

Art That's Alive With the Meanings Of Military Junk

By RUTH LOPEZ

SANTA FE, N.M.

ON June 22, three days before Woody Vasulka's work was to be shipped to Japan for an exhibition, he stood in his cluttered studio amid packing crates, huge rolls of bubble wrap, cable of all sorts, dismantled computers and tables covered with tools going over last-minute details. Mr. Vasulka is a media artist, combining video, computer technology and traditional machinery in his work. It had taken him months to put everything together and relatively little time to take it apart. Something was amiss, but Mr. Vasulka appeared calm.

"The machines want to work," he said. "They just have to overcome human frailty."

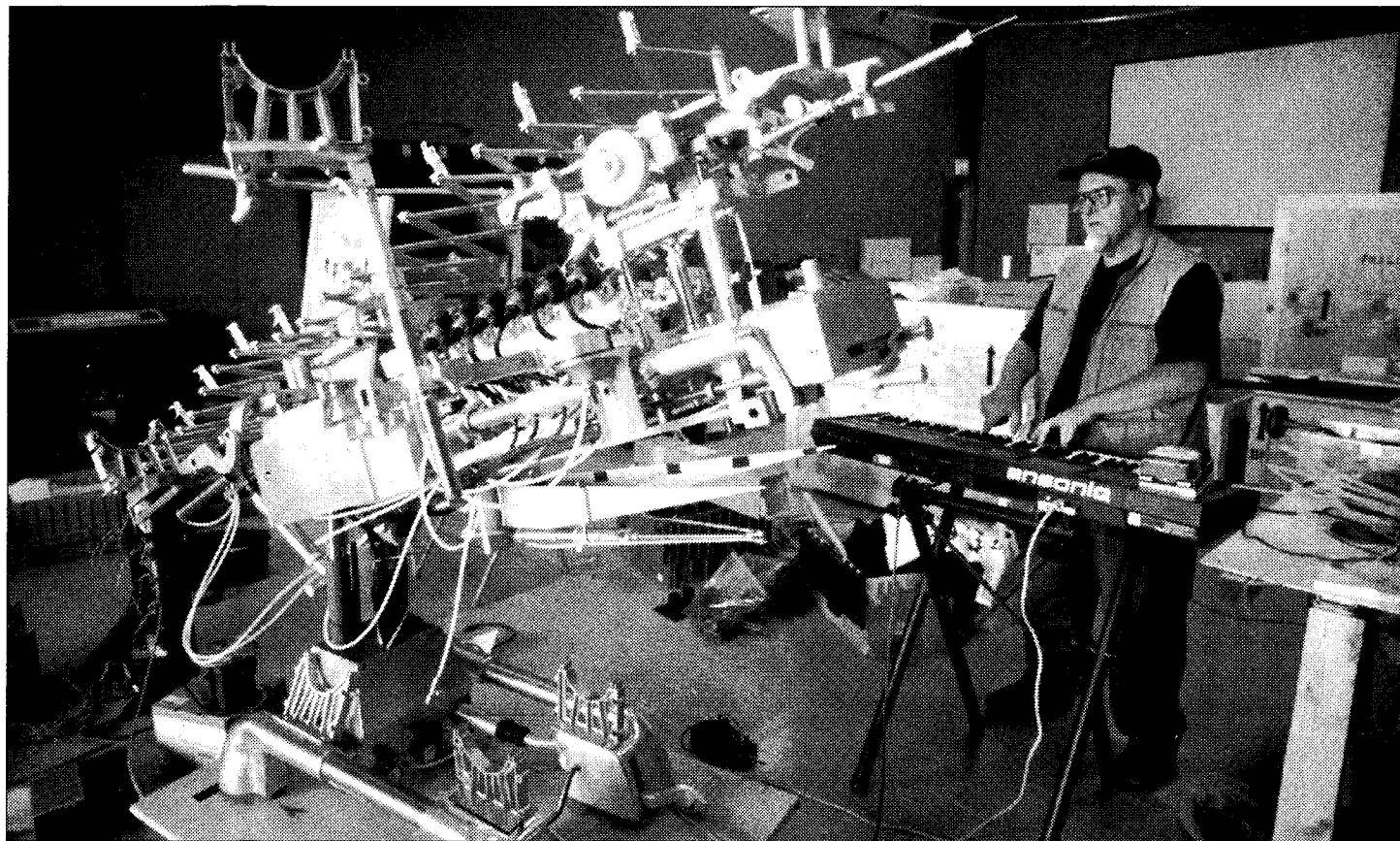
The machines, six interactive constructions fabricated as a series of tables, are made from discarded military equipment found near Los Alamos, N.M., where the

