

Interview with Woody Vasulka_Brotherhood
Agua Fría, Santa Fe, July 2008

PART 1

O.K., what I tell you is my bios, because when I had to dream it up, the first time I was sort of interested in networking, because before we had the systems of closed circuit or control over as a single piece but then I arrived to this possibility to learn about. All I do in life is about learning some new aspect of it and this came just naturally, because I collected all these items over years. I brought some of the things from Buffalo, like elements of it, and here I updated it from auctions and other things. When I came to this critical mass it was very natural that I would challenge this possibility of a integrated network, and since the commission came from Japan to build it actually, or to do it, I already had nucleus of three of these installations.

And then I was hectically trying to develop three more and so this just became for the first time essential that I would connect this whole system thru the net, at that time the net was fully equipped to do that, but then of course the local operation had its own internet, so there is the local net but it was accessible from Los Alamos. And this person called Gritzo developed the software for each individual thing, and he was able to watch it as a data, he made all the provision of watching this records of the performance at night because that was the day in Japan and then in the morning he would look at it and fix it whenever it was necessary. But by miracle we could run this whole thing without interruption, we had only twenty or thirty minutes over three weeks when it was standing, not working.

And Bruce /Hamilton/ was the person who was running it and I was sitting with him in this control room we made and I was just looking at the man and said he was just at the edge of cracking up at times, then I said what happens when he just goes crazy, what I'm gonna do. So we were this kind of dependent. But the exercise inside of the functionality, there's many aspects which I would forget but they are well recorded on the charts that we provided for the promo, the film that someone was making for the show, and the person asked us to list all the functions and make it all drawings, and it does exist, and he's gonna tell me where it is on the net and then you're gonna look at it and read it.

But let me just get to the essence. There were many levels, as many levels as I could think about, so it tells you again my idea of that kind of artistic practice. It was just really for my own laboratory use, even if it was made for the public. The basic rule was, all the instruments would have to be interactive, either on the level of the visitor, or on the level of machinery itself. So this is two basic conditions. Second level was to find all the basic modalities within the system that could be found, because just work with single modality like something that reads and writes wasn't enough, it had to do also something else.

What was missing, which we never really achieved was for it to speak, which I achieved basically last year in ZKM when I exhibited it as separate unit as stand alone but it was again online and I had Bruce watching it here and debugging it. I had two pieces there, both being interactive. They have changed but with O'Kane there in Germany, who was our technician, we added the third modality, so it was machine that was representing literacy machine, but literacy technically means that something can read, write and perhaps something can speak it and memorize it. All that was missing was something that interprets what it means all, and that's the human part, but all the other parts, it's like a brain mechanism, it's mechanistic explanation, because camera has an eye and it can distinguish by OCR, optical character recognition, it can recognize the elements like letters or numbers and it can plot them on the plotter and once it knows what letter it is, it can write it. So it's that kind of the function that in some people is impaired, it just means that this correction to the brain, if you put a chip into brain that does these banal things for the machine, then it can provide some service to the complete literacy assignment. But anyway it's paradox, it's on purpose very crude and it shows every aspect, it has U-matic system that's not really controlled.

We are trying to make another step, so all my life is just continuous laboratory, I had no other interest that would become the art subject, it actually is the outside view of what I do. Of course I was interested in making the things aesthetic, but this Brotherhood, there's actually the only idea that I had that the ideology, is that the Brotherhood itself is the keyword for the war efforts, see. All the machinery from it is the part of war machine, except the Maiden, which is derived from a certain service of the let's say lower rated women like prostitutes that could take care of the disabled soldiers coming from the front. Because all the upper-class princesses that originally were interested in helping soldiers couldn't even touch the rotting bodies. And it looks like the Maiden of the trade could do it, so it was kind of homage to this generation of women that understood what it is to take care of men that were somehow strangely outside of the social understanding and psychological understanding. But the rest is purely taking the piece of very essential part of human progress in building the war machines, like Translocation is part of targeting navy table but these things are probably described in other papers.

So what I employed is everything from feedback to gesture recognition thru program, Dutch program called Big Eye which choreographed certain parts of the Table 1 which is this moving rallies and just table that carries the cameras. So it's in these three steps what I call trans-locational information from one to the other to the other, but it's more or less in a way hierarchical linear system. In Automata it was the head that was providing what I call the poetry of the calibration of the machine, meaning that it's the essay or it's a poem that says or had the question of any navigation, navigational system including rockets that fly to the air and are supposed to find some kind of a destination, which is where am I, where am I going, and how am I getting there.

