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THE VASULKAS

Interview with Woody Vasulka

by Melody Sumner, for Crosswinds, in Santa Fe, November, 1992

Woody seemed destined to spend his life as a tradesman machinist — the craft he inherited from his father. But instead of constructing steel behemoths he found himself writing poetry and cooking elaborate meals for the crew. Stopping him one day on the streets of Prague (1962), Steina asked him to fix her motorcycle. They went to New York City and he found work as a multi-screen film editor. Now known as a leader in the development of video as an art form, Woody has also been instrumental in the creation of advanced digital and robotic instruments working closely with inventors and designers over the years. A “practical philosopher” he describes his work as a form of play. The machine was never his raison d’être but in the machine he finds artistic inspiration: The poet-machinist says, “I like metal — I have a passion for it which is very much physical. It’s the touch. I can communicate with it. I prefer metal over moss.”

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1936, Woody emigrated to the United States in 1964. Since his move to Santa Fe in 1980, he has completed three major works, The Commission, Art of Memory, and The Theater of Hybrid Automata. His Art of Memory must be counted among the most acclaimed and widely-exhibited works in the history of video art. This fall, Woody displays at Artifices Two in Paris his latest incarnation of an ongoing investigation, The Theater of Hybrid Automata which includes in its early stages collaborative multi-media works with other local artists: Steina, composer David Dunn, vocalist Joan La Barbara, and actor Tim Thompson.

— M.S.

How did you come to an interest in machines?

My father was a metal worker. Also, I grew up during the war in Czechoslovakia across from an airfield. My first interest as a kid was to take apart the most complicated machines of that era, the German fighter planes. My youth was spent in these graveyards of airplanes. You can find everything there to drive your fantasy crazy. Europe itself was a huge junkyard after the war — you could find weapons and human fingers in the dump.

The European cultural environment where I came from is so densely dependent on music and literature. What you talk about with your friends is culture. It's impossible to grow up without knowing the heroes of literature. Virtually everything you think about is derived from another source. Culture is what I would call an accumulation. But it's not the same way here in the States, which fascinates me. Every generation starts from square zero. Information is so decentralized. When I came to the States I had to divorce myself from the metaphoric language and old narrative forms and pay attention to new electronic tools. I had to rethink all my aesthetics.

It is difficult to express why technology became the most suitable method for my own work: Let me just say that there is a system of muses, and the muses allocate the tasks to the workers, and these workers — the artists — then work for the muses who have some concept of whatever the hell this is all about, and if they assign you to technology, they nurture you from childhood, and they groom you for the task, and eventually you are employed by some metaphysical corporation.

And your involvement with video?

After the war in Europe, any notion of experimentation with the media was avant-garde. All the modern Czech literature, poetry, painting, and also media, were astonishing. But the war and the political situation rendered it all useless. We didn't pay attention to media-based information, but became interested in ideologies, larger mythological or narrative systems. When I came to the States, I discovered that there was a whole generation of practicing artists called the Structuralists who paid attention to what the European avant-garde did. My basic introduction to video was through the concept of the electronic image being made out of organized energy. People call it abstract video but that is just a transposition of an aesthetic term from the world of painting. Abstraction wasn't our goal. Our goal was to create reality, a certain reality that would testify to its own electronic complexities. In the process of experimentation there are two conclusions: either it succeeds or fails. But if it's art, it has to succeed. There is no failed art.

But I don't want to live in the *necessity* of success. The whole idea about activity and success is very much Western. Any activity takes you into optimistic areas. That's why people in the West like to travel, or develop activities in which they prevent death, improve their finances, become mentally more healthy. Coming to Santa Fe for me was something of a retirement from duties. I found this isn't a community in which to compete, but to contemplate.

What in your mind is the difference between the modernist and the postmodernist aesthetic?

The modernist agenda was basically to innovate, to negate a very unbearable tradition. It was radical, and had a tendency to substitute ethics for aesthetics. The agenda of the left became synonymous with the agenda of the modernists. Its interest was *continuous* innovation — an eclectic mode was never permitted. And the breaking of all the traditions was proscribed. Whoever could operate in that environment could become a viable modernist.

Postmodernism of course is taking the elements that are already fabricated. I don't know truly what is post-modernist though — it is always described in different terms. It is not about generating new material, but reassembling what is already there. In some cases it's interesting but generally it is not. It might be interesting for the audience, I suppose, but not for the maker because makers are usually experienced in observing the world, they know more about where the images come from than the audience does. And artists want to create, they *need* to create new things.

What place do you attribute to new technologies in the conception of your work?