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nuclear bombs that fell on Japan were created. They turn, they twist, they reach out, they reach back, often eerily in response to motions of viewers. Each is accompanied by a system of projectors, speakers, screens, lights and sensors through which each type of behavior is controlled. The result, titled "The Brotherhood," carries overtones of the destruction the Japanese experienced from American raids at the end of World War II, although nothing was made of that point in the planning of the show or the catalogue that accompanies it.

The show, Mr. Vasulka's first on his own, opened at the Intercommunication Center in Tokyo on July 17 and runs through August. The media museum was established in 1997 by the Japanese telephone giant, N.T.T. Visitors to "The Brotherhood" Web site, www.concentric.net/~tables, will be able to view the show.

Choosing Mr. Vasulka for the gallery's first major show was in the mind of the curator, Gogota Hisanori, from the moment he stepped into his post two years ago and began planning exhibitions. Mr. Hisanori said he had been following the career of Mr. Vasulka, as well as Mr. Vasulka's partner in life and art, Steina Vasulka, after seeing their installations at the Whitney Biennial in



Laura Husar

IT MAKES MUSIC, TOO Woody Vasulka in his studio, operating "The Maiden With Fans," part of his first solo show, in Tokyo.

1989. The Intercommunications Center commissioned three new pieces to accompany earlier work.

During the chaotic week before an 18-foot-long truck arrived to take away 20 huge crates for overseas shipping, Mr. Hisanori was in New Mexico for the final push, preparing the text in Japanese to accompany

the exhibition. Because of the scale of the project, "The Brotherhood" had spilled out of its studio to a work space at the College of Santa Fe several miles away. Mr. Vasulka spent long days split between two locations.

"These are blue-collar artists," Mr. Hisanori said. "Sometimes media artists will do nothing by themselves. They have engi-

neers and special staff to do everything."

While it is true that the bulk of the creation of "The Brotherhood" stayed in Mr. Vasulka's hands, he would be the first to point out that he was hardly alone.

"This is no longer something I can claim as a private work," he said. "This is the first

Continued on Page 32

Alive With the Meanings Of Junk From the Military

Continued From Page 31

time I've reached beyond my individual capacity. One always thinks that one can do it all, but that's not true." Mr. Vasulka had to bring in experts, for instance, after he enlarged his concept by incorporating MIDI (musical instrument digital interface), a communications system that enables electronic musical instruments to interact with one another.

"There were so many walls we had to crash through," said Ms. Vasulka, explaining that the project included several computer languages. "In the old days, Woody could go in with a soldering iron and fix the problem," she said. "But if a code breaks, we are defenseless."

The Vasulkas, leading figures in the history of video art, were co-founders in 1971 of the Kitchen, the experimental media space in downtown Manhattan. Their collaboration started in the early 60's when they met in Prague, where Woody was studying film and Steina the violin. They married and moved to the United States in 1965.

In those days, Mr. Vasulka was scavenging industrial scraps off city streets. When the couple moved to New Mexico in 1980, their explorations continued, but Mr. Vasulka was now picking through the junk piles near Los Alamos National Laboratory. His installations began to take on a more sinister tone inspired by the machinery of war. He also turned away from making only video images and began exploring the relationships between objects and space.

