



## An Instrument of Infinite Complexity

By KEN AUSUBEL

Editor's note: Santa Fe resident Woody Vasulka is a nationally known video artist and, along with his wife and co-worker Steina, is a pioneer in the field of video art and computer video. Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1937, Vasulka studied metal technology and hydraulic mechanics at the state school of industrial engineering. Then he entered the film-making program at the prestigious Academy of Performing Arts in Prague where he began to produce and direct short films. In 1965 he emigrated to the United States and worked in New York City as a free-lance film editor for several years.

In 1967 he began to experiment with electronic sounds, stroboscopic lights and video. In 1974 he was appointed associate professor in the Center for Media Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. At this time he began his experiments with computer-generated and computer-manipulated video images, which resulted in the construction of what has now become known as The Valsulka Imaging System.

On Wednesday, March 16, Vasulka's newest work, a video opera titled "The Commission," will receive its world premiere at the C.G. Rein Gallery in Santa Fe. Based loosely on the life of Niccolò Paganini, the legendary 19th-century violinist, "The Commission" marks the first time that Valsulka has applied his video-imaging techniques to a narrative structure.

The following interview was excerpted from a longer one conducted by Santa Fe video-maker, Ken Ausubel.

**Ausubel:** Were you always interested in machines?

**Vasulka:** My father had a workshop and was a metal worker. I grew up during the war in Czechoslovakia. We lived across from an airfield. My first interest as a kid was to take machines apart. I was lucky living close to the airport because I could take the most complicated machines of that era—the German fighter planes—and play with them. My youth was spent in these graveyards of airplanes. You could find everything there that would drive your fantasy crazy. Europe was a huge junkyard after the war; you could find everything from human fingers to weapons in the dump. As kids, we roamed through it. This basically set the scene.

Eventually I began to realize—here let me paraphrase Korean video-maker Nam June Paik—that if you make a simple tool, you'll use it for a while like a child uses a simple toy, then throw it away, because you will outgrow the challenge. But if you can make a tool that is infinitely complicated, it will fascinate you for the rest of your life. What I've been trying to do is to invent tools that contain more mystery than I could possibly imagine. That's what characterizes our better tools—this ability to be inspired by the tool rather than being served by it.

**Ausubel:** How did you get into video?  
**Vasulka:** That's a long story. After the war, the art scene in Czechoslovakia was dominated by socialist realism [the official Communist Party aesthetic that forbade any style of art or literature that deviated from strict realism with marxist overtones]. Any notion of any kind of experimentation with media was looked on like a notion of the avant-garde of the '20s. Though the avant-garde of that time had been leftist, by the time I grew up, the left was already bankrupt. It was associated with the most reactionary thoughts and suppressed experimentation. I'm talking about the Czech situation.

We, as a generation growing up in a film environment—like the film school of which



Photos by Marcus Minerva

A scene from 'The Commission'; Vasulka (inset: 'An image is an energy system')

I was a product—were concentrating on the opposite of experimentation. We paid no attention to what's called the "medium-basis of information," or undertaking a formal investigation of a medium for its own sake. We were interested in what ideologies are interested in, which is larger mythological or narrative systems. As a group in film school, we followed the metaphorical approach. Maybe you could disguise political opposition through metaphor.

But when I came to the States in 1965, I discovered there was a whole generation of practicing film-makers called the structuralists who paid close attention to what the European avant-garde of the '20s did. But these artists extended much further the idea about the material of the medium itself: film surface, motion, elements, information within a frame. Suddenly, I came to recognize the materiality of the medium—the medium has its own truth. All this prepared me for video.

Then, in 1969, I began to experiment with video in New York. About that time it hit me that this is the medium in which I wanted to work. I was interested in this metaphysical concept—that an image is an energy system.

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

**Vasulka:** The nature of our early work was non-figurative or non-representational. We generated images through electronic

systems. We produced numerous tapes that included this aspect of video—what some people call "abstract video." But that is just a transposition of one aesthetic term from abstract painting to this electronic environment.

Right from the beginning, we felt challenged by television as a perception system. We weren't interested in aesthetic results. You see, film travels at the rate of 24 frames per second, but with video you have 60 "fields" per second. Video encodes many more changes than film, and you can build devices that can work with a single field.

**Ausubel:** What was your role in the development of computer video?

**Vasulka:** In the early '70s, we happened to be with a group of people who were working with video, and they made an effort to bring video and the computer into a union. We had only one way of doing it. We built a separate small computer next to the general-purpose computer, and we made a time-link between them, in which they communicated synchronously, even that is not an innovative idea, because it's natural to these technology systems to copulate.

We defined a basic set of rules, and our images were one of the first manifestations of what is called "video art." Our contribution, really, was to define the computer and video in the context of art. Even now there is still a debate on whether there is, in fact, computer art. Sometimes by the time you

amazing video images are not the art-initiated but those that are mathematically or numerically initiated. Then I have to ask myself: Which one is the radical image? Not, which one is the successful image?

**Ausubel:** Some of your work appears to be looking into areas of human perception and cognition.

**Vasulka:** Yes. For instance, we found we could change the color of each video "field" and create "layers," or what we called "perceptually induced mixes." But there are other perceptual systems and cognitive interpretations. We discovered that a particular event, like computer feedback, correlates preceding and succeeding events. So when you end one image with another completely different image, you find out that your vision interprets them logically. Actually, the images are cognitively interpreted.

It's not only discovering the materiality of video or its codes that challenges us, but it is also just a pleasure to see these images and the changes in them.

**Ausubel:** You're most often called a video artist. Do you accept that term?

**Vasulka:** No. It's just a term through which you make a living. A long time ago, we didn't need that term at all. "Video artist" already indicates a set of limitations. It's basically a marketing scheme. "Video art" was coined by the galleries because they had to handle the product, but it really doesn't mean much at all.

