

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH



ISHEN

V&A

PHOTOGRAPHY NOW

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Front cover: William Wegman, Fay and Andrea (Folded), 1987 (see page 74/75)

This book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Peter Reyner Banham with gratitude and af

- 2 Frontispiece:
- The Horses, No.102
- 3 Collection of Eugene and Barbara Schwartz, New York

Woody Vasulka  
 Art of Memory, 1988  
 Colour video with sound, 36 minutes  
 Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum

'Optically dazzling, Vasulka's high-tech manoeuvres are central to the expression of his theme. Without such technology, his smooth juxtaposition of found footage and New Mexico landscape, of timebound and timeless, and his moving-picture solids would have been virtually impossible. But these are not analogue and digital exercises for their own sake. Here, rather, is an extension in video of the grand ambition of such 19th century painters as Thomas Cole, in his 'Course of Empire' series depicting civilization from dawn to twilight: convincing, "realistic" detail engages the viewer's identification and recollection, while the sublime setting given to it locates human tragedy on a cosmic moral plane.'

Anne H. Hoy

Vasulka has developed visually compelling techniques, which he uses to create an *art* based on 20th century history. The setting is the Southwestern landscape of the United States, which symbolizes the grandeur and fragility of the world. The video opens in a red sandstone canyon where a figure on a rock appears to be winged like Icarus. A tourist enters the foreground, stops, pauses, then hurls a stone at it. The sky turns to geometric rain. We see newsreel footage of blazing buildings, war planes – from revolutions, civil war, world war. The footage is presented on a multi-screen, organic shapes abandoned in the desert. We recognise the face and voice of J. Robert Oppenheimer, leader of the Manhattan Project which gave America the atomic bomb. The video is based on a few lines from the Hindu Scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: "Now I am become death, destroyer of worlds." Vasulka's video is like high-speed collage, into which he incorporates found photographs, slogans, and – most hauntingly – songs. These elements provide the video with an authenticity and a resonance which suggests that we are viewing nothing less than the human race in the 20th century, and afterwards. The use of video's advanced technologies allow Vasulka the facility of (in his words) 'taking two-dimensional, object-like forms ... no longer truth-in-a-window. Truth is subordinate ... to this form.' Anne H. Hoy is a writer and curator. 'Vasulka's computer-generated forms convey literally how memory distorts the shape of things. How permeable is the photograph as a container of supposed truth.' She has also referred to the video as 'investigation of the video signal as a plastic, temporal medium, as electronic energy frequencies, unconfined by the Box (the video "frame").'