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18th November 1990

Woody and Steina Vasulka
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Dear Woody and Steina,

It was a great pleasure to have the opportunity to talk with both of you and with Gene Youngblood at the Electronic Arts Conference in Sydney. You were very encouraging to my ideas and that really meant a lot to me, as I'm sure was also the case for other Australian artists and writers who met you. I much regret that I had to hurry back to Queensland and miss the rest of the week and your talks then. I learned a great deal from your acute analysis of video art and its astuteness and it was terrific to see such very strong and clearly directed video work.

You were kind enough to request a copy of my script and I'm sending that to you. It's rough, of course, with many half formed ideas and things I've also changed my mind about since then, especially on the issue of the ethics which perhaps I had too readily given-up. Anyway, such as it is, here it is and thank you for your interest.

The conference had some very odd aspects to it. Chiefly the siting. There was this relatively small group of people representing (and they knew it) something that had taken over the world and cancelled out all the old distinctions of life and art sitting inside this dinosaur gallery of the art-world. Hardly anyone from the traditional art practices was there and as a result one had the feeling of being part of an initiated esoteric elite who were marginalized from mainline art-practice. But the opposite was the case as we all knew. Yet the gallery setting again made me feel that I was part of something invisible to the art world. This invisibility of electronics is a peculiar aspect of Australian art.

I found it all very inspiring and wish I had time to review the conference for an Australian magazine but I am moving home to Europe in the next three weeks. So, sadly, it was the end of my time in the Australian art world which the

conference signalled. I shall be beginning my teaching in the North of England in early January which will be good as I shall also be supervising hands-on work by students, including such art forms.

I shall be in the States later next year for a conference and would like to make contact with you again if that is possible.

Roy Ascott is publishing an article of mine in 'Leonardo' on telematics in April next year (it's an OK article but too broad to be useful) and I hope to write more but would like some real practical experience now. Listening to Woody made me realize that it's hopeless to waffle on any further from a distanced passive standpoint, that it's only when you make at least *some* of this art that you can start talking about what is going on. Gene Youngblood's talk also covered the field with similar in-depth knowledge, though from a very different standpoint and I think that between the two of you you made many of us feel that we had to pull our socks up and think from a much more committed standpoint. Australia is still rather too laid-back and we have a tendency to over-generalize our ideas, to grab one flashy notion and over-use it rather than referring to the reality of what is happening. I think you reminded us of the need for empiricism in our theoretical criteria. (That's not a good word really nowadays but I can't think of another. It's hard to grab hold of this stuff.) I think I was also very well reminded by Woody of the responsibility that is involved in somehow learning to think about what is happening, overwhelming as it is, and to keep working in there, no matter what.

Steina's organization of her forms and their relationship to their sources was intriguing and powerful. It made me think again of how difficult it is to control any photographed material and bend it to the artistic will of the artist, to cut it and wrap it and shape it like sculpture almost and also how to control the inevitable tendency towards narrative that the raw material induces. Critics always talk about the internal space of video and film and computer screens but Steina's work brought home to me, because her work was so powerful, the physicality of what was happening in the art. There is an inevitable relationship with the space of the viewer outside the screens and they are affected by the internal constructs so that their own time and space is physically changed and warped by the video banks. The viewer can't escape, as it were. It does relate to the ethical issue which perhaps must always begin with the physicality of the viewer and their vulnerability and hence the effect of such forms of art on them. I was very aware of dynamic tensions which Steina's work set up and the necessity to position myself almost physically in

relation to the images in order to deal with their demands on me. I had to work terribly hard, in short. I liked that.

You mentioned someone who was doing work on alchemical language. Would it be possible for you to pass on this article of mine to him which is an analysis of some pseudo-Lullian alchemical images ? These calculating circles and tables incidentally are a primitive type of computer (truly) and he might be interested in this. Thank you.

I don't have an address in Manchester (or wherever) yet. The University of Queensland will pass on mail to me in England or better still my parents home address is
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I'll be in touch again. I'm very glad to be going home. Europe is closer to everywhere than here and I'm homesick anyway.

Please give my regards to Gene Youngblood. We've all had to rethink many issues after hearing what he had to say.

