

Woody Vasulka, Hybrid Hand from the series, *Didactic Video*, 1983.

The New Epistemic Space

WOODY VASULKA

While the agenda of a modernist has been to Innovate, to Negate, to Abolish, the effort (expended by artists, critics, and audiences) to undermine all traditional art forms has been driven by the fear of epigonism and conformity. After all this tireless probing and experimentation, the final word should be given to the modernist assessment of Luis Buñuel: "We (the surrealists) set out to change the world—instead (regrettably) we changed art. . . ." Like monstrous and unforgiving puzzles, the excesses of experimentation have piled up at the doorsteps of the twenty-first century.

Despite the apparent confusion, a new situation has quietly emerged. We now have a new creative space, a system of aesthetic practice, and an audience ready for a new aesthetic discourse. We have moved from a relationship with technology in which we attempt to invoke the creative potential of a specific tool, to one with a technological environment invoking a new creative potential from human discourse. The more we understand this technological environment, the more we participate in the opening of this new epistemic space.

More recently, through experiments with systems (social, aesthetic, technological) and the deconstruction of their rules, a wealth of new principles of patterning and composition has appeared. Incredibly, some of us have chosen technology as an ultimate poetic source, material, and promise. We are comfortable with the abandonment of the vulgar "hero's journey" in favor of the delicate exploits of *The Machine*.

Though the immediate emergence of a new audiovisual aesthetic seems unlikely, the existence and use of an underlying coding system in machine-made or machine-assisted art suggest a "new" and tempting opportunity. By now we see that the utilization of technology largely dictates its own aesthetic, if not in the mainstream arts, certainly in its experimental forms. We have learned that aesthetic dialogue exists without strict regulation by intellectual supervision and consensus. While we can see a constant generational process of rediscovery of and confrontation with the past, the validity of ethical prescriptions, asserted by the participants in this process, appears specious when viewed in a later historical context. The way this creative process is mediated requires a certain acceptance of technological determinism, its structure being born in a variety of cultural domains, not specific to the developments in art.

Machines capable of organizing visual or auditory structures have emerged and established their lineage outside of art, or of strict aesthetic considerations, and their evolution does not necessitate artistic formulation. Watching closely

the development of machines, designed to articulate aesthetic languages, we can see how languages of such machines are derived primarily from the intrinsic nodalities of technological systems. These systems, presented as tools, summarize the generic options. In a similar way, the newest tools try to contain a generic set of mathematical options, some spectacularly fitted to the visualization of numbers.

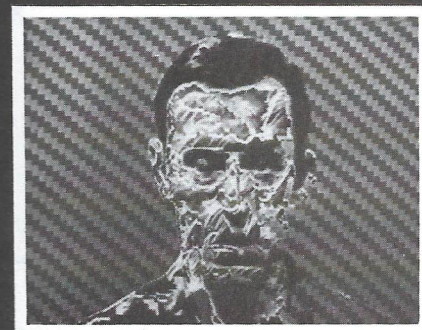
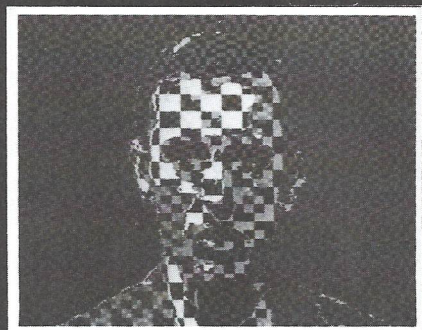
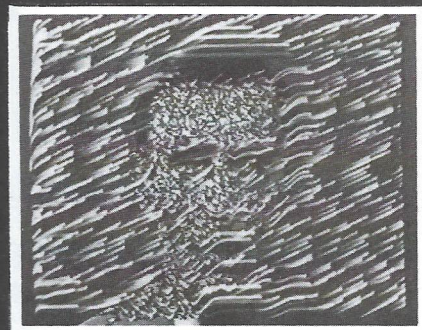
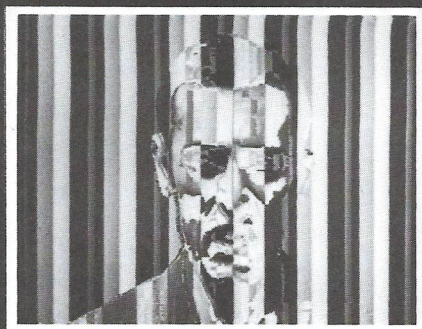
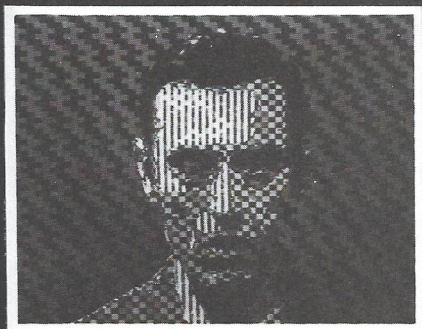
Since technology provides an essential interface between human and machine, and since the technology proliferates its options rapidly, the technological environment by now has exceeded the dimensions of a tool and our relationship to it could be paraphrased "Man is but a guest in the house of technology. . . ." It seems necessary now to activate a core of creative excellence in order to oppose the cliché of resentment toward machine assisted creative processes. While computer-assisted work may not yet become the subject of high art, one should expect a new art form to be as challenging to the rest of art genres as was the influence of film on the early modernist movement.

