

Interview with Woody Vasulka  
by Chris Hill  
May, 1992  
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CH: You came to the U.S. from Prague in 1965. What artistic agendas did you bring with you? What did you find here?

WV: My major education was in film, from the film school in Czechoslovakia, where we learned a coding system to disguise metaphorically the criticism of the government. I was of course infected by the modernist movement, which was left-oriented, and especially affected by the early avant-garde, Mayakovsky, Vertov, and all the people around early cinema and the poets. They were the major influences on almost an entire generation. We did believe in socialist ideals of course. The post-war (World War II) was really a new world order. It was very much into the leftist agenda, especially because the right was destroyed by the war. Remember, Munich was brought out by the Communists and leftists and the intellectuals as the greatest betrayal of the 20th century. So the idea of building the society that was to criticize the West was the whole idea of Soviet Communism. Suddenly there was a new man, Soviet man, that could give a lesson of social brotherhood, proper behavior and social justice to the West. This was part of my upbringing.

When this came to a crisis in the 50s, when I was coming of age, we all had to develop strategies of how to criticize the government pictorially or to determine how the narrative system could survive and remain critical. In the film schools, the challenge was to develop a metaphoric language. I didn't have time to go back to materiality or to the machin—the cogs and wheels that modernists had practiced through the Bauhaus and elsewhere. The major narrative interest at the time [the 1960s] was very similar to Hollywood's—illusionist—in order to portray a social situation. I was interested in the early modernists' preoccupation with machines, but my interest remained dormant while in Europe.

When I arrived in New York, this wasn't the agenda at all. The 1960s were in progress. A version of the structuralist movement was emerging but I was skeptical, because we had a real avant-garde in Europe. The American avant-garde seemed like a second-hand attempt. It took me a while, a couple of years, to recognize that the new element in the American avant-garde was technology, especially electronics...I was disoriented. I was working with electronic sound through Stockhausen, and there were

other influences. I was willing to give up film because it wasn't leading me anywhere. I was working within a cliché of film, educated in film, and already had a certain style. I was stuck there and so was ready to give it up.

There were two influences at that time. The first was the social avant-garde, not so much the art avant-garde, but the sexual or transsexual avant-garde, which Steina and I were completely struck by—the American decadent movement. So we went around with the portapak and shot endlessly—theater groups, performances, various events, dialogues [which is documented in the tape *Participation*, 1969].

The second influence was of course technology. But I had started with light. I still felt that light and shadow were the agenda, the typical filmic agenda...So I started to work with stroboscopic lights as discrete events. I understood there was something in discreteness of the frame, a flash, a quantum. Then I encountered video, and understood that with video there was a different principle that would negate film, or extend film, or re-structure film. I gave up film overnight. I went into working with video, which was completely undefined, completely free territory, no competition intellectually—on the contrary, it was rejected right from the beginning by the theorists and philosophers of film. So it was a very free medium. And the community was very young, naive, fresh, new, strong, cooperative, no animosities, generous, kind of a welcoming tribe. So we ganged together east coast, west coast, Canadian east and west coasts, and we created overnight a spiritual community.

This movement was mediated by two influences. First, the portapak, the first ever portable system [which was comprised of a camera cabled to an open reel-to-reel 1/2" videotape recorder strapped on one's shoulder] which made this closed-circuit 60s experiment in television/video into a national movement. And second, the possibility of generating images by non-photographic/filmic means. No longer was the camera necessarily carrying the narrative codes. It was a very optimistic period. Between 1969 -73 I produced synthesized images, either using feedback [an effect which usually appears as infinite mirroring/tunnelling, obtained by pointing the video camera at the monitor itself] or using various other techniques or video instruments. Steina gave up her violin career and went full time as well. We happened to like the same way of making pictures. But later in the 70s when all the ideals about the new vocabulary and the new syntax had tempered down, video migrated toward the gallery, festivals, closed circuit

special purpose, distribution... and migrated back into that middle territory between the camera and new principles of imaging. So that's the 70s.

CH: You've talked about utopianism being characteristic of that period of time. What were its components?

