

WOODY VASULKA

speaking about video, film, and new Czech art

interviewed by M. Sumner Carnahan, August 29, 1995 in Santa Fe

Why did you abandon film to pursue video?

There were two conditions to my personal decision to pursue video: one, I was not able to face traditional film. I attempted to make a few personal, experimental movies when I first came to New York in 1965, but still I was in competition with developed forms. So, I had to weigh that interest in film against the seduction of this new media, video, which I found to be a completely unwritten page. Very few people had access to it, and it was a personal media that cost nothing as far as time was concerned. Video gave us a completely new playground. I never regretted it.

Even when I look back at my writing, before I did film, I had already encoded certain interests in what I would call "synthetic nature," mostly through sound. At that time sound synthesizers already existed and were a publicly-exposed medium, having started way back at the beginning of the century, in terms of early electronic music.

However, the environment I grew up in, in Czechoslovakia, was forcing me in another direction — that is, to use image as metaphor, for sort of a personal stand in opposition to the general ideology promoted by the established order. Of course, all art has its order, and consciously or unconsciously, all art is seeking some kind of social substrata. Strangely enough, the intellectual strata of the system I came from had developed its own methods of expressing its opposition to the order, and the order would tolerate it because it needed a certain opposition. It wasn't a populist opposition that could reach all the people and so it was safe. This discourse, this dialogue in Marxism, was necessary for a certain group of intellectuals who later became prominent dissidents. Their opposition in

of the country, politics, and time. But if I examine my own work and the work of my generation, this has always been the essential tension. It may be time to confess that I am not the authentic critic to participate in this discussion because I am been removed from the Czech situation for so long. I visited only occasionally during the last twenty-five years, and during the last two years more frequently, which has brought me to some kind of understanding of what's going on, but I cannot be objective.

After all, you always smell the Czech art, there is always a character to it, you understand the strengths of the Slavic tradition to be the world of the poetic essence — very undefined, very beautiful, referring to the heart and soul, something giving, something erotic, and so forth. This is exactly what I had to purge. I had to exorcise all this from my art over years of struggle in dealing with the hard bitch machine. The character of Czech expression comes naturally to me, and I have tried to avoid it, provoked by an ultimate sense of the matter, of the harsh surface, or of *reality* in the Western sense, meaning whatever exposes the mechanism behind things, doesn't reinforce the illusion, or pursue a personal satisfaction, but brings on a total uneasiness, a disturbance, the provocation, seeking in a way, honesty. These concerns I find the Czech tradition of art had masterfully obscured.

Is the Czech tradition essentially romantic?

No. Romanticism can be violent. The Czech tradition is very non-violent. In some way Czechs are programmed to be non-violent and I like that about them. There is a conspiracy toward a certain victory of the beautiful, the poetic, the non-violent form, and all the movies and music and art reinforces it, creating a national character. Now, the new, what is called "capitalist" or market reality, has thrown a monkey-wrench into it. These new media artists have rejected the Czech strength. They are trying to

rooms of the 18th century. There was always an audience and a popular outlet for film. Why doesn't video have that same popular appeal?

Film, as invented and perfected and used, carved itself into a particular niche. When I grew up, film was an established art form, challenging literature, music, painting, and other art forms very directly and very successfully. In fact it served not only the ideological interests (of the East or the West or whatever) but it served intellectual expression; it concentrated the power of the intellectual drive. In the fifties and sixties, you had the main intellectual schools of Fellini, Antonioni, the neo-realism of Bergman, etc., and also the whole summary of the European avant-garde. Film became the cultural expression of a particular era. And that's important because film started to isolate itself from the general art practice.

An industrial base for filmmaking was prominent by that time, so that the so-called small groups, *a la* Cocteau in France who employed only his friends, or even Bergman who started with his own people, had to suddenly shift to an industrial framework, where they had to raise money and employ professional people. Films were being sponsored by corporate entities — in contrast to art in general which is actually rather amateur-based — amateur in the sense of *amor*, meaning it is being done for love. The deeply personalized principal of art had been overwhelmed by the scale of the productions in film.

Also, the idea of writing a film became a condition for the perfect expression. You make a literary model of the film and then you implement it. Even sometimes when the director was the writer like Bergman, all the forms of film from the avant-garde, the free experimental forms, suddenly fell into the shadow of this heavy intellectual load.

This idea of using film as a personal art form was set aside after the war, and the whole appreciation of film became heavily weighted toward the masters who operated through industry, and operated through a

specific literary form of writing for whatever film, to these large cultural units, had become.

Coming from that environment in Europe, to the United States in the 1960s, I found a revival of the idea of a personal cinema. People like Maya Deren and Stan Brakage and Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits had developed their strong "American" so-called personal cinema, or avant-garde. At first I was skeptical, but soon I recognized that contrary to the model I had brought with me of political disguise, this American honesty and openness with an interest in the structure and the material was very real. There was a structuralist cinema, and a personal cinema, and a formalist cinema, and all these forms were vital and excellent.

