



An Instrument of Infinite

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 Niccolo 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 Marcia Mikulak

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, for us, the most

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Ambiguities of the Abstract

By GRACE BRILL

Abstract art, like marzipan, is generally thought to be the sort of thing you either love or hate on first encounter. However, the response is not always so clearly defined.

Delicate marzipan candies may initially enthrall, then disappoint. But they can still leave one fascinated by the juxtaposition of pleasing form and foul taste. Likewise, there

art

are abstract paintings that may engender a specific initial response that later gives way to one less-defined, or even contradictory. Often, it is the changing nature of ones own reaction to a work—and the search for a synthesis—that makes the work compelling.

This sort of indecision is a reasonable response to the abstract paintings of **Dennis Farber**, on display at the **Linda Durham Gallery** (400 Canyon Road, through March 31). The show consists of five, untitled works in acrylic and Rhoplex on unstretched canvas. All are dominated by a single image—a modified triangle form.

There is a soothing quality to Farber's work, which derives from seeing the same shape over and over again. But there is also a lack of tension in the ordering of the forms in space, which renders the works either too cerebral or too placid. As exercises, they go too far; as explorations, they do not go far enough. This is not to dismiss the paintings altogether, however, for they can be engaging.

Instead of being framed, Farber's works are bordered by rough edges of multi-layered, multicolored acrylic. This ambiguous limitation imposed by the artist highlights the definition of the triangles. Also this bordering tends to give the pieces some affinity with organic forms: It makes them seem as if they are growing on the wall.

Possibly the most accessible piece in the show depicts a union of two triangles against a creamy background tinged with green. As ones eye is drawn inward, tiny dots (like those in a newsprint photo) become visible in the matrix, thus lending a new level of interest—the microscopic. The work is peaceful, but it stimulates the imagination; it suggests some otherworldly amniotic fluid that is nurturing the forms.

There is something in Farber's work that excites, but there is also a slickness that leaves the viewer feeling somewhat cheated. The sheen of the canvas and the calm ordering of the forms in space seem too polished; yet effects of texture, color and composition are sometimes able to overcome this. It is the combination of these disparate elements that forces one constantly to reconsider and reassess Farber's work.

* * *

On exhibit at **The Haven** restaurant (615 Canyon Road, through the end of the month) are intaglio prints by local artist **Joel F. Greene**. The show includes etchings, engravings and mezzotints; landscapes, portraits and still lifes. Greene's skill as a printmaker is evidenced by his ability to create subtle shades of meaning while working solely in black and white.

The artist seems intrigued by the reduction of natural shapes to planes and angles, but his angular forms are portrayed with intimacy. "Nude on a Patio" shows a reclining nude with bulletlike breasts; at her side is a pineapple-like plant that could pass for a piece of industrial machinery. Neither woman nor plant are in the realm of the living, but their transformation has been achieved with a sort of wry humor.

"Cat" is an engraving of a rather disgruntled feline whose body is composed of many planes, all detailed by harsh strokes.

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Infinite Complexity

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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.

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Showcase traces growth of pioneer video artists

Woody and Steina Vasulka, Santa Fe's foremost video pioneers, will screen a collection of their works Sunday night at Club West, 213 W. Alameda.

The video showcase will begin at 8 p.m. and is scheduled to last more than three hours. Admission is \$3 at the door.

Woody Vasulka, a Czech-born industrial engineer and filmmaker, and his wife Steina, a violinist from Iceland, were among the first artists to experiment with video.

They became interested in electronic media upon moving to the United States in 1965. They gravitated toward video after working with other new technologies, including electronic sound, synthesizers and stroboscopic light.

"Our context was not really artistic when we started to work with video," Woody Vasulka once said. "It was very far from what I would recognize as art."

The Vasulkas came to see the aesthetic possibilities of video more clearly after they founded The Kitchen, an electronic art gallery and performance space, in New York City in 1971. The Kitchen, in the words of *American Film* magazine, "soon became a Mecca for experimental videomakers."

Through the center, the Vasulkas sponsored many of the nation's first video tape festivals and influenced a

new generation of video artists.

The focus of their own work began to change. While they produced largely documentaries in their earlier years, they started creating more abstract videos.