My good wishes for your work and I hope that your return to the States has been happy.

With best regards,



Urszula Szulakowska

Academic Aesthetics and Metaphysics in theories of Electronic Art: A re-evaluation

The Australian art-world has always over-committed itself to the form of the painting. A conservative art community to an extreme, the recession currently affecting Australia has only aggravated a long-standing reluctance to sponsor other types of art-practice. Despite the fact that Australian artists since the 1960's have had far closer contacts with international conceptual art and performance, as late as the mid 1980's, Australian critics and historians were defining the nationalistic character of the country's art in terms of landscape painting.

Eric Gidney questions whether the resistance to forms of electronic art-practice, in his case, specifically telematics is not due to the predominantly rural mentality of the culture and its land-bound, spatial consciousness, one not confined to the bush-dwellers but paramount also among its intellectual elite, often subconsciously. Australia lacked an industrial revolution historically and her industries tend to be primary ones. Hence, even among 'enlightened' groups of thinkers there existed through-out the eighties a grudging dystopia, some lack of sympathy with advanced technology. Examining the advanced art-criticism of the past ten years, it has predominantly centred on the 'crisis' in painting. Even photography was an addendum to this issue. Rarely did the new electronic forms figure significantly in the post-structuralist battle over loss of meaning and the possibility of self-identification in the contemporary visual arts. Writings on twentieth century art-forms were almost entirely confined to film theory and photography. They advanced significantly, alongside and almost independently of the squabbles over the role of painting.

For the past ten years the radical new electronic arts have gone their own ways, given mere lip-service by critics. Such artists were cast in the roles of absent-minded professors with fixed bees in their bonnets, devotees of Utopia, tolerated for their amiable enthusiasm but not a central issue.

Why? One must of course allow for the fact that initially most artists had problems significantly accessing the electronic forms except through institutions which brings us back to the issue of funding. Certainly it was partly because the potentialities of these forms were still in the process of being investigated, but equally because there was no way of talking about them within the negative discourse centred around the Great Academy of Painting. Electronic art was not dead, dying, over-coded, overloaded with meaning, suspect, fascist and depressive. Hence, there did not seem to be a lot to be said about it. It wasn't decadent enough to be appealing to the jaded criticism of the eighties. Electronic art forms promised to be optimistic, cheerful and healthy. Therefore, the best that could be done by avant-garde art-criticism was to issue archaic Leftist sepulchral warnings about the militaristic potential of electronic media for controlling a populace immobilized by flashy and facile display.

In fact, the real issue was rather different. It amounted to the fact that in the eighties there was no money in electronic forms of art which did not produce valuable commodities on the art-dealer circuit. Artists are economically pressured to produce work which will sell. Work that sells has a recognizable style and a handy identikit explanation easily absorbed by the audience. It is portable and fits into maximum two square feet on the wall.

Thus, text based conceptual forms received relatively little support by official art institutions and government funding bodies. Electronic art, including telematics, computer art, cybernetics, electronic music, film and video-related forms, etc. often produced neither a commodity end-product, nor a single logo-like style. Or rather, often concerned as it was with communication and information, ideas in short, it is not suprising that these arts have found more support in the corporate sector than in the government funding which is determined by academic aesthetics fixated on crafted objects.

Thus, in arguing about the aesthetic criteria appropriate to the different electronic arts the overwhelming effect of marketing on art criticism and practice must not be forgotten. The latter do not occur in a clear space of pure intellectuality.

Therefore, at the present time, largely still because of the funding system for these art forms the Renaissance academy all too often still provides tests of value for the electronic arts. Yet, paradoxically, many of these art forms have been noteworthy from the outset for questioning such cultural hegemonies which determine 'meaning' and 'value' in a text, code or icon transmitted as art. Telematic art, in particular, has offered a socially critical text in the very fact that its 'form' is supremely evanescent. It has proved more problematic to assess aesthetically than most of the other electronic forms which are still to some extent 'packagable'. However, video related electronic forms have also often occurred in a highly politicized space.