WV: First there was an image that came through drugs and video, synchronous forms, from the feedback or mandala. This idea that you can perform an entirely metaphysical principle—that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century in the West, when the influence of Eastern metaphysics came through Germany, France, Switzerland. There was an interest in channeling a stream of new consciousness through Western culture. The idea emerged of a new society that would be based on a new model. It would not be based on Marxism, which describes an antagonism between classes, but rather on a drive for personal enlightenment, which of course Communism had also tried to incorporate in some ways, as a pseudo-religious possibility... So this idea of the possibility of transcendence through image as an actual machine-made evocation created a counterpoint, or a binary union between the image and mind. Some thought of this as a healing process or meditation, or others, like us, as a re-structuring of one's consciousness.

The war [World War II] had wiped out these interests in Europe. Suddenly in the United States they reappeared in the period of the 1960s. The synchronous image—its performance, its form, its behavior and one's own self-processing, self-improvement, or self-alteration. This seemed like an ideal tool. If you read or talked to people who constructed the video machines or to those who discovered processes accidentally doing experimental work, they reported this immediate identification with the image. And so along with these other conditions—alternate lifestyle, anti-war movement, easier economical set ups for producing these machines and for living— this no-cash economy was really something unique, and our whole generation took great advantage of it. Suddenly there was the possibility of changing this society, not only through drugs and communal life and anti-establishment movements, but also through technology. And there were other advocates like Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, and Timothy Leary who pumped this ideological stuff into the whole situation. So the utopia, a restructuring of society in which the exploitation and evils would be moderated, became possible...

CH: One thing in particular about your work, especially in the 70s, is its examination of sound and image, not as equivalences, but in the same terms, common units, fundamentals from which to build a vocabulary perhaps, or with which to challenge cinema. You and Steina both represent formal education in music and image structuring. Say something about your work with sound and image.

WV: Probably 90% of people that developed video synthesizers had formal interest in music—either directly like Steve Beck who came from the tradition of music education, or others like Eric Siegel, who came from the scene, and the 1960s were driven by music. Each of their instruments contained some circuits which were modulated by sound. Sandin confesses that of course the model for his instrument was the Moog instrument. And Don Buchla had immense influence on these video instrument makers. What was called the "synthesized" image, is now called "abstract." It does not have its own genre of presentation. It never developed into what we envisioned as an autonomous, poetic form. MTV has achieved something related in a very crude form, as a mercantile interest. All the genres that were based on tradition of the presentation of light like the Lumina, or Scriabin and all his acoustic and optical interests, and the audio-visual aesthetic that the French would dream of, were never realized. There is no historical audio-visual genre...The unity of materials as we called it. What we were pointing to was the simple fact that sound could influence picture and both are defined simply by frequency, or voltage change in time in a waveform organization. So the organizing principle of this new material, voltages and frequencies, was in a unified code under this new synthetic possibility.

None of us would introduce new compositional principles. Music was very strong in composing, and the syntax of film was strong in composing with story or narrative units...In our cause we never pretended composition. All our works are linear, in the form of demos, bringing certain artifacts or phenomenologies out. Sometimes we arranged them with certain story lines or with a certain continuity, but they were never intended to be composed. It's only later when we come to the vanity of aging men, that's when the composition comes up again. That's about cultural competition, because you can't convince anyone with demonstrations. You have to kind of challenge the cultural hierarchy and you can only do it through composition. And there is self-irony in that because I don't believe that there can be a compositional breakthrough, I just don't believe that our generation has that ability. It was truly exercised in the 19th century so

brilliantly, if you look at history of music and of how composition came to such mastery...This was our fate, to bring those processes and take them from the technological environment and to bring them closer to art, from the technological to the aesthetic. And I think if we will ever be remembered, it will be for making the transition between these two points, and we volunteered for this because we found it most interesting.

American art is still very alien to me; I am still a foreigner. I have no interest in American art because it comes from different needs...But I like the people. I like the practicality. I like the way they bring new systems out and new structures out, and those social interests should be supported. I still don't understand why Americans support forms of innovation and experimentation. I have no clue, because because they never use it practically. For example it never appears in television. Yet there is always a small enclave somewhere, understood to be an essential part, at least until now, of the creative activity. So I am very grateful for Americans letting us do this...