Today computers are decentralized, that means what we used to call sensors are now kind of independent computers, meaning that each sensor is beginning to acquire more and more ability to map, sense, etc. more autonomy. And the way these decentralized sensors inform the other parts of the system increasingly follows more organic patterns. This kind of systemic behavior leads to more humanlike performance which in some way challenges our established way of perceiving. I am returning again and again to how these new technologies manifest certain patterns of actions that we as people can interpret in either an aesthetic or a psychological manner.

The most prevalent victory of achievement of these systems employed in an aesthetic way is that they can provide a vast amount of variations. In music we know exactly what variations are, variations are used in many different art forms to examine a specific scheme or a particular pattern. This is one of the most valuable, the most captivating, but also the most crippling aspects of working with new technology. One can certainly become captive to these new variations because the variation is something one can observe again and again. It almost preempts ones interest to create the new.

It is probably related to learning. I think that what we are experiencing with the new technologies is something which is vastly closer *learning* than it is *producing*. Learning is the most intensive part of this process, maybe the most historically important part of the process.

Can you describe your latest creation, The Theater of Hybrid Automata?

The Theater of Hybrid Automata is a physical construction containing a pool of enlightened electronic tools. In its present state, it possesses the ability to communicate through the recognition and synthesis of speech, vocalizations, musical instruments, lights, and sounds, and robotic response. A singular feature is its complete internal interactivity — any gesture can influence any other element in the system.

I am trying to figure out how the rules of dramatic presentation are developed and what rules might define a digitally-organized space. It is basically a search for a new relationship between elements in space, between new elements which are now fully interactive because of the technology. The Theater writes its own drama as it plays it out. Like human interaction, the result is ultimately an unknown. I don't know what the rules are. I have seen glimpses, I have seen certain reflections of possibilities.

My interest is to make a binary model that contains physicality interlocked with the virtual performance. In the computer a sphere reacts as the head is moving in space. When the camera stops the graphic or virtual space also stops. The actual space is a physical environment inside a transparent cube (10 x 10 x 10 feet) which is to be observed from outside: the cube, functioning as a "stage," provides an exoskeleton upon which the various performing components of The Theater are affixed. I am in the process now of constructing an extremely sensitive and articulate interface between a live performer and the machine based on a physical reading of the performer's body. I want to set up a series of experiments to study the voluntary and involuntary gestural and spasmodic data in order to integrate a performance into the dramatic protocol of the Theater as a whole.

Its an exploration then, you don't know what is going to occur?

I'll tell you what it is: it is a system to be observed. One major ritual is called *calibration*. The camera simply scans the space and locates itself or looks at the six targets which are placed precisely at north south east west and above and below. In order for the machine memory to work, and for the machine to know where to look, it has to be orient itself. The representation of the space is aligned this way, because the program is written in the Cartesian six location representation. If the machine tells us it is looking east, it really has to be looking east, as far as the space is concerned. It speaks the truth about itself and in real time. A certain procedure for the audience is simply to watch the way this machine calibrates itself— puts itself in the space— how it comes to know what and where it is. This particular ritual is not

going to produce a complex narrative system. But all together, the ritual is highly narrative because calibration procedures are so telling. . . . it is a self-exploratory narrative system.

As an author I can induce various elements into it such as irregularity, which presents a question for the audience, or I can eliminate irregularity and leave only the expected. There are projection screens which can contain various images sampled from laser-disc or other sources. I may also induce some sort of a relationship between elements of the world from outside, from nature.

How does this differ from what other people call virtual reality?

Virtual reality is basically the viewpoint that you, as a participant, are inside the computer memory's space. What I am trying to do is make a view that is more allegorical. You observe rather than participate. This has very little to do with virtual reality directly, it belongs to the field of space control. Virtual reality controls virtual space but I am trying to control actual space. My work is rather theatrical, cinographic. It is a redefinition of dramatic space.

What are the implications for the human imagination?

Basically, it provides a critique of psychological drama as presented in film and theater. If you take the traditional genre of drama it is a psychologically supported system. I would like to find something that appeals to human perception from rather a different angle. Like what I am saying about people observing a psychological ritual that is unrelated to their own emotional conditions, their own psychological state. Something that not concretized by an emotional relationship between protagonists, but still represents a certain order or pattern that can be discerned.

I think by now we are all in search of new structuring. Music has gone through centuries of exploration of particular structures since the Renaissance up to the nineteenth century which allowed it to become very very perfect and precise. Minute emotional changes can be expressed mapped into a vast orchestra. Today I guess we know that we can't really repeat the past as far as the level of craft and the social circumstances that were available back then. We are in a desperate search for a new structuring, and so this effort in using technology is taken to be part of that search. The separation that people try to put between themselves and technology is quite silly. When you start working with technology it provides an environment in which your craft can be practiced.

And by the word craft, what do you mean?