Of course, now its all overlaid again by the hegemony of images from some kind of center of populist production, and only now video and the computer media have retained a more or less personal dimension.

Video didn't have any kind of canon of criticism. It was too new. When you came to it there were no previous video artists, right?

There were a few people who had already invaded the gallery with film, like Bruce Nauman, Paul Sharits, and a few others. They were attempting to bring the moving image to the gallery. They were painters and sculptors, like Yoko Ono, like Richard Serra, people who were considered real artists. Filmmakers, though, had no place in the gallery. Film had its own milieu, which was the movie house. The transition to the gallery for moving image artists has always been an uneasy one. Eventually, film was rejected by the gallery.

Video on the other hand had a much easier transition to the gallery, an easier acceptance as an art form. Video brought a multitude of genres with it, after it had freed itself from film in terms of structure, editing, dramatic forms, and such. Video incorporated completely new dimensions,

such as the confessional, the minimalist approaches, the documentary, and various conceptual forms. Video began to flourish in the galleries. It came just at the moment when painting and sculpture had become troubled and no longer vital.

Video was freed of the theater concept — a large screen like a stage and people sitting in rows facing the screen. Did people at first consider video to be painting in motion. Is that how it was bought into the galleries?

Not at all. Any attempt to show a painter-like form was not really accepted. You know, like colorizing and minimalist reductionist work, and the visual poetry, whatever you want to call it. These genres survived only for a few years. They did not become the dominant force. The dominant force was more territorial, in form, becoming a vehicle parallel to television, or one that was critical of it.

The smaller group of people, to which I belonged, were interested in analyzing the structural identity of the medium itself. It was a novelty, but it did not define the genre. Eventually, these very interesting early media works became the property of the archive only; they are never rarely seen in galleries or museums or anywhere else really.

Basically, the mixed media form has won out. Video becomes part of an installation, and we call it sometimes “video installation” because there is one monitor in it and that monitor is used as a special identifier, expander, a sort of a motif or window or circumstantial item. Today, you don’t really see a single video or screen in the gallery. You see it at the festivals where there is a tradition of moving image which is split into specific genres between the art function, and the function of the documentary or film or television. The festivals are really the most dynamic aspect of video presentation. Galleries today are basically all occupied by a mixed media format or a sculptural arrangement of objects that dominates

the space of the gallery.

Which brings me to my own problem of how to place a moving image in a gallery, and my own concern that there is an uneasy peace between the moving image in the gallery and the filmic tradition of the moving image. For me, there was almost a painful confrontation when I returned to the Czech Republic recently and met my friends — who are of course filmmakers because I was a filmmaker and we all studied together. I recognized in them a deep dilemma about what film was and what film might be. For them, film is the carrier of intellectual thought, yet they are engaged in a kind of semi-amateur treatment of it that doesn't somehow have the power of the provocation of the utmost intellectual discourse. They are involved in lesser films. It is the unprofessional, the deeply personal approach, that involves them now, what we used to call "the stench of domesticity," something completely outside the slick or convincing or powerful filmic expression.

When I was in school, this question of allowing non-official film was always with filmmaking. The desire was always to make personal films somehow, but in order to accommodate the regime, it was decided that there would be the industry of film — this huge thing we have described — and there would be amateur film, which would have its own festivals. No one could really appreciate that a single person could make a masterpiece in his or her own living room. In fact, the filmmakers themselves did not believe that the amateur filmmaking was serious; they would not assign to it the function of art. The official art was the *big* art and it had official movie houses. Then there were little works made by artists brought into a gallery. These two things were supposed to compete.

The making of films in Czechoslovakia today is in crisis because the government has withdrawn support of film. Film was once part of the government strategy, even the ones that were anti-government, as I said,

because the government needed this type of enemy or provocation. Now there is no funding for film, and the artists agree with that because they say that only the film giants benefited from the situation — they got their cars, their houses, their women or their men, and they got their big names, and we dissident artists always lived outside, being rejected or put into prison, expelled and disenfranchised. Now the art world is quite happy to be punishing the ones who benefited before.

What about showing video in galleries and museum?

In the Czech Republic, all the galleries that mattered were sponsored by the state. But in the U.S., the acceptance of video in the gallery was a surprise, because here the gallery is a privatized, mom & pop type of operation, a sort of store for selling art. I'm talking about the art world gallery, you know on the level of Leo Castelli, and such. The gallery here is the vital connection between art-making and the showing and selling of art. Then, there is a museum world which is different, semi-sponsored by a city, state, or the government and it deals with older more established forms of art generally. And then you have the festivals, which are a completely organic setting — a dynamic field of response. These are the three stages for exhibiting art here in the U.S.: the private, semi-private, and then the festivals.

