is perceived in its temporal unfolding generates more complex "illusions." Video flicker is more complex than film flicker, since even the "frame" is assembled by the viewer. The screen's phosphors are illuminated for only a fraction of the time that each field or frame demands, so that complete "frames" are displayed only through automated VCR features or within the perceptual-cognitive system. If perceptual "illusions" are stimulated by *Noisefields,* they suggest the reciprocal illusion by which we imagine that a video "frame" exists as a unified entity like that of film.

Whereas flicker in video is usually concealed as much as possible within the flow of a representational illusionism, just as it is in film, here it is manifest as a phenomenon which undermines and illuminates the

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threshold of our perception of discrete units. It simultaneously highlights the role of mental processes in perceiving stimuli as "images." The perceptual field is never simply an external object that we sense, but a creation of our mental activity as we participate in perception. The shimmering quality of video snow gives this work properties different from its filmic counterparts; the closer equivalent might be the pointillist op art works (although the "movement" of the dots in op art is entirely illusory, while in video the pixels do change). One can imagine an animated film that would blend the graphic qualities of the art work with temporality and actual change. *Noisefields* is just such a hybrid, different from its engendering precursors, suggesting that video itself will come into its own through an understanding of its hybrid heritage. In reconceiving flicker as videographic (rather than as previously, cinematic) the tape acknowledges its closeness to perceptual experimentation in film, while marking video's difference (spatially and temporally) as another sort of image.

Similarly, *Land of Timoteus* (1977) borrows principles of single screen 3D effects from the work of Alfons Schilling, a New York artist with whom the Vasulkas collaborated. Like Schilling's 3D slide presentations, this tape creates the illusion of three-dimensional space by temporally alternating slightly displaced fields of vision. Again, there is a filmic counterpart in Ken Jacobs' double projection performances, which create the illusion of binocular vision with depth perception by using two variable speed projectors to train two slightly displaced images on the same screen. In Steina's tape, a panning shot of an Icelandic landscape provides the representational material, in which jutting foreground rocks are sharply distinguished from the background space. It is rendered as a three-dimensional image by switching back and forth between two spatially

displaced shots at a rate of approximately six times a second. Alternating spatial displacements create the illusion of spatial depth. The perceptual phenomenon of binocular vision is mimicked by the systematic spatio-temporal rearrangements permitted by the video apparatus. Cognitively the viewer receives somewhat the "same picture" as unmediated binocular vision, but the rules of this game are not simply the thrill-seeking greater (stylized) realism of a 3D movie. Here the perception of depth itself is examined as a lesson in the relativity of space, time, repetition, and displacement within cognition. At the site of maximal perceptual immediacy, the landscape of one's homeland, the apparatus intervenes not to reproduce a reality, but to subtly dislocate the viewer from the space presented to him or her through relocation and accentuation of the perceptual act.

In *Noisefields* and *Land of Timoteus* visual tropes explicate the active cognitive processes at work in even the simplest act of perception. At some level these tapes seem to interpolate the phenomenological subject, the viewer as a self-aware and privileged entity, a being philosophically engaged in the terms set out by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

> We shall no longer hold that perception is incipient science, but conversely that classical science is a form of perception which loses sight of its origins and believes itself complete. The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limit of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world and to subjectivity its inherence in history. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system "self-others-things" as it comes into being; to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in

the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the
rational tradition to which it gives rise.[7]

Objects and their "rational" systems of representation are treated by
the Vasulkas' tapes as neither self-evident, natural, nor simply available
for reproduction. Yet if video here becomes an apparatus for underlining
subjectivity, increasingly it does so while undermining the sure, safe, and
familiar placement of the subject as observer of a world believed to be
known. In the Vasulkas' other tapes and in their installations the acts of
perception are multiplied and varied with great complexity; these works in
one sense continue to address the phenomenological subject, but also
question this construct. Perception is troubled, treated ironically and
metaphorically using some devices with a rich history of ironic uses in the
pictorial scheme (i.e., Steina's *Allvision* [1976] recalls the convex mirror of
the Renaissance most famous for its appearance in Van Eyck's *Giovanni
Arnolfini and His Wife* [1434]), coupled with some that by virtue of their
mechanized movements or electronic basis are new. Human vision is
countered with machine vision. The parallels and discrepancies between
what machines present to us and our recollection of unmediated vision are
one "object" of our gaze.