Personally, it's not my ambition to be a video artist. I'm just 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 they raise money.

**Ausubel:** What do you mean by "practical philosopher"?

**Vasulka:** The whole idea of aesthetic terms like structuralism and philosophical terms like time and energy were rather abstract to me. Video is a medium that 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 a frame in video. Suddenly, the abstract concept of light or location of light in time becomes extraordinarily practicable. Through this medium I could enter a practical philosophy of time and energy as a means of expression.

**Ausubel:** Then do you consider yourself an artist?

**Vasulka:** In a way I don't think so. In my own personal terms, it's not my ambition. In the process of experimentation, there are two results: Either it succeeds or it fails. But art must succeed; there's no "failed art." I don't want to live with the necessity of being successful, and that's what art is.

**Ausubel:** So experimentation is integral to your work?

**Vasulka:** Yes. Yet I respect art, and all the values of my life have something to do with that. If I would psychoanalyze myself, indeed, I would probably find that at the bottom I have some kind of desire to produce art. Yet consciously, I'm trying to walk the furthest circle around art.

People sometimes call my work "technology determinist," that is, no longer aesthetically driven. What I am driven by is a curiosity about the medium. I do want to find out if there are any codes or patterns that video can create that sometimes border on art, but this is definitely not a part of an aesthetic system.

**Ausubel:** How did you come to create your video opera, "The Commission"?

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**Vasulka:** I wanted to work with the larger symbolic narrative systems that are integrated into general cultural archetypes, like opera. I asked myself: Is there an application of those primary video codes—which you arrive at by experimentation, investigation or just pure visual joy—that you can possibly apply to this more established genre? This opera was a rather formal exercise for me in which I took certain imaging structures from past work and transposed them into a narrative context.

Still, in the work I'm not really saying anything through thought or conscious, spoken ideas; the meaning of the opera is still communicated in the sense of the medium. I don't like thought-produced meaning; I prefer an image-produced paradox that subverts thought. Perhaps the opera will work, perhaps not. That is another question. It was done as an experiment.

**Ausubel:** Much of your work in the past has been done in the academic worlds in the East. Now that you've come to Santa Fe, do you see your work changing?

**Vasulka:** As long as I was involved in discovering or summarizing the phenomenology of electronic imaging, I was able to teach. In many ways I was excited about teaching when I was discovering those codes. But when I moved on to application, innovation ceased and my involvement with my work became more personal. This work could not be communicated with such excitement because it became doubtful and insecure. When you start working, talking or trying to impose on someone else your own creative dilemma, it's a brutal and oppressive act. I was totally absorbed in what I was doing.

In general, I don't like to work. I don't want to get involved in any job. If I can avoid a 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 says a job means dignity. The idea of being lazy here is devastating. Where I come from, most of the fairy tales are about lazy people. A lot of the 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 that wonderful rush. Then I found out that it's not very interesting. So I'm trying to get away, as much as possible, from phone calls—even from getting up from bed.

**Ausubel:** Would you agree, then, with Paul La Fargue, Karl Marx's son-in-law, that people have the right to be lazy?

**Vasulka:** The whole idea about activity and morality is very much a Western thought: 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 the area of optimism again. That's why people in the West like to travel or develop all sorts of activities; they hope to prevent death, improve finances, become mentally more healthy. True, it's profitable to be active, but the opposite is much more challenging.

Coming to Santa Fe is a retirement from my duties. I found out that this isn't a community to compete in, but one to contemplate. It's a privilege to be able to contemplate your life, but it's more difficult to contemplate than simply produce.

Woody Vasulka's video opera, "The Commission," will be presented as a benefit for Tone Roads West, a four day festival of poetry and new music, at the C.G. Rein Gallery (122 W. San Francisco) at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 16. Tickets, which are \$8, can be reserved by calling 988-1878.

## TONE ROADS WEST

Santa Fe as a year-round music center is growing by the proverbial leaps and bounds. What is most interesting and encouraging about this development is that much of the activity is composed, performed, and organized by local musicians, in the teeth, as it were, of Santa Fe's often spectacular but seldom indigenous Opera and Chamber Music Festival.

Most active of the hometown types is the indefatigable Peter Garland, who at 30 is not only a composer and publisher of *Soundings*, one of the most useful and distinguished music journals in the world,

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but also organizer of *Tone Roads West: Poetry and New Music*, taking place in Santa Fe from March 16 to 20 (see the *ARTlines* Calendar for details).

The music programs will be highlighted by the benefit world premiere of *The Commission*, a video opera by Santa Fe's Woody Vasulka. From the *Diary of an Edgewalker*, *Labyrinth*, and a world premiere to be announced, all by local composer Joseph Weber, will be performed, as will compositions by Jackson MacLow and Garland, and a multi-media performance by Charles Amirkhonian and Carol Law.

Other *Tone Roads West* events include poetry readings by Mei-Mei Berrsenbrugge, John Brandi, Joy Harjo, Arthur

Sze, Carolyn Forché, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Simon Ortiz, Carol Cellucci, Harold Littlebird, Leo Romero, and others.

In an unrelated musical offering, California composer Lou Harrison will bring his puppet opera, *Richard Whittington*, to Santa Fe's Armory for the Arts on March 10 and 11. Harrison was doing puppet opera when the Muppets were only a gleam in Jim Henson's eye. Garland himself has written a puppet opera about the conquest of Mexico, which he hopes to present in 1984.

In April, fashionable composer Philip Glass will perform with an eight-member ensemble at Santa Fe's Lensic Theater on April 14.