Telematics and video/computerized forms have frequently loosened visual and verbal signifiers from preconstructed, stereotyped and destructive meanings. In the eighties, perhaps even more than the art discourses associated with traditional material forms, the electronic arts were pre-eminently involved in a critical discourse concerning issues of language/land, European culture/Australian terrain, media/cultural tradition, body/space, gender, race, class and with the problem of Australian art seen as provincial and peripheral by the Northern hemisphere.

For example, Jan Birmingham's *Fourth Art and Technology* short-range communication arts project provided a re-assuring space of contact between groups of peoples of varying ethnic origins. They found themselves able to understand particularities of each others' backgrounds which would have, perhaps, been more difficult to obtain had they been physically present to each other and, hence, distracted by visual and aural signals. There is not time to mention immensely important international telematic art of this kind. Similarly, Simon Penny and a significant grouping of artists around him in Sydney in the late eighties focused all these radical critiques around a variety of electronic forms in his *Irrelevant Ethics* paper in his *Poetechinics* show at *The Performance Space* in 1988. Art-critics, however, did not take-up the issues Penny raised directly in Australia until perhaps the City as Art projects in the Biennale year in Sydney and Brisbane. the work at the City Art Institute through-out the eighties in promoting and

encouraging student work and sophisticated projects of a high discursive and aesthetic value are suprisingly little known among the Australian art community. The *Sydney Biennales* and *Perspectas* still show too little work of this kind in proportion to the vastly increased interest in it on the part of artists as they have gained access to such forms since about 1986.

The response to academic criteria by electronic arts was to eulogize electronic media on the basis of 'process', especially on an ongoing shared experience of the creative act by a group of artists. This should not be dismissed since it has been an essential characteristic of many, though not all, of the electronic forms, distinguishing them from painting (though not of film-making etc). But is this always necessary the 'de rigueur form of the electronic arts? Is the essential character of electronic art participatory, almost mystically so? Is it intended primarily for the artist(s) themselves, or is its nature communal, speaking outwards to an audience or even only to one single viewer? Can it not surely provide a more contemplative and solitary space of contemplation or even catharsis as individual performance work and artistic exhibitionism. Electronic space is surely just another space where anything might happen including more individually directed and closed work of private worlds which viewers enter discretely to share or act as seduced voyeur. Why do we have to be so puritanical about these new art-forms? I think that this community aspect is an immensely valuable potential of electronic forms and of course it does depend on what form we are talking about. The potential for audience response and interception is a unique aspect of computerized forms of art compared with the traditional owner/object, painting/sculpture forms. Nonetheless, art expresses many moods and experiences. It is interesting that such a more private, moody, even erotic work is now emerging as the number of artists using such forms increases, particularly as women and socially dispossessed groups get a chance to speak their outsiderism and their private worlds. I am thinking more here of performance and dance orientated work which inter-faces 'real' space and time and electronically constructed dimensions. Internationally, one of the first dance groups to really seriously experiemnt with inter-active forms was *Dance Alliance*. In Australia some of the

Western metaphysics in which the 'Real' was structured according to the polarization of self and other, inner and outer, fixed and fluid. This has meant taking on board radical ideas about temporality and space, other than the linear biological givens of nature (which was only a fallacy anyway. There being no 'external' nature). Theories of memory are reworked into this non sequential concept of time. All is in a sense in the present, in the one spot, all is a collage of moments, of equal value. In short, the paradigm of electronic art-practice is that of a topology, not of a sequence.

More than any other scientific idea lifted from mathematics and physics and applied to the arts in the twentieth century, the concept of a topology is proving to be the umbrella for subsequent artistic metaphysics. The exception is chaos theory which genuinely does introduce some new factors into the more traditional artistic metaphysics of this century. Chaos theory has reintroduced the super-multidimensional aspects of earlier twentieth century metaphysics, rather than dwelling on the net-working and planar aspects which topological theory, as espoused by Ascott, presented in the form of democratic space-sharing, a horizontal space rather than that dominated by the vertical, hierarchal icon of painting. Or rather, more than earlier theories chaos theory unites one of the severe dualities of Western conceptualisation, namely order and disruption. It suits one of the aspects of electronic forms in that it accomodates both the important notions of process and change which are central to its aesthetics, as well as laws of structure and fixed form which are the fundamental base-line a traditional academic criteria of value. Ultimately, though, one wonders how much chaos theory really tells us about what is happening in the art. I am biased towards thinking that linguistic theory still provides perhaps a drier but more specific explanation for the processes of much electronic art.