The Mirror, the Panopticon, and Multiplicity

In a series of recent installations, Steina's interest in both human and
technological interaction with landscape and architecture are manifest.
Both *The West* and *Geomania* (1989) reexamine landscape. The panopticon
vision, historically introduced by the wide-lens, composite photography, and
the cinematic 360-degree diorama, is here automated through the use of a

machine Steina calls "Allvision." A rotating support for the camera, most often aimed at a mirrored globe held out in the same rotation like a reflecting moon creates a hyper-panoptic gesture by combining a 180-degree wide-angle image with its reverse field within a circling camera vision. The image produced by *Allvision* with its globe is not only a 360-degree pan, but one in which each pole of the 180-degree arc is present simultaneously, the "back view" inside a centered circle, the forward distance framing this circle. Inherent in this gesture is a survey of space that extends the conic vision of the subject into a powerful sweep of all that surrounds a central location, a metaphoric exploration of vision's power, geometry and limits. Michael Snow's *La Region centrale* (1970-71) explored this metaphor of a circling, machine vision taking its rotation systematically around a spherical course in the midst of a landscape in a day-night cycle. As in Snow's film, the tropes generated by the evocation of panoptic vision in *Allvision* are multiple and contradictory. Enveloping, flowing, repetitive cycles generate one sort of association, while the fragmentation of various image frames and analytical trajectories generate another. We are engaged in a vision fully imbued with both the sensation and the promise of power (certain aspects of the power engaged by the panopticon as established by Jeremy Bentham are elaborated by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*[8]). To overcome the limits of a fixed position in space and to be capable of surveying all who could threaten or attempt to escape one's control is a motivation for the tower and the turret. Through exaggeration, the Vasulkas' hyper-panopticon becomes, in part, a parody of the paranoid desire to seek, know, and control everything, a wish already embedded and automated in the use of video for surveillance systems. Yet in its inscription here this panoptic vision is also deeply

phantasmic and playful, like the vision sought by children as they whirl around, including the additional points of view afforded by such toys as swings and merry-go-rounds. Ominous and delightful, powerful and innocent, the panoptic vision is an oxymoronic look at its field.

In *The West* the panoptic vision comes as the middle segment, after a hand-held exploratory camera is combined with selective colorization to etch out the architectural forms of the Chaco Canyon ruins. The blue that fills in and accentuates the shadows on the golden stone construction just barely denatures the image, lending an uncanny, emphatic quality to the ancient construction that could almost seem a natural element of the Western landscape, so keyed is it to earth and sky. Then comes the panoptic survey of a desert landscape that includes the VLA (Very Large Array) satellite antenna installation followed by a section in which the panoptic survey is of a forested landscape. Alternation occurs between natural and built environments, not just between the sections, but sometimes within the same image, as the circular "insert" (of the mirrored sphere) will show primarily the artifacts of military science, while the frame shows the natural landscape that lies in the other direction, or vice-versa. *The West* uses a bank of monitors. A series of wipes split the screen further as one image progresses across another. Alternate monitors carry images from two tracks/versions of this tape, a checkerboard pattern of repetition and variation that is constructed at times to graphically match the wipe movements. When the wipes match, they transcend the limits of the individual monitors and create flowing imagery, at times to maximize contrast and emphasize the fragmentation.

Metaphors are engaged in *The West* that do not simply rest on obvious or singular interpretations. Surely one could read it as a poetic indictment

of the contemporary reconstruction of this space for industrial and military purposes, or conversely as a fascination with the forms that obliterate such a reading by an equally poetic vision of both. We would like to suggest that such readings are not only too partial, they miss the problematizing of image-metaphors at the heart of the work. The nature/culture opposition does run through the tape, reiterated in the opposition of the machine (that produces the vision) to the humans (who make and see that machine vision). This nature/culture opposition is but a preliminary proposition. Once made thematic, the opposition is varied and left to reverberate as a more fundamental questioning of a subjective placement within this world of the western United States.