CH: About the rasters [the video screen, where the video image is "written" by an electron gun], how were you attracted to using specific instruments to explore the (de)structuring of the video frame?

WV: ...What it meant to us both was that all the change in the image, the reorganization of the image, would be achieved by an instrument, not by manipulation from and by the outside. This is what separates us basically from the earlier 60s practitioners, namely Nam June Paik, whose interest was to deflect the TV image for pragmatic reasons. At that time there was not much knowledge about how to reorganize the television signal. There was no know-how. It required another step in terms of developing apparatus and also an ideology, to re-structure the image. It had something to do with purity; it was an ethical issue. We would never take a magnet, like Paik, and place it on a television set. The furniture of television was such a burdensome idea; we would disregard that as part of our practice whatsoever...

I would never touch Paik's instruments, which were designed to perform a social critique of the image. He would take a famous person and distort him. It was a Fluxus idea to attack the bourgeois ideal of proper delivery of the image. It was a subversion, a contextual subversion. This would not be permitted in my ethical interests. I'd rather wrestle with the gods...so we tried to avoid completely the social context of iconic presentation.

Eventually it crept in in another context, in the context of the "scene," which also broke rules. But we never associated these events with the TV tube. It wasn't only us, it was also the religion of those others working with the signal, to disregard the existence of television sets which was so dear to Wolf Vostell and Nam June Paik...

We were never interested in television. We didn't know it, we didn't grow up with it. We didn't like it...We never had to associate or disassociate ourselves from what's called American television. We did not have a set until 1969; that was the first television we watched in America.

The biggest shock to both of us regarding video and film, but especially to me, was that video had frames. I didn't know that initially because the phenomenon is well hidden behind the frame of television. But soon we found out, through a broken cable, that there could be a drift of frames in video. We always used a matrix of monitors—by accident we got 6 monitors at first and everything that we ever watched was related through these monitors. This idea of a time frame on multiple screens becomes so powerful. When the frame starts drifting horizontally within one monitor you see that this frame has a vertical and horizontal boundary. Of course it is made by timing elements but the frame is very evident. I understood that video was designed to be an imitation of film, and it was designed to deliver one frame after the other. They couldn't deliver an entire frame in one piece so they scanned it, but the idea of a framing system was preserved. And that's how narrativity was carried on or was translated from film to video.

But as soon as you make feedback, you take the interest with the frame and put it completely in a different category. You see then that there is a systemic behavior which becomes dominant, and you see that there is something that the medium has to say regardless of whether it has a frame or not. So there was this idea of feedback and later our investigating the heterodyne process, an interference of two frequencies. The television set is already a set of frequencies, and when you put any additional frequencies into that system they start interfering. This was the basis of our first synthetic work. It was not recordable, so we re-scanned it [with a camera off of the monitor and recorded that image].

But Paik and others had found these principles in the 60s already. They understood that there was the TV signal and in addition there were interference possibilities. We tried to specify that those artifacts [image interferences] were our interest; the other part of TV was not. American art

is always interested in the confrontation with TV. TV became the centerpiece of the American avant-garde. It still is. It's a monster breathing down everyone's neck...

We were very taken with the American politics, with the First and Fifth Amendments. But we never mixed it with our video. We worked with public access; we were the techies there. We saw the Attica riots and the response with video...but we never associated it with what we were doing. It was a related activity, and we were perfectly happy to work with those who had that vision. It was exciting, but it never entered into our video.

CH: So how did you come in contact with the Rutt-Etra instrument [Rutt-Etra Scan Processor developed by Steve Rutt and Bill Etra, 1973] or Bill Etra?

WV: Well, Bill was a student at NYU and he was a natural... He was playing with oscillators, his thing was banks of oscillators, which introduces the process of heterodyning. It's a basic synthetic principle in which one timing system interferes with another timing system, and since the energy and time are interplayed, aesthetic structures or other structures are formed. So his interest was exactly in a line with our interests. But he went directly into the building of the instruments.