The fourth dimension and such Einsteinian related ideas have affected the theories of Cubism, film (Deleuze for example), Futurism. Sub-atomic physics is endlessly useful in promoting concepts of chance and play. Certainly chaos theory is, from one point of view, only another variant, albeit a highly specific one, of artistic Zen Buddhism. Alchemy, of course, always lurks around art-theory. There is something alchemical about all art:

earliest dance work of this sort was done by Nanette Hassall, of course. I might mention also some of the earlier installation work of Gary Warner. The Dance Umbrella in London in both 1989 and 1990 showed about a quarter to a third of the participants using inter-active electronic media in some way. Other international performance art includes the inter-active computer work of Jeffrey Shaw and Dirk Groenveld show at *Arts Electronics* in Linz in 1989.

Physics (bent towards metaphysics) has been plundered in quest of an apologia and explanation of electronic art. Further, artists and viewers become hypnotized by the structure of the tools producing the art-work, systems programmes etc. Certainly this has been a necessary part of the induction into electronics.

What was offered was sometimes a recall of past mystical practices, termed by Paul Brown recently as a 'cargo cult'. Within these syncretic, semi-scientific theories was an abandonment of positivistic views of onward progress and a sort of leap into the 'cloud of unknowing', of the play of random chance in particular, the idea being to lay aside the controlling artistic ego which had characterized historical art forms. Of course, this is not new. Earlier painters of the twentieth century had had such ideas, as well as those musicians and visual artists of the fifties in the United States influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

I am thinking here of Cage and his metaphysics or earlier Dada work, seeking super and sub conscious respectively, transcendence and imminence. Cage rhetoricized and, in fact, actually evaded facing technology directly, using it poetically, collage-like rather than really investigating its character. Earlier Dada prozaicised and directly intervened in the web of socio-political/technological discourse.

The current cloud of unknowing is rather different from these historical examples. It is a real symbiosis with high technology. The formless taking form. Mystic becoming material. Individual being, brain and body together rendered immaterial. In fact, the striving of the latter half of the twentieth century idealistically is towards monism, the ending of the ancient

all decent artists transmute their materials into something higher. It is certainly around in contemporary video work, as well as in computer graphics (which are the essence of alchemy with their slippery mutational qualities).

Such scientific theory mystified is part of the playfulness and the most serious, most earnest sense of adventure associated with discovering what electronics offers us. In naming an art form playful one instantly runs the risk of denigrating it. Art is not fun, art does not laugh, etc. That is yet another problem with the old academic criteria. To be taken seriously art must be solid, eternal and humourless. That will be a very long battle to be fought.

To define the form of the new arts may seem to be academic pettifoggery. However, it is necessary somehow to provide a more blanket theory for electronic aesthetics, not with the aim of colonizing the new arts, but as much in order to provide them with a defence against philistinism on the part of traditional academia. Nowadays all visual art if it wants a pedigree is given a verbal theory, that is a notorious fact. I am well aware of the backlash against the theoretical aspects of eighties art criticism by many contemporary artists, as witnessed at this year's Adelaide festival. Nonetheless, theory is necessary as an aid to understanding. Of course, intuiting the forms and their potential is the euphoric and creative aspect of interaction with electronics. But theory also provides artists with memory and history as a data bank and acts as a springboard for further tighter discourse with this form of art. It is also true that an artist can operate without much theory and theory alone does not substitute for dull art. Nonetheless, the best art of the present day is highly self referential, self critical and highly conscious of its own traditions and their problems. It is a dialogue, not a completed and fixed single presentation. That is the *Zeitgeist* of our times. Thus, a consciousness of theory is a directive framework, a tool of induction and should act as an aid to dialogue, to further interaction.