The play with metaphor is further articulated in *Geomania* (1989). Geysers and tides become not so much the content of these images, but are evoked as metaphors for video keying in its washing-over, blending, and energizing of images. As in several other tapes, the perceptual differences inherent in the properties of two substances (earth and sky, rocks and water) are arranged in the frame to coincide as the conjunction between two images in overlay or in a wipe. This sort of matching suggests that the energies of nature and of electronic representation can be brought into mutual correspondence. It is perhaps a more Romantic vision than the tensions produced by the multiplicities *The West* suggests, yet *Geomania* maintains its own plurality in presenting energies and conjunctions as abstract concepts within the space of a metaphor.

The geometries of the Allvision machine's rotations in several of Steina's tapes suggest the obvious metaphor of reflexivity, especially when the video camera or its shadow appears in the image. However reflexivity is presented with such variation that what by now has become self-evident

within modernist reflexivity is troubled. Even if we are shown and know all the components of the construction of an artwork, do we know anything more of the process of textual construction? So much reflexivity has been limited to externals: the filmmaker in the film, the camera in the image, the characters speaking themselves as actors. Not that the music of these spheres is simply better left to an appreciation that remains magical; the geometries of Allvision suggest perhaps that the deconstruction of metaphysics cannot occur by the merely physical reflection of the apparatuses of production.

Meta-Art Projects

A number of Vasulka tapes engage the history of the arts in a critical and self-reflexive manner, either as a comment on art history as in *Golden Voyage* (1973) or as an appropriation of music history as in *The Commission* (1983). *Golden Voyage* replicates *The Gill Legend* (1956), a Magritte painting of loaves of bread suspended in the sky, but places the loaves in motion, drifting across the screen. Arrested movement, displacement of objects from their "proper place," and the inversion of literary metaphors through their visual literalization (floating bread as manna from heaven) are what make the Magritte surrealist. The reproduction of Magritte through a playful refiguration suggests that video is automatically surrealist, as it is able to electronically dissect the picture plane, literalize the movement, and accentuate the collage-like presentation of objects set against imaginary grounds. The instantaneous multiplicity of imagery produced by keying and switchers in video performs as the automation of a modernist art movement. Similarly, *Digital images*

suggests the fractured imagery of analytic cubism, or at the level of pixel organization, the pointillism of Seurat. These works demonstrate that video can be programmed to automatically replicate any and all styles of representation throughout art history not as simple reproduction, but as an elemental reworking. Unlike photography whose automatically replicative capacities have been limited to copying the original work, video makes it possible to recreate the processes or effects of image construction by breaking into the image surface through electronic reconstruction of the signal. Each and every point on screen can be reworked in relation to the others. Instantaneously, previously handcrafted techniques can be imitated on various image sources. A colorizer can be adjusted for fauvist effects, scan processing could warp the figure like Donatello, rapid switching can simulate cubist multiplicity of perspective. If photography became an important stage in the history of art in part through its reproductive capacities, video is shown to be an equally significant device in its ability to reproduce non-Euclidian geometries, differentiated image planes, and the selection of surface texture and color as it manufactures its images.

The implication of this incorporation of art history into the Vasulkas' video, if read seriously, is a re-evaluation of the relationship between art and history not unlike Michel Foucault's conception of discursive formations. Foucault argues that history operates through decentralized dynamics and that such separate disciplines as medical practice, criminology, and economics are organized through implicit rules that govern their discourse. These rules set boundaries to what is or is not part of the discipline. They establish the discipline's claim to legitimacy as a form of knowledge. The Vasulkas' reference to specific painters similarly rehistoricizes art in terms of rules or regulations, which can be programmed into the video

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apparatus. Art history becomes spatialized in the process, with each period and style reconceived in terms of boundaries and internal organization. Yet the material does not become dehistoricized, as Fredric Jameson argues occurs in postmodernist conceptions of art.[9] Rather, the manner of intervention in history is reformulated.

