

# THE VASULKAS

## Woody Vasulka

Issues of memory, history, and narrative, and their relationship to electronic imaging have been central concerns of Woody's work.

## ART OF MEMORY

1987; with Daniel Nagrin; 36 min.; color

"Not only is *Art of Memory* Woody Vasulka's most famous work, but it must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely exhibited works in the history of video art. There were three major sources of inspiration for the tape—Vasulka's childhood memories of newsreels of world conflict; historian Frances Yates's book *The Art of Memory*; and the engravings of the 19th century Romantic illustrator Gustave Doré. Vasullka took from Yates not only the title of his videotape but also one of its two organizing principles, that of 'putting thoughts into a landscape.' The mnemonic architectures in Vasulka's tape are newsreels, photographs, and texts—memories of major conflicts of the 20th century—which are mapped onto shapes or objects that float above the landscape of the American Southwest or are continuations of it. The winged figure could be interpreted as Icarus or an Angel of Death, but for Vasulka he represents the metaphysical world, which must share the burden of responsibility for the violence and cruelty of human nature. Each segment is composed of three elements: the image-object that is to disappear, the image-object that will replace it, and a wipe that performs a syntactical operation of replacement or succession by masking one while revealing the other. The resulting visual drama is one of discontinuity rather than causal linearity. The segments are organized into six major movements: an introduction/European theater, the atomic era, the Spanish civil war, the Russian revolution, the war in the Pacific, and an epilogue which Vasulka calls the 'catharsis.' The movements are demarcated by a sound like the door of a great vault slamming shut . . ."

— Gene Youngblood

history set against and sculpted within the barren yet monumental Southwestern landscape, Art of Memory refers most specifically to the Spanish Civil War as the pivotal moment in shaping the historical events of this century. The black-and-white images of now-lost political figures, and images of war-torn Europe spread like movie screens through the desert take on a powerful poignancy as they refer not only to the loss of memory but also the final days of cinema.

Woody Vasulka worked more singularly on his highly complex, very evocative *ART OF MEMORY*. The video opus combines a score, an arid landscape and historical stock footage into a meditation on memory, militarism and media. Against a sun setting in the desert, images of World War II, the Spanish Civil War and others are figured into biomorphic 3-dimensional shapes, appearing as though vaguely familiar forms are bumping with our cultural heritage. The images are drawn from the collective media memory to examine the violence leading to the atomic age.

**Vasulka** arrived in United States in 1965 from Prague. In 1974 he turned from filmmaking to teaching media at State University of New York, Buffalo where he began his investigations into computer controlled video, building "the Vasulka imaging system". With his wife Steina he founded the Kitchen, an important interdisciplinary art center in New York. He has participated in many major video exhibitions and festivals around the world. Vasulka just returned from a residency in Japan and is currently preparing a major retrospective of his and Steina's work at The American Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

Although **both** of these works are single channel tapes, they give the impression of multi-disciplinary works. They evolve like musical themes and variations; their images come from many sources and play against a theatrical backdrop. Both artists think simultaneously in musical and visual terms, while they present very personalized explorations of the larger social sphere.

Ed Emshwiller first presented this work as a longer theatrical presentation combining live performance, real-time processed acoustical and computer music, and computer-controlled video on 16 screens and monitors. The Los Angeles Festival featured this version of *HUNGERS* last fall at the Japan American Theatre. As a video tape, the piece condenses the breadth and maintains the magnitude of the original performance. The title refers to many hungers: food, security, acceptance, mother, sex and power, each expressed poetically.

Mr. **Emshwiller** was artist in residence at WNET/13 in New York during the 70s and then joined the California Institute for the Arts' faculty where he serves as dean of the School of Film and Television. Numerous granting agencies including the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, have awarded him fellowships. His works have been shown in most of the major museums showing video and at many of the international media festivals. He continues to work in film, video, computer graphics and their combinations. Morton Subotnick is equally recognized in the field of new music, and also teaches at Cal Arts.

The Commission By Woody Vasulka. Camera: Steina. With Robert Ashley, Ernest Gusella, Cosimo Corsano, Ben Harris, Andrea Harris, David Ossman.  
1983, 44:55 min., color, stereo sound.

Applying for the first time his complex imaging codes to a narrative, Woody explores issues of art-making and sacrifice in this electronic opera. The tapes tells of the relationship between violinist Niccolo Paganini (played by video artist Ernest Gusella) and composer Hector Berlioz (played by composer/performer Robert Ashley), touching on the myth of the romantic and tragic artist and the power relationships of history. Centering on a commission which Berlioz gave to Paganini, The Commission is a precise and carefully constructed work in which effects are applied to specific narrative intent--the flip/flop of rapidly switching two image sources dominates the scene in which Berlioz hands the commission envelope to Gusella, and the scene of Paganini's embalming is given and ethereal quality with the Scan Processor. The Commission is an ambitious and pivotal work in developing a narrative language of electronic images.

Art of Memory By Woody Vasulka.  
1987, 36 min., color, sound.

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