Here, as I say, the speed with which video as an art form was accepted into the galleries was amazing. It broke all the rules. My complaint is not against the galleries, my bitter pill is that the galleries that we created in the 1960s here in the U.S. are disappearing rapidly. And people say that perhaps its a natural evolution that art forms begin to cater to the populous. But the privilege of not having to cater to anybody — whether as a reaction to politics in the East, or from a kind of strideful independent stand here in the West — is still an ideal state to be in. Independence. Not caring if any

one sees or likes what you do. Art looking at itself.

I think art benefited tremendously from this freedom to observe, to experiment, to investigate. There was a moment in which it did not matter if there was anyone outside who looked at it. It was sort of a religious ritual in which people were indirectly taking part.

That's why you and Steina started the Kitchen in 1971, so that artists could see what other artists were doing.

That's right. It was a large social impulse. But, what I'm saying is that even that situation pushed against vast social and political forces. That was the sixties. Those things might not have happened had there not been a tension between the generations. Or whatever it was. Conflict resulting in tension.

Today, I am kind of at loss going to the Czech republic as part of the process of selecting and critiquing new work. The new Czech artists are very involved with what is called "interactive art," very synchronous to what is going on in the rest of the world in terms of art. Czech artists know the magazines, they travel, they are caught up with the times. Yet, there is no social or political background against which this art can present itself. There is no tension between the state of the political social environment and their own process of creating in that environment. So, I kind of was surprised that such a situation could exist there. Which brings me to an idea, new for me, that art can be transmitted as a form in itself. Perhaps art doesn't need the social struggle behind it. Maybe there is a struggle I don't see. There may be some fear, or uncertainty that provokes an artistic expression. Maybe I am missing something.

However, this experimentation is very interesting to me because it seems to take place in a social vacuum. None of the subjects of the exhibition I observed relates in any way to the social or political background

fact served the system in order to help it find its demons. The whole disguise was carried out through particular forms: symbolic, iconic, metaphorical, and with language; and eventually, the disguise was to be gleefully uncovered by the critique, and then punished by the new Marxist order.

The new avant-gardists you were involved with were developing their own modes of disguise?

Let me put it this way, the intellectual system I came from stood in marked contrast to what I found when I came to the United States. Here, there was a discourse about actual material, about film, about how the system performs, how it reveals the deceptions of, say, Hollywood. What I found here was a "materialist" avant-garde. That type of materialism could not have existed in Czechoslovakia. The political agenda there was the hot issue, and everyone was trying to find the enemy or the mutual enemy. Art, as well, always focused on that agenda.

Here, there was also a political aspect to the avant-garde, but the formalist approach was the dominant approach in the 1960s, when I came to the United States. The interest here was in some kind of honesty, to expose the medium, show it without its clothing, compare it to the Hollywood disguise. Hollywood films were interested in using the illusionist power of the medium, to disguise the medium. Pure illusion.

To me, the Czech interest in socialist or communist government seemed to be somehow similar to the Hollywood strategy of using the medium to disguise the inner workings of the medium itself.

Film has been described as the most successful art form of the 20th century comparable in popularity to the public plays of Aristophanes and Shakespeare, or to chamber music with its ubiquitous appeal in drawing

none of these mechanisms would directly relate to a social or post-communist reality or any issue that would be linked to a social process in the world, except that some prescribed rules that some of them followed, but that they followed the rules because they were prescribed not from an inner motivation. Not only that but I found that because of the suppression of this poetic essence that sometimes traces of it broke through but it was so visibly artificial that it was just a cliché that appeared. I feel that the whole show tried to purify itself from the social and traditional influences, which is an interesting challenge even if most of it is clearly a game, or play. Which I have nothing against as far as exploration, but I don't know how deep a statement can be made that way. The talent of course transcends these concerns of mine. But I am very curious to see if this kind of suspended state of the culture, which I in a way prefer, as I said I prefer artificial cultures. I rationally or irrationally as I could would build opposition to the tradition. Using nothing that was natural but only the artificial. I like an utmost artificial stand in art. But they seem to me to have done that. If the show succeeds or not, that is a different story. However, I think there is something heroic in it — the struggle was made to depart from the strength of the tradition into the unknown.

The form of electronic media will go how far?

We don't know yet. Until it develops a generation capable of attacking it and destroying it, we will not know. Its not at that stage yet. Its beginning to barely walk. Most of the CD ROM stories are so trivial and ridiculous they are not worthy of attacking.

What about the Czech avant-garde, historically?