CH: So did he know of your work before he built the instrument? I am trying to get an idea if these instruments were designed to respond to individuals' aesthetic projects, because the Rutt-Etra played a very important role in your work.

WV: We were probably not directly influential on overall concepts. We were influential in a specific way. You see, when we asked George Brown to build a special tool, like his switcher [Video Sequencer or Field Flip/Flop Switcher, 1972] which was designed in fact to do A and B stereoscopic work or the multikeyer [1973], they were very specific tools. But if you look other tool makers, they were concerned with general use. You see, they were toolmakers more in the tradition of music, who wanted everyone to play the violin. They disseminated their tools; they really believed in changing society by providing an unbelievable instrument that everybody could play. We were more exclusive in a sense...For example, the multikeyer had a very specific purpose—we wanted to have multiple cameras that could be collaged together and we needed that tool to do it because we knew it could be done...We got completely interested in

personalized images, not generalized ones, and synthesizers were exactly against our vocabulary. We never used the term in our own work and we never wanted one. We never bought one until the mid 70s.

With the Rutt-Etra, we looked at it when they were building it. We were right there when they made the prototype, and were playing around with it and it wasn't very interesting, because what it was doing these wavy images. And everybody was striving for symmetry which drives both of us crazy. So we were just watching it. But then we saw that we could make objects. It could be used for a very specific vision and we said, we want this one. So we went to Buffalo and taught a class in the summer, and with that money we bought one.

WV: Within this type of working proximity, our function was to take a principle already in existence, perhaps in science or technology, and bring it over to other people associated with film or art, moving image art. Our function was always mediating, it wasn't the true inventing...Of all our friends, true invention probably comes back to Don Buchla's time when he did voltage control, and decided which signals should be the audio signals and which should be the control signals, so the whole system was conceived as a signal and sound architecture. That was a breakthrough. But in video, video mostly adopted existing principles...

CH: But the other thing about the Rutt-Etra was that it seemed to allow you to articulate some issues having to do image architecture, looking at 3-dimensional space in a 2-dimensional field.

WV: There were two significances. First, film could be taken off its boundaries. Film always presents a frame; the Rutt-Etra was a tool that took the frame off its boundaries. That to me was very important but no one else has ever commented upon it. Because I believe that once you take the frame outside of its filmic boundaries, the filmic truth disappears; it is no longer a window to the world. All the discussion about film being truth is taken away in an instant.

CH: There is another way in which the Rutt-Etra connects between your early investigation of tools and your narrative work in the 80s. Steina's work is often concerned with landscape, at least that is an identifiable image. The horizontal drift seems to be an extreme important line of investigation in her work. It adds movement; it also becomes part of the



metaphor of landscape. And Woody's work with the Rutt-Etra seems to be this other way that space is introduced into this investigation.

WV: You are absolutely right. But I think that Steina's major work is the Buffalo period, the what you called snow tapes. She creates a system of something observing itself, reporting on itself interactively. It's very sculptural, actually installation. The rest of her matrix work is based on a horizontal pan. In the matrixes she used the horizontal because that is where they are effective. For her, the instruments are the performers. She always used more instruments than I ever did. She creates polyphonic structures, multichannel compositions.

CH: Her structures seem to be very musical to me. And it seems that some of it has to do with a certain kind of composition or layering, it seems more like music than any other visual system that I can think of. But this seems to be a shared interest with you as well because you are also interested in rendering space...

I want to get back to this idea of feedback. It was a machine artifact that also had resonance in social ideals. And there is this notion in your work that the work should be in a dialogue between the maker, the tools, and the audience. You have soundtracks telling the viewer what you're doing... You founded the Kitchen so that there could be such a place where this could happen. Could you talk about that?

WV: There are two components to the idea of feedback. First, what's surprising about feedback is that it cycles without your presence... Feedback is an autonomous system, almost like an organism.