Woody Vasulka continues this process of spatializing history in his recent narrative works, which may appear at first to be unrelated to previous Vasulka concerns. In *The Commission*, an incident from music history legend becomes the source of narrative and formal development. Paganini acted as go-between for a newspaper editor's commission of a piece by Berlioz. The recounting of this tale in video unavoidably suggests the contemporary problems of art funding in the United States and the process by which a panel of artists or experts evaluate competing grant proposals for public or private funding agencies. Paganini's virtuoso violin performances, however, resonate with Steina's past training and performances on the violin, as well as with the operatic form of *The Commission* The past is situated at a balancing point between personal memory and public history. This conjunction occurs in the desert, with European characters displaced, located in the landscapes of the Southwest. The desert seems to function as a metaphor for America as zero-point of historic traditions, an imaginary antithesis of Europe, as it does in Jean Baudrillard's *Amerique* As immigrants, Steina and Woody seem to share elements of Baudrillard's vision of America. Yet the European history of music is chosen as the substance to which an American composer, Robert Ashley, turns to create a post modernist American opera. History is not absent, but refigured. The form of inscription selected for this new historical opera, video, allows for the tradition of the spectacle to be

reinscribed as a text of sound and image. The desert is therefore also a place where history can be freshly reexamined, where displacement works to overturn the myths surrounding performing artists. Art history need not be an embrace of the cult of personality, but a reflection on the historical transformation of forms and a study of how art is commissioned by forces that involve both the personal history of the artist and the history which surrounds him or her.

Art of Memory (1987) evokes the iconographic heritage of World War II in the form of film clips, among which are films from UFA, the German national film industry, and newsreels from the Spanish Civil War. The films are laced through shapes and multiple frames that digitalized video can create within the video screen. A landscape of displacement and fantasy, the desert wilds of the Southwest, are not so much background as overlay, interposed in a tension with these haunting images from the past. The desert here echoes its use in *The Commission*, as absence of history frames historical material, filmic material. Woody's Eastern European training in cinematography functions as a personal reference.

Imaging the past, memory and history are never so directly addressed as they are in the film flashback. Certain formulas repeat across film history, as a means of subjectivizing history or defining memories through positive uses to which they can be put or means through which they can be overcome. Most film flashbacks are clearly narratives of legitimation, construing a position from which history can be worked into the present and/or future. *Art of Memory* is intriguing as it points to video as a support through which the logic now operative in the flashback's conjunction of memory and history might be undone or at least rethought. This rethinking process began with such modernist films as Alain Resnais and Marguerite

Duras' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and Andrej Munk's *Passenger*, Woody Vasulka's work may show primarily the haunting of images that can't be entirely worked through or forgotten, the ironies of our fascination with visual power. It may primarily introduce an intense subjectivity, beyond the controlled subjectivity of history that narrative film uses to frame and legitimize the past. It also opens the possibility that a sense of history can emerge out of a different presentation of the icons of history, though it must be stated that here much is dependent on the spectator bringing to the text both points of reference and active critical engagement.

Throughout this essay we have attempted to see the Vasulkas' work not merely as the product of their intentions or as trails blazed by two video pioneers, but as works which become increasingly intriguing in light of contemporary theories of the image, writing, and perception. The methods of textual analysis, which may at first seem impersonal, rework preconceived notions of the artist as a central unifying force that controls his/her work. Instead of a model of the artist as unitary auteur, we can reconceive artistic activity as multiple and dispersed even within the body of work produced by individual artists such as the Vasulkas.

1. See Woody Vasulka and Scott Nygren, "Didactic Video: Organizational Models of the Electronic Image," *Afterimage*, vol.3, no.4 (October 1975), pp. 9-13.

2. Unlike other tapes in the *Vasulka Video* series that excerpt materials from other tapes, *Digital Images* includes materials not available elsewhere.

3. Woody Vasulka in, "Woody and Steina Vasulka: From Feedback to Paganini," interview by MaLin Wilson and Jackie Melega, *Artlines* (May 1981), p.10.

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4. Ibid.

5. Ulric Neisser, *Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967).

6. See Maureen Turim, *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Films*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Press, 1985), especially the chapter on the flicker film entitled, "Flickering Light, Pulsing Traces," pp. 93-106.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 57.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

9. Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism, *New Left Review*, no.146, (July/August, 1984). See Turim's discussion of this in "The Cultural Logic of Video," to appear as a "Working Paper" from the Center of Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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