This new direction was evident in *Golden Voyage*, which they made in 1973, inspired by Magritte's surrealist painting *Golden Legend*.

They have continued to push the limits of video since coming to Santa Fe in 1980. The two have designed and built much of their own equipment, becoming ever more sophisticated in the use of computers to manipulate sound and images.

"Our work is a dialogue between the tool and the image, so we would not preconceive an image, separately make a conscious model of it, and then try to match it, as other people do," Woody Vasulka says. "We would rather make a tool and dialogue with it."

The Club West showcase will include tapes from the early days of The Kitchen, as well as tapes produced by the Vasulkas at the Center for Media Studies in Buffalo, N.Y., where they were faculty members during the '70s.

Also on the program will be recent New Mexico work.

Steina's latest video was *The West*, which used the state's vast, arid landscapes as a backdrop for various signs and symbols, from ceremonial

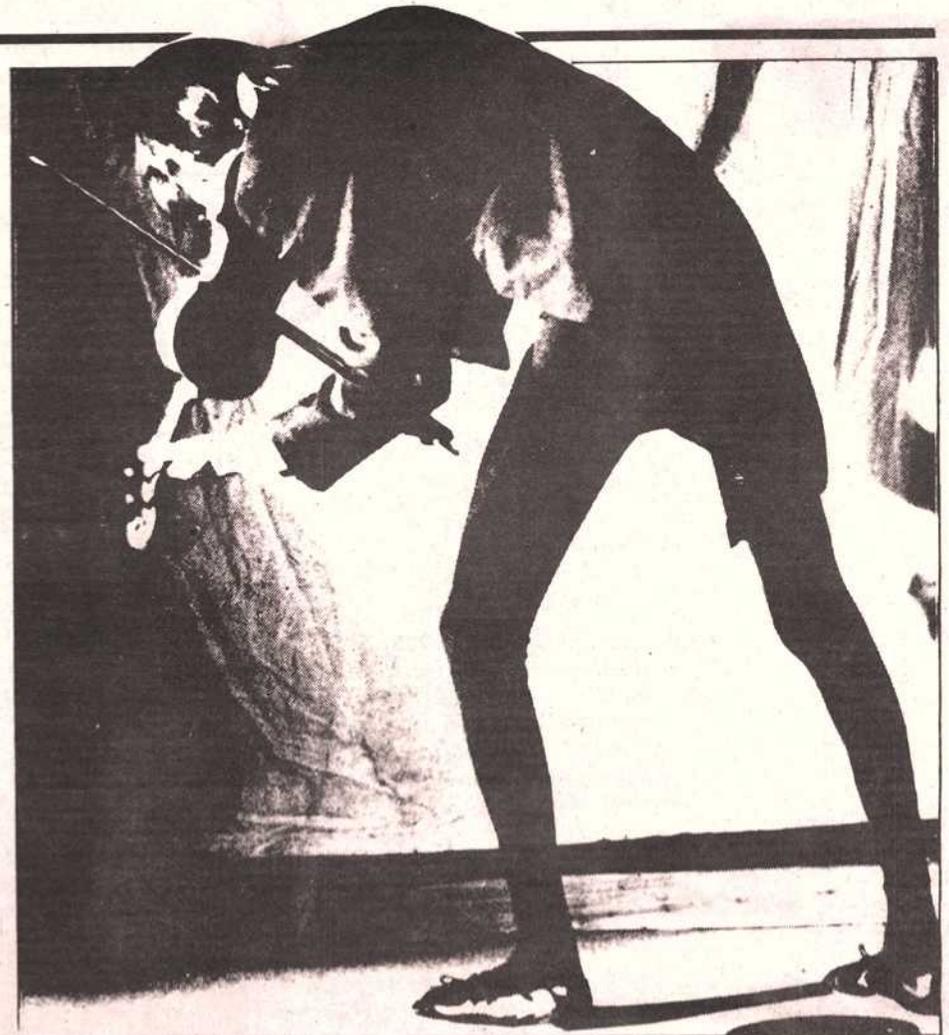


Photo by Marcia Mikulak

Ernest Gusella as Paganini in Woody Vasulka's *The Commission*.

Indian dwellings to scientific apparatus.

