

Art of Memory

Art of Memory is not only Woody Vasulka's most famous work but must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely exhibited works in the history of video art. Three and a half years in the making, *Art of Memory* has won numerous awards and has been exhibited countless times around the world since its premiere in November 1987. There were three major sources of inspiration for the tape -- Vasulka's childhood memories of newsreels of world conflict; historian Frances Yates' book *The Art of Memory*; and the engravings of the 19th century Romantic illustrator Gustave Dore. Vasulka took from Yates not only the title of his videotape but also one of the tape's two organizing principles, that of "putting thoughts into a landscape." Yates writes in *The Art of Memory* about mnemonic devices used by classical Greeks and Romans. In preparation for his long orations Cicero would walk through a temple noting the number and positions of the columns, assigning to each column one of the topics of his speech. When debating he would visualize his temple walk, recalling the points of his speech with a perfection that would leave his opponents defenseless. The mnemonic architectures in Vasulka's tape are newsreels, photographs and texts as "memories" of major conflicts of the 20th Century -- World War II primarily, but also the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. The movies, photos and book pages ("leafing through history") do not fill the screen but instead are mapped onto shapes or objects that either float above the landscape of the American Southwest or are continuations of it.

confined in a box, and the witness who earlier scoffed at Destiny in the form of the winged figure are all the same person, Daniel Nigrin. The spectacular soundtrack is composed mostly from the sampled and processed voice of the Santa Fe artist and poet Doris Cross, reading her poetry. X

-- Gene Youngblood

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The second organizing principle was to display these image-objects in brief segments with openings and closings. Each segment is composed of three elements: the image-object that is to disappear, the image-object that will replace it, and a wipe that performs a syntactical operation of replacement or succession by masking one while it reveals the other. The wipes constitute a vocabulary of visual syntaxes divided into nine different shapes with varying durations of opening and closing. They allow Vasulka to avoid conventional montage by replacing direct cuts with complex translations or transmutations of imagery. Into these structures Vasulka inserts the newsreels as pure "tones" with no narrative function. He "performs" the images as one performs notes in a musical composition. The resulting visual drama is one of discontinuity rather than causal linearity. The segments are organized into six major movements -- an Introduction and the European Theater, the Atomic Era, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, the war in the Pacific, and an Epilogue which Vasulka calls the Catharsis. The movements are demarcated by a sound like the door of a great vault slamming shut as a black wipe closes down over the image.

The one direct cut in *Art of Memory* occurs when the winged figure flies over the man Vasulka calls "the witness," the artist's alter-ego. The winged figure was inspired by an image from Gustave Dore's *Paradise Lost*. He could be Icarus or an Angel of Death, but for Vasulka he simply represents the metaphysical world, which must share the burden of responsibility for the sadness of the human condition, whose unmatched violence and cruelty has no rational explanation. The epilogue represents for Vasulka a catharsis of the inner conflict, ignited by metaphysical forces, that manifests in the outer conflict of war. The three faces in the lower right, the convulsive dancer