There was an avant-garde film in the twenties and the thirties synchronous with the European film avant-garde: once the media matured into having structural possibilities, a lot of talented people explored it, some would stay with the medium and explore an abstract form of film like Fishinger [?] and others. War somehow disrupted the whole thing bringing in a new reality. War criticized art somehow completely because the absurdity of war was much stronger than any surrealist view. So the war brought this kind of rational existentialism to Europe, and in Eastern Europe war brought a kind of euphoria of the new. New world, new socialist mandate, engineers of the human soul. Utopian futures and so forth. Two main ideas: existentialism, and socialist utopianism occupied the world. There was not much interest in formalist expression: it had been done by the past.

When I grew up, we looked at the avant-garde as the source of formalist experimentation. But we did not have a true living line of experiment because it had already been conscripted in the service of ideology.

If the Slavic or Czech vein is particularly appealing to you in terms of its spiritual inquiry and language of the soul and heart, a poetic and gentle investigation of the world, why did you personally try to eradicate it from your life?

You see, historically, this idea of co-existence with the West was impossible

for us. The West was always dominated by its realism. In fact, the whole communist movement developed in order to get even with the West, to show the West what the true "brotherhood" means. This is all going back to Dostoevskian ideals and the Russian soul being able to oppose a type of French rationalism or the English mercantile ideology. The closest ideal was to be found in the German destructive romanticism. The hidden Marxism. I grew up in this romantic era of Marx and Engels who were poets of that social discourse. In some way, when I saw the futility of that direction, I became interested in what makes the West tick.

The West so dominated the world after the war. I found out that the West looks and thinks differently from everyone else, even when you take away its mercantile interests. In the West, there is still always an interest in the *principle* of things, principles that are very essential. It is impossible to bypass certain things; to face them means pain but the disclosure is essential. Basically, that was the struggle of 19th century German philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, which became so important to the whole world. The Slavs, or the culture I come from, did not arise from an engagement with those issues; they were interested in ethical issues, occasionally, but more or less it was the perfume, it was the escape, it was the principle of pleasure that dominated. Or a type of false romanticism about a distant land — coming from a landlocked and politically-locked base. They always strived for the foreign influence. This is hard to describe because it is very personal.

The ideas arising from Nineteenth-century German philosophy dominated world for a long time. This was always shown to us Slavs as the power of reason, then the danger of reason, and that's how until today the Slavic soul cannot really accommodate the principles of reasoning.

I don't want to generalize but its not by accident that this whole communist thing was an acceptable alternative to actually dealing with the

world. These remnants still exist in Poland, Hungary, and all the Slavic lands.

Would you say then that the traditional Slavic mode is based on an emotional impulse rather than the intellectual impulse?

That's what I thought it was and I was trying to stop that and put myself into a dialogue with something concrete. And yet, it will always betray me, because eventually there will be traces of that Slavic undefined poetics.

I have found, in observing the new Czech art, that because of the suppression of this poetic essence sometimes traces of it break through, but often, it is so visibly artificial, that it seems just a cliché.

However, I think there is something heroic in what the Czech artists are doing — the struggle was made to depart from the strength of the tradition into the unknown.

(the end — 4,166 words)

WOODY FOLLOWING IS STUFF I LEFT OUT OR CHANGED RADICALLY THAT YOU MIGHT NEED TO USE IN YOUR ESSAY OR MIGHT WANT TO PUT BACK INTO THIS INTERVIEW.]

Since I was part of the selection process I was astonished by the fact that

blunder into the territory of *the real*. Trying to find the underlying structure of the world. This may be the result of a basic rejection of video and the embracing of computer-based image making.

The electronic and machine media are much more unforgiving, much more cruel. They answer different questions. They do not really satisfy your spiritual or your emotional needs.

Film does?

Film, as it is generally presented, is a melodrama basically. Though when I experienced American personal cinema in the sixties I experienced it as a personal domain. It became so experimental that film was no longer film in terms of melodrama, it was not a structural image in which you presented a narrative. It was itself, it was looking at its own milieu, and it was exploring in an unconventional manner, keeping far as possible from the cliché.

Today, I still refer to American cinema as the cultural film, but again today film is really film again. New films made in Hollywood, or maybe in Sweden, or in Russia, I don't know where films are made anymore. In fact, American criticism of American culture mostly talks about film. Even if they speak about John Steinbeck they speak about a film made about Cannery Row. This is a stunning kind of deferred understanding of history. There is always some kind of film that shows up if someone is a famous artist — his poem or his novel is made into a film. This kind of association of American culture with film is so dominant, so intrusive, and so untrue. I must admit when I deal with new media like the electronic image, I use the cliché of film because its much easier to attack, to criticize, to present. Now we really live in a world of new cliché. I don't see a new generation tearing it apart yet.

And this notion of anti-film, or film as experiment, disappeared as an intellectual challenge. We do not refer to it anymore.