

Woody Vasulka

(Bohuslav Peter Vasulka)

Born in 1937, Brno, Czechoslovakia

Bio

Woody Vasulka (b. 1937) was a pioneering video artist, starting his career in the 1960s. He studied engineering in Brno before moving to Prague in 1960, where he graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts as a filmmaker. In 1964 he married Steina and a year later they moved to New York where they worked in the emerging field of video art and electronic media. They exhibited video at the Whitney Museum and founded the The Kitchen in 1971, which has been a powerful force in shaping the cultural landscape in the US. It was among the very first American institutions to embrace the emerging fields of video, performance, and cross-disciplinary explorations. An internationally acclaimed institution, the Kitchen is one of New York's oldest and most active nonprofit art centers, and has helped launch the careers of many artists who have gone on to worldwide prominence. Together, the Vasulkas also worked to develop the Center for Media Studies at the State University of New York in Buffalo, where Woody became a video professor. His vast body of work includes seminal documentaries, but his main focus has been on the use of electronic media in art. He has produced extensive series of videos, some of which can be seen as cataloging the possibilities of new media, akin to Bach's explorations of the fugue or György Kurtág's ongoing series of pedagogical compositions, *Játekók*, exploring the potential of simple tonal and rhythmic combinations. Despite the pedagogical flavor of some of his work, Woody's background as a documentary film maker and modernist poet often shines through, in highly personal and almost narrative pieces that transcend the technical methodology of their production and are among the most expressive works of video art ever made. He became a Guggenheim Fellow in 1979 and has received many other honors and awards for his art. His work has been shown in major museums all over the world. In 2014, the Vasulka Chamber, a center of electronic and digital art in Iceland, was established at the National Gallery of Iceland. The Vasulka Chamber is a collaboration with Steina and Woody Vasulka, and includes a part of the Vasulkas' archive. Later in 2015 the Vasulka Kitchen, a center for new media art in Brno, Woody's hometown was founded, dedicated to preserving the legacy of the artist, who passed in December 2019.

Chronology (selected)

1952–1956	Studied hydraulic mechanics and metallurgy at the Industrial Engineering School of Brno, Czechoslovakia.
1956	Completed a Bachelor's degree in engineering at the Industrial Engineering School of Brno.
1959	Developed hydraulic assembly line equipment designed for a metal works factory in Czechoslovakia.
1960–1965	Attended the Academy of Performing Arts, Faculty of Film and Television, on a state scholarship for higher education. Obtained a diploma in production and direction of documentary films.
1964	Produced two documentaries in Algeria on the country's political situation following the overthrow of Ahmed Ben Bella by Houari Boumédiène.
1965	Emigrated to New York City.
1966–1969	Worked as a freelance multi-screen editor and industrial display designer. Began experimenting with electronic sound, stroboscopic projections derived from moving images and light-activated screens, later becoming involved with video.

- 1969 Produced documentaries for the Alternate Media Center (New York), in collaboration with Steina.
- 1970 Acquired first video tools: a SONY Portapak System and a VCS3 (Putney) audio synthesizer.
- 1971 Formed the Perception Group together with Steina and Eric Siegel. The Vasulkas received one of their first grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, which they used to develop electronic media tools. In collaboration with Andres Mannik, they founded The Kitchen, an experimental performance space devoted to electronic media in New York (official opening June 15th). There, they established the first annual video festival and worked together with David Bienstock on organizing *A Special Videotape Show* at the Whitney Museum. They participated in some of the first exhibitions of video art, such as *Continuous Video Environment* at WBAI Free Music Store, New York and *Transmitted Environment* at the Experimental Television Center Binghamton, New York. Until 1973, the Vasulkas collaborated extensively in investigations into the electronic nature of video and sound, and produced documentaries on the subject of theater, dance, and music.
- 1973 Moved to Buffalo, New York.
- 1974–1979 Professor of video at the Department of Media Study, State University of New York, Buffalo (SUNY, Buffalo). During these years, the artistic interests of Woody and Steina diverged. Woody became interested in tools, such as the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor which allowed him the diversion and deflection of electromagnetic scanning, thus modifying the images forming on the video raster. He also started building his own devices, e.g. the Dual Colorizer (in cooperation with Eric Siegel) and the Digital Image Articulator (with Jeffrey Schier). In 1975, he undertook his first digital experiments, and also developed a new visual code theory, which he applied in texts like *Didactic Video: Organizational Models of the Electronic Image* (1975) and *A Syntax of Binary Images* (1978).
- 1980 The Vasulkas moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where Woody produced some of his major works using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor and the Digital Image Articulator-*Artifacts* (1980), *The Commission* (1983) and *Art of Memory* (1987). By recycling industrial machines he found in the military surplus waste and decommissioned by the Los Alamos Military Research Center, he began building his *The Brotherhood* installations. Woody began both practical and theoretical research on what he calls *The New Epistemic Space*, where he examines modes of interactivity between technology and people, such as gestures and sounds.
- 1982 Received a N.E.A. Visual Art Fellowship.
- 1986 Received a N.E.A. Media Art Production Grant.
- 1992 Together with Steina, was awarded the Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists, conferred by the American Film Institute, Los Angeles, California, which honored them for their contribution to developing and reinventing the film and video industry. Together with Peter Weibel, the Vasulkas acted as curators for the exhibition *Eigenwelt der Apparate-Welt (Pioneers of Electronic Art)* for Ars Electronica Linz, Austria.
- 1993 Received a grant from the Art & Culture Committee of the Open Society Fund to lecture on video media and present work throughout Eastern Europe. Lectured at the Faculty of Art, Polytec Institute, Brno.
- 1993 Visiting professor at the Institute for New Media at the Staedelschule, Frankfurt, Germany.
- 1995 Received Siemens Media Art Prize, conferred by ZKM | Karlsruhe.
- 1996 Exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
- 1998 Exhibited at the NTT InterCommunication Center in Tokyo, Japan.
Vasulkas receive an honorary doctorate from The San Francisco Art Institute.
- 1999 In collaboration with Steina, plus musical collaborators, Joan La Barbara and Morton

