

Curatorial Statement

Woody Vasulka



IT WAS NO ACCIDENT when Peter Weibel called Steina and me last November with the question: Could you curate this show? Peter had met with Gene Youngblood and us here in Santa Fe at least twice — 1986 and 1987 — for the sole purpose of illuminating ourselves through ongoing discussions about the remarkable experience of early video which still seems to occupy our life so much. Peter, Gene, Steina and I have all gone through the "Media Activism" of the sixties which left us with a "front row view."

For me, video has not been an intellectual movement. Early protagonists Nam June Paik and Frank Gillette have given it an illusion of certain legitimacy, but no one has dealt with the formal concerns of media. My own interest was in confronting the syntax of film with the new video image, a concern that has not been addressed at all by the video movement. The criticism of media art has never risen from the shallow and sketchy.

Yet, I think, Peter's offer to us to curate an exhibition made some sense after all: Steina has a good personal video archive, and we have accumulated both general and custom/personal video instruments which map a certain line of aesthetic vocabularies (as they rather rapidly appeared in the early 1970's). We have also had a long standing interaction with their makers.

When we arrived in New York in the mid- 1960's Steina and I were struck by two experiences: the American decadent movement and the aesthetic use of technology. We set out to explore both via video. Jackie Curtis took us through the demimonde; with George Brown and Eric Siegel we poked through instruments — organizing Time and Energy. There were vast resources for our education, from LaMonte Young's drift oscillators to Automation House, from loft to loft, there was a state of creative frenzy — a lot of materials, new systemic thinking, another promise of techno-aesthetic utopia ...

After Peter's call, our time got very short. It was mid-January when Ars Electronica confirmed and we assembled our team: MaLin Wilson (independent curator & writer), David Dunn (composer & writer), and David Muller (technician). I knew we needed to present not dead

but live instruments the earlier the instrument the better. We had to locate them, transport them and restore many. As I am writing this in mid-April, only God knows how this adventure will turn out.

On the other hand, many of those involved seemed to be just waiting for our call. Ralph Hocking, founder of the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, New York, is now by default, the only large scale producer and facilitator of personalized, custom-built video instruments. By even greater default, Ralph and Sherry Miller Hocking are the only collectors and archivists of many of these instruments. Ralph picked up the phone as if we were having an uninterrupted conversation over the years.

We still haven't located Al Phillips to whom Eric Siegel entrusted his only video synthesizer. In a comparison to electronic audio instruments, there is no comparable historical or intellectual protocol to even consider the video instruments as cultural artifacts. While Pailles first synthesizer is still in the basement of MIT, the first Buchla box has just been purchased from Mills College by a French institution.

It is a real pleasure to lift up a piece of scrap, to dust it off, return its name, restore it, insure it for thousands of dollars and publish it in an Austrian art catalogue!

THE MYOPSIS:

Video infringed on our private lives, crowding our loft on Fourteenth Street. We established the Kitchen in 1971 to resolve that. Overnight we became part of a large network ranging from Europe to Japan to Canada.

Of course, the global character of the network did not help our own craft of making pictures electronically; that was helped by a very small tribe building circuits. This tribe is the subject of our exhibition. There was a legitimate underground technological community, with a life free enough to practice low budget experimentation and manufacturing. A new range of high frequency components appeared on the market at the same time that there was a dominant archetypical image commonly shared by the usage of hallucinogens. Finally, there was a generation of artists eager to practice the new witchcraft. And, indeed there was an audience
...

It is important to note that besides these experiments with video, there was widespread practice of mixed media including television as closed circuit installations. And, of course, electronic sound making was in its golden era. It is even more important to understand that all of these forms of media work were being conducted against a full blown cultural background: painting, sculpture, poetry, music and film, to mention only a few. As insiders, the perspective we offer may be grossly exaggerated; nevertheless, that's what you, the viewer, will be getting.

Within the video movement our choices for this exhibition will look a bit odd. We are not going to show or describe works outside of the consideration of audio/video as electronic signal ~ that blessed state when it becomes accessible for alteration by electronic instruments. We are avoiding the essential and important pictorial and conceptual influences arising from "art as style" during the time period, from social influences and, from gallery and art market influences. We also believe that the most important works of art in video have been systematically presented by other curators. On the other hand, what we found more essential,

more mysterious and unexplainable as newcomers from the "Old World" was the undefined spirit of American innovation and invention. To us it was all there was to do.

In the 1960's we used to distinguish between white collar and blue collar artists. Both of us came from socialist societies and would at "the tip of the hat" side with the working class. We thought the world was still material, even though we were handling metaphysical material — Time and Energy.

THE TECHNOLOGY:

Besides the instruments, the essence of the exhibition is the images, both still and moving. In our private work we have advanced to the technological state of presenting our work on laserdisc. From the moment that we discovered a link between the laserdisc and the printed page through the barcode we knew it would suit the purpose of the exhibition magnificently. Despite the clumsy laserpen for reading the barcode and despite the time delay, we are convinced that this is a perfect marriage of method and subject.

THE TAPES:

Steina has always been an avid collector of videotapes. Very early she was engaged in personal tape exchanges, a habit she still keeps. During the early days the urge to share unique discoveries drove people into almost compulsory communication videoletters, "how to's" and "look what I'm doing" were common, almost a genre. Many times we were the first on the receiving end, and today we are looking at an amazing assortment of tapes which forms the core of this exhibition.

There is an unprecedented affinity between electronic sound and image-making. Each generation of artists seems to come up with a tempting proposition of uniting the acoustic and the visual and vice versa — hoping once and for all to solve the mystery of audio-visual aesthetics. The generation that is the subject of our exhibition has gotten somewhat closer: even if the mystery of composing images with sounds was never revealed, this time the material, i.e. the frequencies, voltages and instruments which organized the material were identical. The advent and use of the oscillator became the natural link. As in our case, many of our colleagues and friends used audio oscillators or audio synthesizers to generate their first video images. The first video instruments were inspired by the architecture of audio instruments, and the first organization of images was negotiated in similar ways. With feedback, which all these instruments possess generically, the preliminary nomenclature of generated images was established. The continuity between instruments of sound and instruments of image-making was basic to our conception of the exhibition in discussions with Peter Weibel. We also knew that there was a chance that the great weight of the cultural history of sound and music might tip the balance of the exhibition off center. So be it.

Woody Vasulka
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REGRETS:

Now, the time is up ... I still regret that we did not get Tambellini's Black spiral working and that Beck's DVS would require such logistics to restore and present. I also guess that Siegel's EVA may still be intact and possibly alive

I also miss a "proper" historical background: Bauhaus, Czech kineticists, full summary of Ben Laposky, Mary Ellen Bute, the Whitneys in film and all the European video instrument builders: DePuouy, Richard Monkhouse and others involved in constructing and using electronic tools. What we have is only a preview to the ultimate show, to the mythical and forbidding "Project 2000," where the twentieth century will be thoroughly combed with a fine toothbrush.

W.V. May, 1992

EPITAPH:

Do I believe that video meant anything significant? Was it a legitimate art movement? Will it be remembered? I suppose if art in the future continues to be made electronically or becomes even more dependent on technology, then the history of this movement shall be secure. If, on the other hand, technology should be rejected in the art making of the near or distant future, the efforts of this tribe, "the tribe that worshipped electricity", (as Jonas Mekas put it), will certainly lapse into obscurity.

W.V.