Woody's most recent tapes include

Artifacts and *The Commission*, an operatic work based on the legend of Paganini and Hector Berlioz.

Documentaries reveal another side of India

India, home of three quarters of a billion people, has suddenly become "in."

Films such as *Gandhi* and *Passage To India*, and the successful Masterpiece Theatre television drama *The Jewel in the Crown*, have rekindled American interest in the vast Asian nation and its diverse cultural and religious traditions.

A different side of India will be on view in a pair of documentaries opening today and playing through Monday at El Paseo Theatre, 123 W. San Francisco St.

Instead of the Westernized perspective provided by *Gandhi* and *Passage To India*, these two documentaries strive to invoke the spirit of ancient India.

The major film on the program is Malcolm Leigh's *Manifestations of Shiva*, revealing the Indian view of the nature of reality as reflected through the worship of the Hindu god Shiva.

Shiva is both Lord of Life and Destroyer. The film shows the physically demanding preparations for a rhythmic dance evoking Shiva and the endless cycle of birth and death.

Juxtaposed with the dance are scenes of daily life, temple events and festivals in the small towns of southern India, primarily in the state of Kerala.

The film has received widespread critical praise, largely because it dispenses with the usual explanatory narrative, relying solely on



music and striking images.

The Directors Guild of America called *Manifestations of Shiva* a "documentary of staggering visual beauty" that "provides a religious and poetic experience."

Calgary Herald film critic Fred Haeseker was similarly impressed.

"Verbal expressions would detract from the film's intimate observations of the preparations for a yogic dance," he wrote. "The subtle visual detail, brilliantly edited and accompanied by a spare, delicate soundtrack, takes us deeper into the very basis of Indian mysticism than words ever could."

Rounding out El Paseo's program is the 1959 short, *The Sword and the Flute*, directed by James Ivory (*The Bostonians* and *Heat and Dust*).

This film is a study of 16th and 17th century India detailed through miniature Moghal (Moslem) and Rajput (Hindu) paintings, borrowed from the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts and Metropolitan Museum.

Indian composers such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan provide musical accompaniment.

Ritual dance to the Hindu god Shiva.