Second, regarding our bringing things out in a didactic fashion. Probably this comes from the musical past or scientific demonstrations. In our work we encountered these scientific projects that were aestheticized... We all engaged in explanations. We wanted to know how to make it make sense, to develop a vocabulary, we wanted to formulate it. There were cliches about information at this time... Both of our upbringings are socialist and concerned with knowledge. We were interested in the transmission of knowledge from one place to another: that was the mission of the time. The mission was not to compete with paintings, it was to get this knowledge and bring it to people... Once you bring that knowledge to people and they have no interest in maintaining or possessing that knowledge, this is the end of utopia, a Don Quixote syndrome...

CH: One of the features that distinguishes even your narrative work of the 1980s [*The Commission*, 1983; *The Art of Memory*, 1986] is that the tools you use to interfere with the image are visible, and also in Steina's landscape work of the 1980s [*Lilith*, 1987]. It's not an easy discussion with most audiences—how you use these tools. You can't expect a general audience to understand how those instruments affect the image without considerable orientation. But as soon as an audience does start paying attention to what's in the tapes, it's clear that you're not hiding anything. And maybe you do have this in common with the people who went out in the streets with portapak to work with others to develop their own voices, to represent themselves on TV. This sensibility seems to have been lost with the generation of artists in the 1980s and since, who gambled on TV, because TV will not reveal itself to you, and certainly it will not reveal its commercial structure.

WV: ...In order to present illusionist work [like narrative] there has to be the means to present it which are real, mechanical. This is also true of showing an image which is abstract in form. Its image is not there to deceive you but to reveal the means of making it. It's honesty, I'd like to think. The system is a participatory process in which tools give you abstract material, and you're there maybe to form it, but the tool and you have the same significance. We always called what we were doing dialogues with the tools. Sometimes we said that the tools were our teachers...

We realized that tools, and later the computer, incorporated all the styles of art; they performed endless variations by changing one parameter; they were the art stars...We were completely infatuated with how the tools actually emulated artist-thinking, especially within the modernist tradition, minimalism...See, it is a very strange feeling to realize that Boolean algebra incorporates the photographic principle negative/positive pictorially. It brings you negative or positive images by inventing its table and it has all kinds of complements and keying and all those things we had to struggle for in photography and film and video. It is pristine in the Boolean table of Boolean primitives. In this same way wave forms are called primitives—triangle, square and sine waves. Scientists call the wave forms primitives, and the Boolean table is the same. These basic codes participate so willingly and so inspirationally in the summary of art concepts of the 20th century. This may be an exaggeration, but we saw the tools produce structures that we didn't invent...This education was perhaps the most powerful experience of this period. We got this strange education and we felt that knowledge had

to be disseminated. So we became didactic and we sent it all over. And at one time there was this great dialogue. Today it's not about transmission of knowledge. It's about something else.

CH: Steina was talking about open forums being common in the 60s in the U.S.—like you could walk into the WBAI radio station in New York and converse about art or telecommunications on the air...Was the Kitchen like this?

WV: No, the Kitchen was a live audience test laboratory (LATL), sometimes with practical purposes, like testing a new microphones system or an interactive environment...It was taken over by the needs of the New York scene. We were not dogmatic about it, so the Kitchen became a presentation space for performance, dance, music, theater, and video. Video was always there but it was not dominant. There were open screenings each week...

CH: You describe it as including an audience as part of the send/receiver paradigm?

WV: Running the daily operations were Dimitri Devyatkin and Shridhar Bapat. There was almost a religion about disseminating information...it was an activist period. Everyone was trying to disclose the utmost secrets of systems, systems thinking and performance.

CH: How did Howard Wise's gallery function at this time?

WV: It was an inspiration. In the late 60s he exhibited technology and art. His track record was amazing. But he'd closed down his gallery before the Kitchen opened. He had reincorporated as Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), which became the sponsor for the Kitchen when we went to the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) for money. The Kitchen was an interesting phenomenon; it was symptomatic of this period. We fixed up the Mercer St. space...and then it sood empty for 2 weeks and we got paranoid. Doesn't anyone want to use the space? Then it started filling...Musicians wanted every Monday, then Tuesdays too...We felt so lucky; little did we know that the musicians had no other place to work out of than the Kitchen...New York always makes what it needs. The Kitchen became self-programmed. They'd come and we'd say, yes, here is a time for you. And anybody actually could perform there. It had a vast repertoire.