

Woody Vasulka on *The Theater of Hybrid Automata*

Today computers are decentralized — what we used to call sensors are now almost independent computers, meaning that each sensor is beginning to acquire more and more autonomy to map, sense, and direct. The way these decentralized sensors inform the other parts of the system increasingly follows more organic patterns. Since this kind of systemic behavior leads to more human-like performance it begins to challenge our established manner of perceiving. These new technologies manifest certain patterns of behavior that we as people choose to interpret in either an aesthetic or a psychological manner.

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The only obvious and indisputable achievement of these new technologies seems to be the machines' characteristic of being able to provide endless strings 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, most captivating, but also the most crippling aspects of working with new technologies. One can certainly become captive to these new variations because a variation is something one can observe again and again and it almost pre-empts one's interest in creating the new.

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

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It is difficult to explain why one chooses a nontraditional method of creative involvement. I might just say that there is a system of muses, and the muses allocate tasks to the workers, and these workers — the artists — work for the muses (who have some concept of whatever the hell this is all about). The muses assign you to the craft — in my case the use of technology — they nurture you from childhood and groom you for the task, and eventually, against your will, you are employed by some metaphysical corporation.

As for the purpose of the new technologies, I think that computers came here to give us many questions: The question to me has something to do with space. Is space the place where extraterrestrials come from? No up and down, right and left, north and south. Is space polytopic, multi-directional, and non-centric? Hence are we freed from the limits of a Renaissance definition? Or, is the computer memory the true place for a redefinition of space? It has no spatial qualities unless assigned. So this question — *what is space?* — must again be asked.

One of the reasons I like film is that it's basic representation of space is made of light and shadow, a very abstract way — there is a certain power in that. But I am a man of printed matter. 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 eventually on describing my own work as a form of practical philosophy or rather a form of play where one experience follows another without being considered as fixed or recorded. The event marks itself historically. I guess I am most certainly captive of a process which assumes heraldic ethical proportions — I'm sure there must some nasty label for it. I was born into the world of book, media, and film transportability — I like things that can be duplicated, things that can be

represented. It suits me fine the way computers represent the world by code. I enjoy the ephemeral, the immaterial. My guess is that I have a kind of inherent disbelief in reality. I still think that theater could be immaterial with a kind of a real physical presence of the dramatic elements. Now I am trying to work with it, building a kind of stage. I am very confused about what this all means. But obviously the muses decided, or at least one of them decided, that this is what I should do and so I am obedient.

Right now my theater is simply looking at itself. But I have plans to include human beings — to build suits they'd wear with a complex system for detection of motions, gestures and body tensions. Imagine an actor or a protagonist who could feed into a system that records and instantly retrieves the performance. We learned from the laser disc that between each frame, between each gesture there is a micro dramatic structure that might be further developed.

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The new technology offers a set of decisions that can be made by the participant, the reader, the audience or the viewer. Film, for example, is a prescribed medium. You cannot alter the story. A book is more flexible, you can stop and reread, but film in particular is very totalitarian. You can see it only as the author prescribed it. Now in music we say also it is prescribed because of the notation, but there is a certain variety in interpretation, so there is always some room for interaction. But the new technologies truly give us a choice: space can be created while the viewer is finding a syntactic path — the way he or she wishes to go through the space. You can see it in the digital video games, they give you certain options such as doors or multiple pathways. In some ways the perfectly constructed new digital narrative space with all the narrative elements could provide for the viewer a completely personalized tour. However, is not the most interesting thing the prescription by the artist — the kind of unique guidance the artist gives? This has all been badly explored. Most of the exploratory materials made so far do not even come close to the respectability of a cultural experience. The spaces and concepts generated by the new technologies may still be so basic that one cannot yet make even the lightest comparisons with literature. I have grave doubts about non-authorship. I find that all I'm interested in is a particular mind, a very specific mind, to read and be part of.

However, I think that whatever we do with technology really depends on the viewer as well. None of us is willing or has the generosity to tolerate triviality or mediocrity even when employed in a noble cause, nor should we. Now I speak of intelligence. Without an intelligent viewer the new work could never be intelligent. This is a dilemma. Sometimes someone constructs an interesting work that is engaging and important at a certain moment, but if the viewer misses that particular moment, then the work becomes quite primitive. 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 movement with such minute precision that the result is stunning.

In order to engage the viewer there has to be some level of interpretation so that the viewer might truly trust that a cause and effect or the evocations of a mood or an atmosphere are meaningful. The technology usually goes its own way and one has to kind of bring it back and nail it down — it is continuously changing, it is dynamic, and precisely for those reasons the rules of the game are nearly impossible to get. The modes in which it is presented are too ephemeral or too crude. It doesn't have to be *real*, but it has to be convincing. Every emergence of new media empowers the artist to ambush the viewer again. Stripped of his dignity, the viewer cries for the rules of ethics, the very subject the artist abhors the most.