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Editor: Robert Nery  
Editorial Committee: Ross  
Gibson, Catriona Moore, Grace  
Cochrane, Denise Robinson  
Art Production: Sheona White  
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The wrestler with death. With Robert J. Oppenheimer in the background.

# The Art of Memory

John Conomos

One of the highlights of the third Australian Video Festival was Woody Vasulka's astonishing new videotape *The Art of Memory* (1987). How does one begin to talk about this masterpiece of contemporary electronic image making? Vasulka's new work will, I suspect, revolutionise future conceptual and visual trends in video art, and by the same token, expand the aesthetic parameters of computer art. Undoubtedly, Vasulka's presence in the history of image-processed video is a central one (shared by his wife and

collaborator, a former musician. Steina). but what needs mentioning is how Vasulka has given us a rare glimpse of what may be possible in tomorrow's video art by questioning the conventional wisdom concerning the medium's visual and sonic properties. The originality of the videotape's computer-generated imagery lies in the innovative way space and time have been treated, transfiguring contemporary pictorial space into space-time (more of this later).

The Art of Memory is a mesmeric lyrical poem of unpredictable multi-layered curvilinear images that scan across the monitor screen in every direction. The work's title invokes the anonymous ancient text *Ad Herennium* (ca 86 BC), a founding text for the memory techniques of Roman rhetoric and incalculably influential for the classical art of memory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, contributing to important works like Robert Fludd's *Ars Memoriam* (1619). The latter formed the basis of the same author's 'Memory Theatre'.<sup>1</sup> The videotape's images recur, are distorted in unpredictable ways, and concern the Atomic Age, collective guilt, fascism and popular memory. On a fundamental level, one may interpret it as a multi-faceted audio-visual memory text designed to remind us of the political and cultural events of our recent past.

The tape's theoretical architecture and visual rhetoric (strongly indicative of Vasulka's past as a process video artist) contribute to its overall 'operatic' look and feel. Its synthesised soundtrack of 'songs' — that become progressively louder as we are transfixed by the video's mercurial and disturbing images — vividly evokes the psychic and social horrors of twentieth century politics. The Art of Memory, it needs to be remembered, is Vasulka's second work in a series commenced with his important 1983 tape *The Commission*.<sup>2</sup> In this major work, Vasulka was dealing with obsessive artists like Paganini and Berlioz, whose moody temperaments doomed them to melodramatic fates. The digital effects in *The Commission* are deployed to express (rather uncharacteristically, given Vasulka's generic position) landscape, emotion, narrative and death. Here, as in *The Art of Memory*, Vasulka's visual framework employs digital techniques that are the result of a lifetime's experimentation with electronic imaging tools. This fact is of critical significance because it is characteristic of Vasulka's particular generic tradition of process video, a genre of video which has been seldom understood or valued except by the occasional informed critic like Lucinda Furlong, who has bothered to analyse its prominent concepts and visual qualities in order to trace its genealogy since the mid-60s.<sup>3</sup> (While I am on the subject of video history — or rather the lack of it — it should be said that we are still grossly ignorant on this extremely important matter. Excluding Rob Perree's new book *Into Video* (1988), there is hardly anything around in book form of any worthwhile theoretical value.)

Of equal, if not more importance, is how Vasulka is experimenting in his new videowork with narrativity through video synthesis devices of his own that he has developed for the last twenty years. Vasulka is an

exception among his process video peers in taking up the challenge to negotiate narrativity in his machine-generated art. Before I proceed to describe some of the videotape's unmistakable merits, it would be ideal to speak briefly about Vasulka's pioneering contribution to process video, so we may delineate some of the genre's foremost philosophical and stylistic features.

Image-processed video generally refers to a particular category of video art which accentuates the synthesis and manipulation of the video signal in a way that the image itself is dramatically altered or changed. Over the years it has been known to include every thing from the most fundamental analog-processing techniques to elaborate digital computer graphics and special effects. In many interesting ways, the visual abstraction of process video, based on the modification of the video signal, was inspired by the utopian writings of McLuhan and Wiener, who both conceptualised complex connections between the human nervous system and electronic circuitry. However, critics like Robert Pincus-Witten have justifiably criticised the genre on the grounds that its formalist aesthetic of abstract imagery and colourful swirls reflected a basic exhaustion of ideas.<sup>4</sup> But in his criticism Pincus-Witten also pinpointed its lasting significance — namely, the development of imaging tools applied by the genre's artist/engineers, like the Vasulkas, Eric Siegel, Nam June Paik, Stephen Beck and Dan Sandin. In the case of the Vasulkas, they invented (in collaboration with Jeff Schier) an elaborate digital imaging device called the 'image articulator' which they used along with the Rutt-Etra scan processor in creating their distinctive videos. For instance, the former machine was responsible for a significant tape like *Digital Compositing Studies* (1978) and the latter was used to generate the distorted self-portrait images of *Self-Portrait* (1975) which are similar in shape and texture to the strange fugacious images in *The Art of Memory*.

Basically, the Vasulkas were fascinated by expressive plasticity of the video image as measured by frequency and voltage. Woody Vasulka once praised the electronic image in the following way: 'It's liquid, it's shapeable, it's clay, it's an art material, it exists independently'.<sup>5</sup> This critical view of the video image regarding its theoretical and compositional plasticity informs the visual and sonic language of *The Art of Memory*. More specifically, what we notice in the video's ever changing open-ended textuality of political and personal dislocation, is the Vasulkas' cardinal awareness that both audio and video are composed of electronic wave forms and are intricately connected to each other. The Vasulkas, including other major video figures like Nam June Paik and Ed Ershwiller, were interested in altering the shapes of images through sound impulses. In their previous body of work, as in *The Art of Memory*, sound is of equal importance to the video image. Not only are image and sound equal elements in the overall significance of *The Art of Memory*, we experience again and again the videomaker's aesthetic priority of seeing the video image as a frameless continuum. Both critical factors shape the work's eye-catching pliable textual surfaces and its cumulatively engaging sonic registers.