For Mr. Vasulka, "The Brotherhood" is the expansion of an idea that began in 1990 with a construction called the "Theater of Hybrid Automata" (now "Table II"). That installation explored both actual and virtual space. The device at the heart of this construction is a celestial navigator, a piece of military hardware originally designed to deliver a deadly bomb load somewhere off in the heavens.

The two installations that followed began to take on the structural military intentions of the original machine, but benignly: for Mr. Vasulka it was a way to examine the mind of the military designer or, as he put it, "the male idea" of the machine's destructive power. The original "Brotherhood" (now "Table III") was built in 1994, and its main component was a plotting device that

An artist is fascinated by the 'discreet antagonism' between art and science, and by objects in space that have 'some self.'

once charted air interception. This sprawling installation is an interactive, computer-driven construction surrounded by five large screens. Mr. Vasulka repositioned the circuits to project computer-generated imagery onto the screens, which are driven by the plotter.

Over the last year, Mr. Vasulka has been preparing the new tables for Tokyo. He calls "Stealth" ("Table IV"), a flashback to the 60's when he became bored with the cinematic frame. "The Scribe" ("Table V") is a code-breaking network for transferring linguistic data from one medium to another. Using a pneumatic device designed by a studio assistant, it consists of a video camera that locates words in a book. A robotic arm turns the pages.

"The Maiden With Fans" ("Table VI") is probably Mr. Vasulka's most intriguing construction. A long metal creature, a cross between a giant praying mantis and a dinosaur skeleton, rises out of the base of a hospital operating table. Ms. Vasulka will direct the "Maiden" with a computerized violin on opening night.

In his artist's statement, Mr. Vasulka says that the theme of his installation is male identity and mankind's compulsion to reorganize nature. "The Brotherhood" neither argues for a reformist agenda nor defends a male strategy," he wrote. Later, he added, "I think art should be as far away from life as possible."

Mr. Vasulka's intentions are far-ranging. He is fascinated by the "discreet antagonism" between art and science and contin-



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SCAVENGER Woody Vasulka, in his studio in Santa Fe, N.M., with one of his works put together from military junk.

ues to examine objects in space that have "some self or independent sort of expression."

But as "The Brotherhood" neared completion, what seemed to concern the artist was the strange situation with, as he put it, the show business aspect of art. His bigger commissions will come with bigger expectations.

"I never believed art should be expensive," he said, clearly overwhelmed by the cost of resources during the last few months. "I seem to be facing an industrial involvement with logistics of organization, machines, tools. I don't think that's the right direction. If I could find an articulate group of Luddites, I would be interested in joining them."

But that could have just been fatigue talking. For now, Mr. Vasulka will have a show in Tokyo at a time when many galler-

ies in Japan have closed. How the economic situation in Japan has affected the art world there was very relevant during that last hectic week in the Vasulka studio in New Mexico. Mr. Vasulka was weighing where to trim costs, at the request of the Intercommunications Center, and decided that the packing material for the delicate equipment was not the place to do so. Despite all the pressures, Mr. Hisanori said he was pleased with the project. His biggest concern was moving the crates through customs.

"Media art is not yet popular in Japan," Mr. Hisanori said, adding that the Government thinks machine imports should be taxed. Each time it is a small battle to convince the officials that the material is for artistic, not commercial, use. That the material being used is military scrap will only complicate things.

Mr. Hisanori said that to the Japanese

viewer, Mr. Vasulka's works might seem like "grotesque handmade machines" and he hoped that the exhibit would challenge the notion that technology is always good.

That the show might disturb viewers would please Mr. Vasulka. "Art should not provide a kind of comfort," he said. "Art should be draining you and drenching you."

Mr. Vasulka and his team of five assistants will remain in Tokyo for the length of the exhibition. Between all the systems — computer, pneumatic, optical, mechanical — there is plenty of room for trouble.

"We have to kind of sit around and watch it," Mr. Vasulka said. "It is now complicated enough to fail, and since this was all engineered on the kitchen table, one has to be aware that it's not like you put a picture on the wall and just go home. The whole exhibit lives with you. It is part of your nervous system." □