The alternative to the stablishing of theoretical criteria as guidelines for artistic practice seems to be a replay of psychedelic, pastiche neon, whoopy Disney Wonderland and

commercialism. (Many computer graphics, again as witnessed at Linz last year, though not all, are already are too often stuck within a rock video fairground). A problem for many artists is how to detach oneself from a rivetted fascination with all that a high order computer programme can achieve. The characteristic qualities of computer graphics seem to have become all too quickly established. The situation largely reflects the effect of media commercialism on artistic production, something which must be broken soon if computer graphics are really to progress. There are present in too many computer graphics a transmutational slippery slidiness which reduces to the same continuum advertisements, high art cartoons, logos, headlines, programme entries.

Is this characteristic really a necessary aspect, a given, of computer graphics? The best work of this type is still that such as Adam Wolter and Gary Warner have achieved in collaborating between computers and video in Brisbane on austere mathematical concepts such as the visual production of images based on fractiles. Part of their success is due to formal qualities such as the adoption of frame by frame drawn cartoons. In too many graphics it is the one form that endlessly mutes and transmutes and slides about. Wolter and Warner provide points of emptiness, shelves almost on which one can rest.

Of course, these observations of mine, I must admit, are perhaps coloured by the experience of the tradition of painting in which contemplative spaces and above all different rates of rhythm alleviate a fast paced monotony which viewers often find oppressive in contemporary moving graphics. Further, neon colouration is a sameiness which is not always necessary either. It looks too formulated. Its surrealism and 'magical' world tones are over-dominating. The best work in current computer art respects a certain discrete minimalism, such as that of Tamas Waliczky from Hungary. Minimalism was an aesthetic quality which the electronic forms displayed, really of necessity, in the earlier days of the still barely developed technology prior to Roger Rabbit.

Or maybe we just have to accept that the look of the nineties is Baroque, Rococco, at least. That has been coming up in the

body using tech to emphasize its presence, rather than being in competition with it or in subjugation to it as occurs in too much male performance work.

This issue foregrounds the two problems which dominated thinking about electronics in the eighties, that is:

How to control the means of control, ie. how to assure that the new media was made as widely available as possible and thus to assure some system of public accountability for how it was used.

Second:

How to evolve some mode of responsible interaction between the primary component of a human being, its own body and receptive, suffering body surface with the disembodied thought of high technology.

So have we found an answer to these? Well, as is to be expected in the nineties which promise to be decade of non-theory, the issues have been shelved in favour of a personalization of the electronic mode. They are outdated problems. The technology has become more accessible to artists and has lost its strangeness and quirky character. In fact, it is hard to remember the time before P/C's and public interactive *Telecom*, let me remind you that the turning point for general public accessibility was around 1985/6, albeit some forms and technologies eg. advanced telecommunications systems, electronic synthesizers, highly advanced computer programmes/video interface systems still demand a prohibitive capital outlay with the continual fact of obsolescence to be faced at the time of the investment.

The electronic arts are a fact. The technology they are based on is changing all of us. It is futile to argue about its possible worth by now, of course. We are all in symbiosis with the machine with or without our bodies, with or without our brains and with or without our democratic scruples. It's happened. But it'll probably take another generation to find the words to sort out what IT is. It is astonishing that Australia should have had to wait till 1990 for funding to hold a major public forum on this issue, speculating on the BIG BANG long after it has occurred, in spite of all the work done over the past decade in this area in this country, both in the arts and in other sectors.

traditional forms for the past two or three years in both Europe and the States. Maybe we simply expect all art to have an inbuilt easy entertainment value. We probably do demand this of the electronic arts since they have been most developed by media capital in the information and entertainment industries. Do we really want quiet contemplativeness as in the traditional forms of art, spaces to be and wander in.

The example of the most advanced electronic music indeed suggests that we do, such as the music at the recent *Musica Nova* festival in Brisbane. It was not easy listening, nor particularly expressionistic, but rather paced, cerebral and demanding. Why then do the visual forms adopt too often rock flash and thunder instead? Is it just sellability, or is it more, a natural mood of the times? Contemporary electronic music seems to have, on the whole, a much wider range of pace, style and structure, ranging from back to nature work to transcendent raga ambience, to gritty conceptual toughness. Maybe this is partly because music is protected somewhat, literally less on view than the visual forms, and less susceptible therefore to pressures from popularized media. In short, maybe the visual electronic forms are in the same situation as painting being profoundly challenged by popular culture. In which case it is as well to be extremely conscious of this fact and either provide a rigorous apologia against it, or more sensibly as is probably the stage of development which we are in, use popular culture in a creative way. This might well be successfully achieved by electronic visual forms since painting on the whole has rarely had anything very new to say in its interaction with them since the time of Dada.