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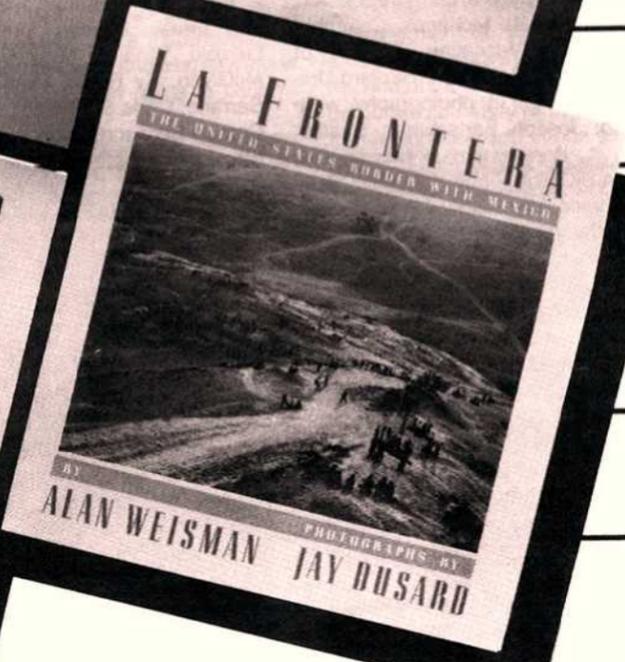
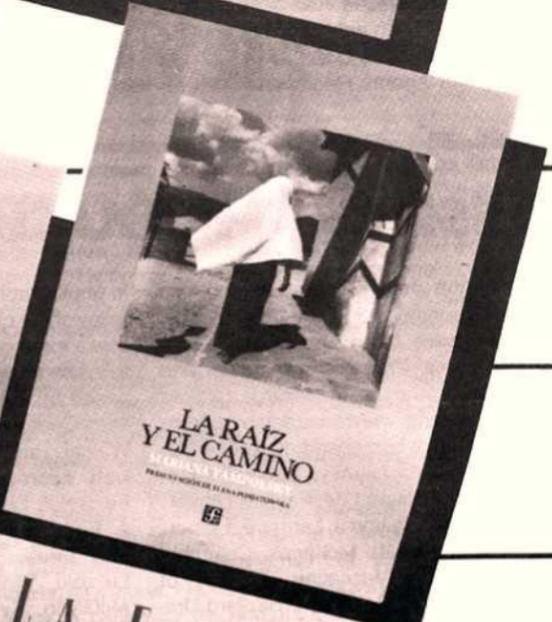
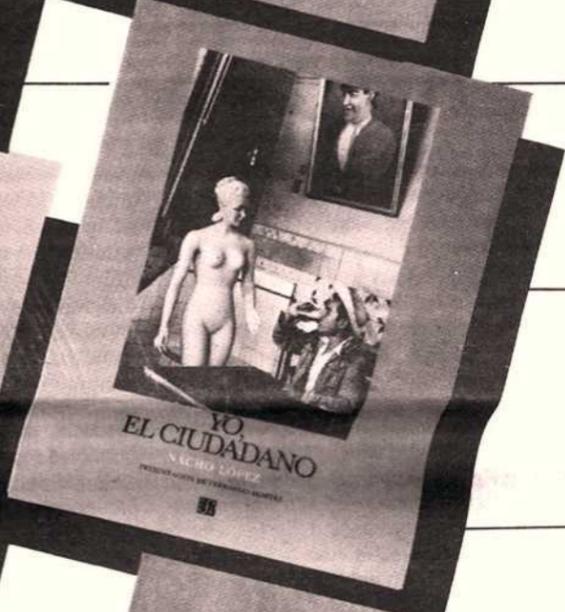
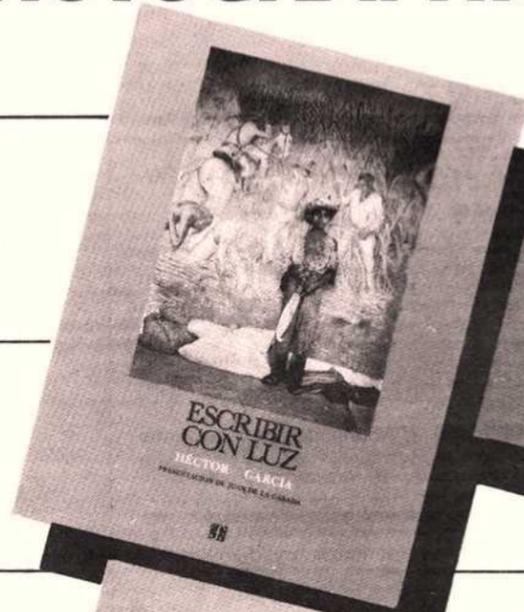
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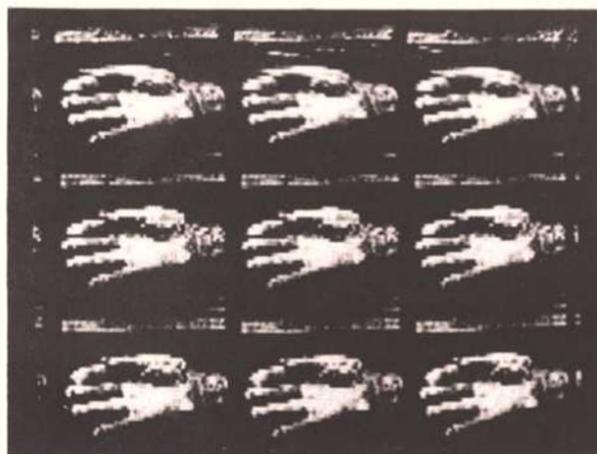
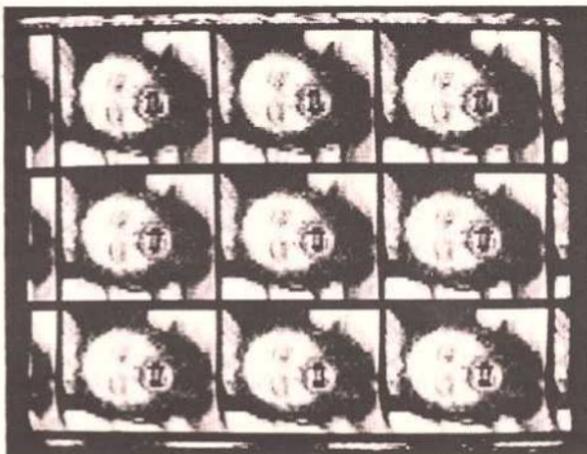
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All frame enlargements from *The Commission* (1983) by Woody Vasulka.