Subotnick, held a six-week series of workshops in experimental interactive media arts entitled *Techne and Eros: Human Sensory Space and the Machine* at the Santa Fe Art Institute.

Together with Steina, David Dunn and the physicist James Crutchfield, formed the organization Art and Science Laboratory with the aim to actively explore and encourage all facets of the electronic and digital arts and sciences as a new creative domain for human thought and action.

2000 The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, in Montreal, acquired, digitized and web hosted an early, limited version of the Vasulka

Archives

2003–2007 Artist-in-residence at ZKM | Karlsruhe

2004 Received an honorary doctorate from the Brno University of Technology

2004–2007 Founder and artistic director of OASIS (Open Archiving System with Internet Sharing), a Europe-wide project funded by the EU and aiming to preserve electronic art by providing an innovative, collaborative archival platform.

2006 Curator and participated in the exhibition *MindFrames: Media Study at Buffalo 1973–1990* at the ZKM | Karlsruhe: responsible for the architectural design (together with Shinya Sato) and the media design (together with Bob O'Kane).

2007–2010 Named Professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Technical University of Brno.

2011–2013 Awarded an honorary doctorate at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts.

U.S. and European exhibitions + workshops, including the Vasulkas 2011

Boulder Show (CO), and 2013 WRO Biennale, Wroclaw, PL.

2014 The extensive Dynamic Vasulka Archives October dedication and opening of the Vasulka Chamber, at the National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, preserving the Vasulka Archives. Works shown at Oslo Screen Festival, Oslo. Nomination for Prix Ars Electronica award, as Visionary Pioneer of Media Art.

Exhibitions and workshops in France, Belgium, Germany, Norway, Iceland and Seattle.

2015 Works shown in the Vasulka Chamber at the National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Nordisk Panorama, Malmö, Sweden, Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival, Czech Republic, The Paseo Taos Outdoor Art Festival, New Mexico.

2016 Works shown in Whitechapel Gallery, London, Raven Row, London, Code Art Fair, Copenhagen, Untitled Art Fair, Miami Beach, Galeries Lafayette, Toulouse, France, Le Lait Art Centre, France, Spilberk Castle, Brno, Czech Republic, the Vasulka Kitchen in Brno, Czech Republic, Atelier Nord, Oslo, Spilberk, Brno, Czech Republic, Kuryokhin Center of Modern Art, St. Petersburg and the National Gallery of Iceland, Vasulka Chamber, Reykjavik.

2017 Works shown at Photo London, LOOP Barcelona, BERG Contemporary, Reykjavik, the Spilberk Castle, Brno, Czech Republic and the National Gallery of Iceland, Vasulka Chamber.

2018 Solo exhibition with Steina, *Art of Memory* in Pori Museum, Pori, Finland.

Works shown at LACMA, California, US, ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany, The Armory Show, New York, Media Art Festival, Rome, Carroll Gallery, Huntington, WV and the National Gallery of Iceland, Vasulka Chamber.