I mean the code systems, all the code systems have to eventually express some kind of aesthetic summary or aesthetic definition which in itself then is called, maybe, art. The tools are different now, and the notation is different. We still don't know how the new patterning builds a dramatic form—because it is always easy to take the old dramatic form and use the new patterns to perform themselves through those old proven dramatic forms. Which unfortunately or fortunately will be seen as the new forms for as you know any innovation or modernist edge may not be ever be accepted by the general public. Historically, the whole effort of the modernists is vastly neglected, and all popular culture feeds on traditional dramatic systems.

How does your approach differ from science?

Maybe the method is somehow scientific, but I am not trying to find a specific answer, I do not have a specific goal. I am trying to discover how the performance of this theater might affect the observer, and I am trying to mediate it within the cultural codes. It is completely abstract in the sense that it is inconclusive. I am guided purely by curiosity and intuitive interests.

I think that computers came here to give us questions: The question of interest to me has something to do with space. Is space the place where extraterrestrials come from? Is space polytopic, multi-directional, noncentric? Hence are we freed from the limits of a Renaissance definition with perspective and such? Or, is the computer memory the true representation of space? It has no spacial qualities unless assigned. So this question — what is space — must again be asked. We are always talking about representation in art. What is the representation of space in a computer memory?

That is what I am involved in now. That is why I liked film: film is basically a representation of space made of light and shadow, very abstract, but still it represents hard realities — there is a certain power in that. Video too brought in waveforms as a materiality— the waveforms are a formation of energy and time which point to a type of universal event, they are not really on a human scale. But video never had the strength to criticize film. And theater, unfortunately, has somehow been pushed into an even more traditional position. I have never been particularly excited about theater. Anytime I go to experience theater, this crushing sense of *reality* overwhelms me. I don't like the crushing reality of the actual presence of people on stage, the way they behave, the dialogues, the stage settings. I know there have been experimental forms that have taken theater far far away from this crushing presence of the stage, but still it seems that for me it is too concrete. Also, it is unique that you have to go to the theater when the thing is being played.

I am a man of printed matter. I was born into the world of book, media, film, transportability — I like things that can be duplicated, things that can be represented, the immaterial. All my upbringing was conditioned by the mistrust of objects, unique artifacts, as tangible property. I can't overcome my bias against art as commodity. I have settled on describing my work as a form of *practical philosophy*, or rather a form of play in which one experience follows another without being considered as fixed or recorded. It suits me the way computers represent the world by code. My guess is that I feel a kind of a disbelief in reality. However, I still feel that theater could be more immaterial with a real physical presence of dramatic elements. Now I am working with that, building a kind of stage. Why I am doing this, I haven't the faintest idea. But obviously the muses decided, or one of them decided, that this is what I should do and so I am obedient.

What is new in the way a viewer receives what is created by these new technologies? The new technology in general offers the possibility for decisions to be made by the participant, the reader, audience, or viewer. As we know film for example is a proscribed medium you cannot alter the story, a book is more alterable, you can stop, go back and reread in different order. But film in particular is a very totalitarian mode of perception. You can see it only as the author proscribed it. Music is also proscribed because of the notation; however, there are ways of interpreting it so there is a little room for interaction. But in some ways the perfectly constructed new digital narrative space could provide for the viewer a completely personalized tour. What does this mean? To me the most interesting thing about art is the proscription by the artist — that kind of unique guidance. But it could be that the audience now might begin to have a more creative involvement in the art. This has all been badly explored. The spaces and concepts generated by the new technologies are still so basic that one cannot yet make comparisons to literature. Still I have grave doubts about non-authorship. I find that I am interested in a particular mind to read and be part of. This is a dilemma.

However, whatever we do really depends on the intelligent involvement of the viewer. Sometimes someone constructs an interesting work which is engaging and important at a certain moment but if the viewer misses that moment then the thing seems very primitive. And too, the articulation of the new tools is not as fluid as in some older forms. For example, the conductor of an orchestra moves a little stick just a little bit in a certain direction with a certain speed and a vast body of people interpret that with such minute precision that the result is stunning. To, in order to engage the viewer there has to be some level of interpretation so that the viewer

trusts that a cause and effect or the evocations of a mood are meaningful within the context of the work. It doesn't have to be *real*, but it has to be convincing. That is basically my struggle. As in traditional theater, unless an actor delivers a convincing gesture he cannot be trusted, he will not be communicating what he intends ... on the contrary, people will laugh at it.

Of course, the human mind-and-body system constitutes the most elaborate control-system ever devised — the codes of communication are so complex and refined, so elegantly crafted and executed with such a divinity of talent that we may refer to it as perfect, unequivocally. At the same time, it is a closed system where success is measured on the most familiar scale of reinforcements. Our dramatic sense longs for more surprising rules, more abstracted and open-ended genres of expression, for a representation of principles and tendencies from beyond our limited psychology. I'm actually not trying to de-psychologize space as much as I'm interested in making models for alternate states of awareness.