the phallus, and the father. The first tape's title, *Virtual Play: The Double Direct Monkey Wrench in Black's Machinery*, refers to a strategy for playing chess that enables the players to continue the game for the longest possible time without getting checkmated. Fagin transforms this metaphor for coitus reservatus into a metaphor for coitus interruptus in the frame story that is told at the inception of *The Amazing Voyage* and repeated at its conclusion:

Raymond Roussel died at the Grande Albergo Delle Palme, Room 226. It was connected by a door to the adjoining room occupied by Charlotte DuFrène, his life-long celibate companion. Their custom was to keep the door unlocked. He dragged the mattress, which represented a super-human effort, to the adjoining door. It was like he had died on the bachelor side of the "Large Glass." The door was locked.

Fagin's reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* seems appropriate, since Duchamp wrote, "It was essentially Roussel who was responsible for 'my glass,' *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*. The general idea came to me from his *Impressions of Africa*."⁴ Duchamp designated the lower half of the *Large Glass* as the "Bachelor Apparatus." There, the energy produced by the nine bachelor mannequins who are inscribed on the sheet of glass is conducted through sieves in the chocolate grinder, which symbolizes masturbation. The ejaculatory fluid that ensues is dazzled up into the top half of the glass, where the figure of the Bride is represented by an amorphous shape. In an essay about the *Large Glass*, Michel Carrouges wrote, "A bachelor machine is a fantastic image that transforms love into a technique of death."⁵

Michel de Certeau has offered a parallel interpretation: "The machine is really the story of the bachelor in an impossible relationship with the mother."⁶ This insight provides a rationale for Fagin's pairing of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel. Both French authors suffered from obsessive attachments to their mothers. One of the narrators of *The Amazing Voyage* notes that Roussel arranged to have a glass skylight built into his mother's casket, so he could watch her until the very last moment during her internment. And Flaubert's Egyptian travel diary, which Fagin used as a source for his videotape, records Flaubert's hysterical reaction after parting from his mother at the outset of his journey.

This diary, which also contains excerpts from the diary of his companion, Maxime du Camp, provides another explana-

tion for the conjoining of this odd couple. Du Camp observed that Flaubert "was adverse to movement and action. He would have liked to travel, if he could, stretched out on a sofa and not stirring, watching landscapes, ruins, and cities pass before him like the screen of a panorama mechanically winding."⁷ Similarly, John Ashbery wrote of Roussel that he traveled extensively, "but he did little sightseeing as a rule, preferring to remain in his stateroom or hotel room working."⁸

Fagin has fleshed out the bare bones of facts like these into a complex network of dramatized re-enactments and recounted anecdotes in *The Amazing Voyage*. His method of working involves immersing himself in the primary and secondary literature about his subjects, and then letting this material sift through his unconscious processes. His final script was written without consulting his sources; hence his text is annotated, rather than coded.⁹ The tape functions like a palimpsest, its cultural references visible as half-erased traces that underlie the products of Fagin's own invention. Like Roussel, Fagin realizes that things always refer back to the "already said." As Foucault has observed in his book about Roussel: "We live in a world completely marked by, all laced with, discourse, that is to say, utterances which have been spoken, of things said, of affirmations, of interrogations, of discourses which have already occurred."¹⁰

In the twentieth century, these pre-existent verbal discourses have merged with the image repertoire we have culled from the "already seen": photographs, films, and television. Thus, Fagin addresses the spectator's imaginary body, a body formed out of the libidinal remnants of mesmerizing images that have been personalized by the unconscious. Plagiarizing from famous paintings, avant-garde and Hollywood films, newspaper clippings, opera, rock 'n' roll, and Greek mythology, as well as from literature and the academic disciplines of structural linguistics, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, Fagin offers his own kitschy recombinations of these received ideas and pictures.