Its novel visual representations of images within images, horizontal iris effects, space-time worms, of Nazis on parade, Italian fascists, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, revolutionary figures like Gramsci, Lenin and Trotsky — all these images are reinforced most effectively by Fascist and Nazi radio speeches on the videotape's highly atmospheric soundtrack — and as arresting images they may be regarded as a direct consequence of Vasulka's avoidance of traditional image making, which is mainly structured on techniques dependent on camera-obscure projection. It is worth quoting Vasulka on this fundamental point:

*I can at least unleash some attacks against the tradition of imaging, which I see mostly as camera-obscure bound, or as pinhole-principle defined. This tradition has shaped our visual perception not only through the camera obscura, but it's been reinforced, especially through the cinema and through television. It's a dictatorship of the pinhole effect, as ironic and stupid as it sounds to call it that.*

There is ample persuasive imagistic and aural evidence in Vasulka's video of his departure from photo-realism. It is this anti-camera-obscure rationale that forms the experimental basis for the tape's unsettling contorted images of authoritarian conformity, a war-devastated Europe, and vast eerie desert landscapes displaying distant vistas of deserted beaches. Faced with these sharply juxtaposed images the viewer is forced to contemplate the possibility of nuclear annihilation. This theme is augmented by a series of weird images that illustrate an angel of death(?) engaged in a tormented struggle with an equally mysterious male character. There are related images that show our entry into the Atomic Age, represented by the twisted face of Robert J. Oppenheimer, the atomic physicist, superimposed on the iconic mushroom cloud. We see and hear Oppenheimer utter (after he has witnessed the first atomic explosion) "The world will never be the same again. I remember the lines from the Hindu scriptures: 'Now I have become death, the destroyer of the world'".

All these strange images and sounds of destruction and loss, challenging our perceptual convictions, depend on Vasulka's ability to generate them through the unpredictable mediation of digital machines like the Rutt-Etra video synthesiser. I say 'unpredictable' because the Vasulkas have frequently testified how the dialogue between themselves and their imaging machines is not one of total control. This admission of theirs may account for the surreal ambiguity of the video's unprecedented mobile audio-visual configurations. Wood Vasulka has commented how his video experiments have unexpectedly enriched the expressive means of his art and determined his basic vision of the world. The surprising effects that colour the visual vocabulary of *The Art of Memory* have been called by Vasulka 'artifacts' and he claims that they can not be premeditated by the artist concerned. These 'artifacts' are the chance effects of the machine's architecture. Another important point to make here is not only do these 'artifacts' shape a tape's visual and aural information, but the machine itself involved is a

critical device for the amplification of the videomaker's subjective fantasies. The later phenomenon for Vasulka is central to his oeuvre:

*What intrigues me about the computer and video are mostly the changes between time and other problems . . . that cannot be foreseen or fantasized through the best synthesizer, which is the human brain . . . This untapped wealth is the pool of unmatched fantasy that cannot be produced by plainly human fantasy, confined in a pictorial tradition.*

This quotation shows Vasulka's willingness to acknowledge the limitations of human consciousness and his positive understanding of the machine's unique contribution to video making.

As promised earlier, and in conclusion, I wish to make a few brief remarks about the significance of Vasulka's subtle and highly kinetic treatment of space and time. *The Art of Memory* evidences a remarkable transformation of pictorial space into space as experience of time. The video tape's experimental multi-spatial and multi-temporal richness emanates from an acute recognition of how our culture, as Virilio claims, has and is undergoing a profoundly dramatic transition from geo-policy to chrono-policy.<sup>8</sup> What we encounter throughout its constantly shifting electronic sculptural dimensions of image and sound is the de-corporealisation and de-materialisation of space. *The Art of Memory* is a sublime instance of how pictorial space in today's electronic media art is best suited to articulate the temporal and spatial relations that characterise contemporary experience. To ignore this momentous video would be to turn your back on the expressive possibilities inherent in tomorrow's electronic art.

#### End Notes

1. For a definitive English history on the art of memory — the first in English — refer to Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Lond., Ark Paperbacks, 1984 (1966).
2. Having not seen *The Commission*, my description of it comes from Christine Tamblyn, "Whose Life Is It Anyway?," *Afterimage*, Summer 1987, p22.
3. See Lucinda Furlong, "Tracking Video Art: 'Image Processing' as a Genre", *Art Journal*, Fall 1985, pp230-236. Furlong has written a fairly detailed history of process video that is to be found in several articles: "Notes toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Eric Siegel, Stephen Beck, Dan Sandin, Steve Rutt, Bill and Louise Etra," *Afterimage*, Vol 11, Nos 1&2 (Summer 1983) and "Notes toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," *Afterimage*, Vol 11, No 5 (December 1983).
4. Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Panel Remarks', in *The New Television*, ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1977, p70, quoted in Furlong, "Tracking Video Art;" see n3.
5. Quoted in Furlong, "Notes toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka;" see n3.
6. Quoted in Frank Dietrich, "The Computer: A Tool for Thought-Experiments," *Leonardo*, Vol 20, No 4, p321, 1987.
7. *ibid.*, p321.
8. See Peter Weibel, "Pictorial Space in Electronic Art," *ARS Electronica Computerkulturtag* Linz Orf — Videonale 1986 catalogue, p189.