2019 Works shown in Zebrstraat, Ghent, Belgium and BOZAR, Brussels, as well as at Fiac, Paris.

Filmography

1960 Zdymadla [The Locks], 16mm film, silent, 10 min (lost)

1961 Ve dve odpoledne [Two P.M.], 35mm film, sound, 16 min

- Jazz Festival v Karlovych Varech [in Carlsbad], 35mm film, sound, 20 min
- 1962 Zachytna Stanice [Withdrawal], 35mm film, sound, 12 min
- 1962 Odjezd Brancu [The Recruits], 35mm film, sound, 17 min
- 1963 U Pana Capka [Visiting Mr. Capek], 35mm film, sound, 15 min
- 1963 Predmesti [The Outskirts], 35mm film, sound, 17 min
- 1964 Velrybarska Stanice [Whale Cutting Station], Island, 35mm film, sound, 12 min
- 1964 Sezona v Seydisfjordu [The Herring Season in Seydisfjordur], 35mm film, sound, 20 min
- 1968 Aimless People, 16mm film, 3 screens, sound, 4 min
- 1968 Peril in Orbit, 16mm film, 3 screens, sound, 4 min
- 1968 360 degree space records, 16mm film, 3 screens, sound, 4 min
- 1975–1977 Studies for Scan Processor, 16mm film transferred to video
- 1975 Time/Energy Objects, 16mm film, 3 screens, silent, 13 min
- 1975 The City, 16mm film, stereo sketch, silent, 3 min
- 1975 Gorge, 16mm film, stereo sketch, silent, 3 min
- 1975 Noiseplane, 16mm film, silent, 3 min
- 1975 Grazing, 16mm film, silent, 19 min
- 1975 No. 18 (Krysuvik), 16mm film, silent, 11 min
- 1976 E-Object, 16mm film, silent, 11 min
- 1976 No. 20, 16mm film, silent, 3 min
- 1976 No. 21 (San Francisco streets), 16mm film, silent, 3 min
- 1976 Soundshape, 16mm film, sound, 5 min
- 1976 No. 23 (Seal Cove), 16mm film, silent, 11 min
- 1976 Torso, 16mm film, silent, 4 min
- 1977 No. 24 (Circular Noise), 16mm film, silent, 5 min
- 1977 No. 26 (Rotating Panel), 16mm film, silent, 5 min
- 1977 No. 27 (Frame Sizes), 16mm film, silent, 5 min
- 1977 No. 28 (Face by Wave), 16mm film, silent, 6 min
- 1977 No. 29 (Winding), 16mm film, silent, 8 min

Video

- 1971 Evolution, 1/2" Open Reel video, b/w, sound, 12:40 min
- 1971 Swanlake, 1/2" Open Reel video, b/w, sound, 7:25 min, with Ekathrina Sobechanskaya
- 1973 Vocabulary, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 4:30 min
- 1974 Noisefields, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 7:05 min
- 1974 The Matter, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 4 min
- 1974 C-Trend, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 8:30 min
- 1974 Explanation, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 4:20 min
- 1974 Reminiscence, 1/2" Open Reel video, b/w, sound, 4:50 min
- 1976 No. 25, 3/4" U-matic video, b/w, sound, 6:30 min
- 1980 Artifacts, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 22:50 min
- 1983 The Commission, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 39:15 min, with Ernest Gusella, Robert Ashley, Cosimo Corsano, Ben Harris, Andrea Harris, David Ossman, Bradford Smith, Peter Kirby
- Art of Memory, 1987, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 36:30 min, with Daniel Nagrin, Klein, Doris Cross, Rutt/Etra, Jeffrey Schier, Bradford Smith, Penelope Place, David Aubrey and Steina.
- 1984 In the Land of the Elevator Girls, video, color, sound, 4:00 min, with Steina
- 1993 Studies for Hybrid Automata, 3/4" U-matic video, color, sound, 8:40 min

- 1998 Woody Plays the Maiden, digital video, color, sound, 6:10 min
 2006 Sonifications, Variations on Studies for Scan Processor, digital video, color, sound (by Brian O'Reilly)

Installations

- 1990–1998 Brotherhood, six computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical constructions
 – Table 1: Translocations, 1996, interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical construction, dimensions variable, with Russ Gritz and Bruce Hamilton
 – Table 2: Theater of Hybrid Automata, 1990, internally interactive video/computer/sound construction, dimensions variable, with Don Buchla and Russ Gritz
 – Table 3: Friendly Fire, 1994, interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical construction, dimensions variable, with Russ Gritz, Bruce Hamilton and Tom Joyce
 – Table 4: Stealth, 1998, interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical construction, dimensions variable, with Aaron Davidson and Thomas Ashcraft
 – Table 5: Scribe, 1998, interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical construction, dimensions variable, with Russ Gritz, Bruce Hamilton and Roderick Peyketewa
 – Table 6: The Maiden, 1998, interactive computer-driven opto/electro/mechanical construction, dimension variable, with Steina, Russ Gritz, Bruce Hamilton, Susan Hamilton, Jamie Hamilton, Roderick Peyketewa, Van Baer, Tom Demeyer and Rutt/Etra
 2004 Shining Moment, video, color, sound, projector stands, mirrors, 5 min cycle
 2001 Light Revisited – Noisefields, video, color, sound, 10 min cycle

Collections (selected)

- The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 The Daniel Langlois Foundation Collection
 The National Gallery of Iceland
 The Reykjavík Art Museum
 The Smithsonian American Art Museum
 The Thoma Foundation