Some examples of how this might be happening were on show last year in London at the *Contemporary Photographers Gallery* near Leicester Square where young artists were exhibiting computer based photographic work in an enormous range of styles and moods, but all consciously and, above all, hyper-critically exploiting that haunting look of 'difference' hard to define, hard to indicate which electronic visual work has at its best, an ambiguity, an intimation of some meaning, some dimension which is still perhaps best categorized according to Barthes 'third meaning', though Derrida's theories may provide

better words, once we all really come to grips with Derrida (uphill).

The flirtation with post-structuralism in theorizing the electronic arts has been relatively brief, however. Its chief period seems to have been the mid eighties around the visual poetics and the inter-active telematics work sponsored by Roy Ascott. What Ascott then took up and I'm not sure that it has really been sufficiently developed in relation to the electronic forms since his ideas needed extending out of the Romantic arena of universal cosmic consciousness and placing into a far more rigorous structure which would apply more specifically to a particular work.

Post-structuralism like chaos theory deals with inconstancy and transferability, however, dealing as it does with communicability, or rather, non-communicability it accomodates the recipient of the information. It was this that made the notions of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida initially so appropriate in dealing with telematics specifically and computer-interactive art in general. Deleuzian ideas about nomadic science when popularized in the late eighties similarly fitted in with both the theoretical and the economic and socio-political context of the arts in the new technologies. Problems were solved empirically, in intersecting networks of relations as suited the case, the mood, the chance, rather than by reliance on unvarying abstract geometricized paradigms.

However, perhaps the example of art theory in relation to painting was an unsavoury and off-putting exemplar for the electronic forms. Perhaps in order to express the enthusiasm which those arts generated there was a need for a more holistic and more optimistic theory of inter-action and of beingness, a more mystical orientation in order to encompass this feeling of 'otherness' about the new arts, of the sense of 'gift' which the electronic forms bring.....an intervention which is not human, not individual, clearly not divine either, but a context supplied from elsewhere and not entirely controllable. In short, the muted presence of the simulacrum machine, like but always alien, intimate but as yet barely contactable. The artist can still be a magus in the electronic arts.

In the London computer photography show the artists were largely involved in exploring the nature of the relationships between matter and electronic ether, body and machine and the Utopian and science fiction myths behind them. Baroque and humourously over-loaded as some works were, others were spare and ethereal and the range of forms would have satisfied the most conservative academic formalist and the most austere theoretician in the play and replay of codes.

A certain Baroquism has to be accepted as positive factor in the atmosphere of the times which is one of taking a breather from the economic and intellectual emergencies of the past. It is not entirely possible to continue the minimalism of the eighties, since that mood is dispersed and it is not recommended as the ONLY valid form for electronic art. Nor are we in an even older situation regarding minimalism such as that of the sixties where we are concerned to produce isolated sequences of samey units as a reflection of a cleansed technology. We are also probably through the 'Arte Povera' stage of electronic art as we have gained more control over the medium. For, as artists came to terms with the new technologies and learned to interact with them, they were at first, allowed to speak for themselves, their own grain as it were.

It has even had a sort of 'threshold art' stage, as still occurs in music where the performer seems to sit and dare the computer programme to come up with a combination that they can further improvise, deposited on a naked stage of loops and wires with a humbled, minimal personal interface with the audience.

Then there are the apocalyptic versions of this. Let us not forget Stelarc's amplified body and Japanese performance work with high tech...an austere Buddhism mingled with the neo-embryonic. The issue always seems to be either the de- or the re-eroticization of the body. It fits in with the new puritanism of the nineties. Sometimes this can be a monkish discomfort with one's own physique as against the impersonal technology around one. The best work of this kind still seems to be that of women performers and dancers who can present intense personal narratives which place forward the physicality of the

Whatever theoretical apologia we can find for the electronic arts, we should be grateful that they are watering the plane of arid academic discourse. It is to be hoped that main-line art-critics and electronic artists will finally make contact and landfall together.