Criticism of the machine-made or machine-assisted environment has been one form of traditional social dissent. While remaining reluctant to embrace such an antitechnological stance, despite the latest generational effort toward a broad integration with mass culture, artists have stood in opposition to social engineering. Today we do hear the dissenting voice of the legitimate art community, made powerless by the social structuring of the machine/state.

And what of the Critic in this debate? I do not accept the position of most critics just as I do not condone the enthusiastic promoter of the telephone or satellite! In desperate need of new modes of rhetoric, they evoke a gross terminological time-shift (modern then postmodern?), from a technological evil—the uncomfortably doubtful, tortuous—toward a psychological heaven of values, more politically exploitable, consumable, secure, and sentimental. Instead, I await a critic who learns, comprehends, inverts, and educates, one who sees far ahead of the practice of art.

Though any discourse concerning technology may appear to emphasize its physicality, my ambition here is to initiate a cultural interface between the creative processes of writing, imaging, composing, and scoring for an electronic stage, operating autonomously or interactively under human control. My ambition is to clarify the specialized media nomenclature so that an individual can participate creatively and intimately, with more rigorous control or organize the stage and execute her or his vision more authentically. This new understanding would contribute toward the specification of future participatory genres, and to more enduring, more stable creative strategies.

After a few years' experience with computer programming, my good friend Hollis Frampton called the specification of such a code, writing. At the time I did not agree with him, but the intervening years have educated me to



Woody Vasulka, Hybrid Studies from the series, *Didactic Video*, 1986.

an understanding of what he meant. Writing implies more than a literary product. Our current agenda can be viewed as the expansion of written language to include the articulation of an environment where an interaction between all our sensory modalities and those of technology may symbiotically unfold.

The latest digital graphic flirtation with formal mathematics plays an important role as a model for interpreting and mediating two domains: the auditory and the visual. While it is trivial to point out the daily human experience of perceiving the interaction of these perceptual domains, within both the real world and that of artistic formulation, the privilege of observing the emergence of a unified code system within all modes of perceptual representation is entirely unique. As a practitioner, I find this event extraordinary.

The intercourse with the machine has articulated essential coding systems: languages, protocols, scores, and procedures. We have constructed a complete set of symbolic and time-perceptual models and emulated the essential operations of analog electronic media (sounds, images, spatial strategies, temporal events, psychomodalities, chaos) by making the computer a total media machine. The consequences of a unity of code are enormous. Confined to specific categories by its academic, media, or nomenclature particularities, the material becomes cross-disciplinary and cross-referential. Now, let me pause here and confess that I tire fast of talking this and similar gibberish. Over the years, we have volunteered to give our ears and emotions to the voice of these beliefs. They have originated in the abstract utopian places of our minds, and in our struggle to redefine ethics in the shadow of the social and political disaster of the Left and of the emergent terror of religious bigotry.

It is good to remember Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky, the master of literary psychopathology, learning the art of understanding the human soul from all the professors giving testimonies at St. Petersburg' family court. His antiliberal agenda could not stop the onslaught of an upcoming century. His sincere cry for the true brotherhood of man under the icon of Jesus Christ fell heavy and with great embarrassment under the wheels of socialism. We cannot possibly see a lesser scandal ushering in the next, the twenty-first century! If we cannot see the true giant on the shining path, let us pray for the fool.

Amsterdam, May 19, 1989