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WOODY VASULKA: Experimenting With Visual Alternatives

By Ken Ausubel

This interview is a dialogue between two video makers, Woody Vasulka and Ken Ausubel, now living and working Santa Fe, New Mexico. Woody Vasulka and his wife Steina, are two of the artists included in the *Video As Attitude* exhibition at The Museum of Fine Arts and the University Art Museum. The Vasulkas were, and are, pioneers in video, electronic sound and computer-controlled video.

Portions of this interview appeared in the *Santa Fe Reporter*. The entire interview is printed here, however, to give our readers a better understanding of the medium and the people who work in it. Other dialogues on video will be forthcoming.

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 concentrating on the opposite. We didn't pay any attention to what's called media based information. We were interested in ideologies, 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 there was a material or medium basis. There was a whole generation of practicing artists called the Structuralists who paid attention to what the European avant-garde did, and 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 the materiality of the message- the message is the medium, the medium has its truth. As I encountered video, it was basic work with electronic materials.

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

WV: My basic introduction to 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 which is just a transposition of an aesthetic term from abstract painting to the electronic environment. That wasn't our goal. Our goal was to create reality, a certain reality that would testify to its own electronic complexities.

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.

We would work on specific electronic image-making at night. The next day we would record all of what we define as alternate culture events that legitimate media were not interested in at all, from homosexual theater and street scenes to rock 'n roll and 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. Video artist already indicates a set of limitations. 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. I am 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 aesthetic 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 the craft of electronic imaging. Through this medium, I could treat time and energy as means of expression. Later the computer did 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 conclusions: either it succeeds or falls. 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 it has to be a success.

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 apart 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. As kids we 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 something unreachable. Many people treat video as a black box and use it only as input and output, but that's their own ideology of 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, re-entered and fed back. That's what characterized most of our better tools, this ability of being inspired by the tool rather than being served.

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

WV: Right from the beginning, rather than achieve esthetic conclusions, we felt challenged by television as a perception system. In film you have 24 modes or dynamic phases [24 frames per second on film]. Suddenly with video you have 60! [60 images per second on video tape]. Any event encodes many more changes [on video] than film, and you can build devices that can look or work with a single 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 in a higher field rate than in film.

There are other perceptual systems and cognitive interpretations. A particular event, like computer or digital feedback, correlates preceding and succeeding events. If you cinematically arrange it into a sequence of images, which video does, there are certain processes that are natural to our perception. When you combine one image with another, 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: 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. We made sense of a basic set of rules, and our images were one of the first testimonies brought into the context of what is called video art. Computer systems and environments have been embedded mostly in industrial and scientific environments until now. 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. Even now there is 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?

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

WV: What intrigues me about computer and video are 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 the human brain. There is something outside the layman's brain, like mathematical systems, which are 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.

The computer is such a large participatory system. It encompasses all the 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 to air 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.

The audience is probably always necessary for performing arts. But once you work on anything that is coded, letters in literature or poetry, or grain in film 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 to someone who would fully share that. A general audience fully shares these things, but it is a rare occasion that it's synchronous with the thought that you have. I don't want to be at the mercy of pop culture. Then you have no time to develop more intimate codes which will probably be more popular later.

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 Fe?

WV: As long as I was involved 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 with 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 aesthetic principle, in general, I don't like to work.

I don't want to get involved in any job. If I can avoid any 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 well-being 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 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 heroes. They submit themselves to the deepest possible torture. Any activity takes you into optimistic are 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 a community in which to compete, but rather to contemplate. It's a privilege to be able to contemplate your life, but it is more difficult to contemplate rather than simply to produce.

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

WV: These things 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 centralized. For so long, the decentralization of this power and knowledge seemed to be important. But 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 in the 1960's. That means the whole idea of a social change or a decentralization of research, as we believed would happen, did not happen in that form. Society tends to organize socio-biologically toward more and more specialization in which there are providers and users. This idea of 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 design 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 so radical where I came from because they could be used dangerously against the establishment, the Socialist establishment. I had to pay attention to the workers of the media and to the material basis of the media, which is in fact more leftist than any of those radical forms I experienced in Czechoslovakia, which were eclectic and reactionary, very traditional. Suddenly the sources for me became different ones. The innovation lays in different types of tools, for example, electronic tools. I had to rethink all my aesthetics. 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. It's a different problem now, a decay of the revolutionary into the 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. I refer to the collapse of Socialism. I think to witness the pain of any ideological system collapsing is the most devastating experience one can have.

I have been careful in accusing the system 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 is the fulfillment which the proletariat is following. It's poetic, not really real that the proletariat 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 humanity that 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 aesthetic or radical concept. It's much more indirect.

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