For example, the films are sometimes arrested as still photographs and awkwardly collaged with other flat souvenirs to create the ersatz postcards the travelers mail home. In one scene, a Charleton Heston film, *The Naked Jungle* (1954, by Byron Haskin), serves as the impetus for the jumbled account of a dream in which animated figures from paintings by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Gérôme also appear. Fagin foregrounds his own synthetic methods of composition by

making frequent references to the act of copying. An anecdote is told about a village schoolmaster who is too poor to afford to buy *Don Quixote* or *The Divine Comedy*, so he writes them himself, fashioning illusionary counterfeits of these masterpieces. While footage from a silent film made by an unknown imitator of Georges Méliès is shown, a female child narrator reads a letter from Roussel, in which he describes his visit to a museum where only copies of famous paintings are exhibited. Believing that the age of great art has passed, the artists of this culture no longer bother to paint originals.

However, the videotape's most cogent explication of the issues of authenticity and authorship occurs in a dialogue involving a woman, a tape recorder, and a hand puppet, a tour-de-force derivation from the theoretical framework propounded by Gilles Deleuze. The scene begins with a close-up of a facsimile of a Joseph Cornell box with a title emblazoned across the screen: "the copy versus the simulacrum." The camera pulls back to reveal the puppet, which symbolizes the writing or drawing hand of the copyist, as it accuses the simulacrum, portrayed by a tape-recorded voice, of being a fake. The tape-recorded voice, which is activated when the puppet punches the machine's buttons, argues that the copy overvalues appearances and threatens it with dismemberment. This threat throws the hand puppet/copy into an apoplectic frenzy, forcing the woman, who represents the putative author, to intervene. Reprimanding the simulacrum, the woman states, "If we did what you did, simulacrum, and destroyed the model of sameness, we'd destroy the model of otherness, or difference."

Of course, this exchange also carries implications about the role of the video apparatus that produced the tape itself. And, indeed, Fagin seems to be suggesting that the video apparatus is another type of bachelor machine. In Roussel's novel, *Locus Solus* (1914), a wealthy eccentric shows his friends one of his inventions: eight tableaux vivants are endlessly repeated, like a tape loop, inside an enormous glass cage. The actors are dead people who have been revived with a fluid that makes them continually act out the most important incident of their lives.

Analogous cyclical metaphors for neurotic repetition reverberate throughout *The Amazing Voyage*. Audiotape loops of familiar sounds comprise a layer of the sound track, and deliriously circling camera movements are employed to produce a disorienting effect in the spectator. Anamorphic pictures of Flaubert and Roussel appear early in the tape and are restored to a normal configuration with the aid of a conical mirror at the end of the tape. These iconic visages are the only depictions of Flaubert and Roussel used in the tape. Even the roles of their mothers are played by blatant impostors, who serve as stand-ins, rather than actresses. Their fathers, conspicuous by their absence, are alluded to in the tape's pun-laden, final voice-over narration, which serves as a reprise to the Gérôme painting of the harem guard at the tape's commencement: "Their fathers never spoke, so images were found to replace them. But the sons were loyal. They were bright, too bright. The images were only seen in their shadow."

The first of the three biographical pieces that performance artist Ellen Zweig has created since 1984 was also inspired by Raymond Roussel's eccentric literary output. Like Fagin, Zweig extensively researches her subjects; she uses quotations from the historical documents and literary texts she discovers to structure her poetic scripts. *Impressions of Africa: Variations for Raymond Roussel* (1984) was based on Roussel's 1910 novel and the subsequent adaptation that he wrote for the stage.

Although the surrealists loved Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* when it was presented in Paris in 1911, it was a critical and popular flop. Its bizarre plot details the activities of a group of Europeans who have been shipwrecked off the coast of Africa. Talou, a tribal king, decides to hold them for ransom. To distract themselves during their captivity, the travelers plan a gala celebration for the day of their liberation. Each person rehearses a wildly implausible magic trick. Their presentation of these phantasmagoric vaudeville numbers is punctuated by a grisly series of executions ordered by Talou.

This implausible situation, with its fortuitous incongruities, bears the traces of Roussel's aleatory compositional formulas. In *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (1935), Roussel explained that he would take a phrase containing two words, each of which possessed a double meaning, and use the

Both production stills from *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel* (1986) by Steve Fagin.