So these things were put together and the machine was able to track by kind of infrared communication certain musical system called Lightning which is some instrument made by Don Buchla, which can scan the spectrum and send it to this box that interprets it either in tones or words, in our case, because anything that comes as MIDI into the network can translate now that time. This is also the edge of this interface, not only mechanical but also codification that was inflected on the system and could be read and performed. But it is again in my case again the dealing with the great impression of my life which was war experience. And it's kind of a anti-war in my sense because I eventually of course after experience of the war I get very specific idea that it was completely brutal, unjust, inflicted on the society and not the way to advance any social system. And the fascism was actually clear, there was no confusion about it and it was terrible imposition on the whole world and if you see it today, the same lesson wasn't drawn on the society because now people think it can solve the problem, like Americans want to win the war, you know. It becomes such an absurdity because after all it's religious and ethnic war and you can't just terminate it. Maybe in Spanish civil war it came to some sort of resolution by punishing loser and segregating but it was bloody civil war that I think should have given the lesson to the world that this kind of a war wasn't really won, it was just dealt with but it lingered on for decades.

But I don't want to talk about things that are generally known. But this idea was also homage to my first experiences in war machinery and I must say I was seduced by that, so I have partial guilt in that appreciation and when I collected all these machines then of course I must have had some flashback to my earlier interest or autopsy of these machines. And then they had these integrated media, because I stopped doing what's called video and computer went thru those periods in the 70s and thru the long narrative works, and sort of sketches of interactivity at the end of the 80s, but Art of Memory was also co-memorial to the war effort and if I would ever now think of any other work it would just be related to the idea depicting some problems of the warfare. So now have to think about, should I be detached from those things in sort of more pure artistic abstract way? But I'm not interested in that and it's not my nature to become a gallery artist that makes art because it's somehow has its own purpose, but what

I am saying it's probably under certain supervision of some strangely inherited ethical principle. But I just have to see what I'm here for but that's a different history.

PART 2

Are you thinking about coming back to Brotherhood and evolving it in some direction?

I would like to have at least the legacy reconstructed that it exists and of course to try to update it, you bring so many new aspects that it becomes probably virtually impossible to reconstruct it in original way and I am not interested in that because I am moving laboratory thru time, but I'm still tempted to put it back into existence. Because now it's only in existence three renewable or reconstructed pieces. But the idea, the network written by Russ Gritzko that you saw, he was eventually always asking me what kind of information are you interested in networking.

So eventually I suggested this idea that there is a protagonist, messenger, that brings certain message into every state of the operation to all the machines. And then he said, O.K., then we need actors, and I said, yes, I need an actor that gets the information there and disappears. So that's what he built, it was like a virus who travelled to find its own home, got rid of the information - it was usually small, few parameters, probably five, six or maybe eight - and then it was supposed to die. And it just virtually did that. And it was the local program and some of it of course in the long run didn't die by accident and started to fill the network so we had to find the way to kill it, every couple of days we had to kill them, shut it off and restart it in the morning, but this was the principle of integration of all machinery.

But the other day we said with Bruce, hey, let's run it wild, designate the change in the others and see what the other machines would do with the same information. So we run this circus when they suddenly started to behave completely different, they get the different parameters, and they had to obey because as long as they had the same address and the same actors would be active in them, like the virus would be able to live, it deposited the information it had into the registers that had to act on it, so this was interesting experience but we didn't have time there because we couldn't run this alternate programing because the place of course was an exhibit.

So you wanted to create autonomous machines that would behave autonomously and take some information from the net and you would change parameters once in a while?

We had to develop a cycle of each machine and mostly they started in idle state, but if someone made an action, it produced the virus, the actor, which went to the network and found the right place for it. That means this idea of interactivity was usually physical intervention. Like we had a drum pad which was controlling laser disk in locational jump and so it changed the program or function of the machine. So there were parameters that were U-matically controlled, three or four of them, some of them had stepper motors so they had linear functions and anyway when you look at charting, and some of them were audio, so all these codes were mediated thru initiative or the audience.

Of course there is not much benefit of the visitor of participation, because they get involved in playing and trying what's gonna happen, there were children working with Maiden, torturing it death because it was behaving, moving, but it had great benefit to what I call voyeur, someone who stood outside and watched these people playing with it. And that for me had this psychological meaning and that's in fact why I built these machines because I wanted to see. Because I was always witness to things and all my life I would look at life as a theatre, as I'm looking and talking to you now. It had nothing to do with me, this is now a memory of some impulse and I didn't want to show and do it just because it should be done. It was just that I wanted to see what it does when I do it and what's the experience that I would

extract from it, and that experience is the benefit that you have from it.

It's a strange perverse way of looking at art, you know. But that laboratory what I'm talking about, permanent laboratory of my life, was about not really doing it but making it enough rich to extract the experience I wanted to know. So this was very good for...there would be some volunteers, this Japanese man who tried to live in the embrace of the Maiden and there was this lady he brought with that played flute to the Maiden. And Japanese are people that can understand something like that the machine has a psycho, psychology, they build robots that suppose to serve you and you are supposed to like them and you can have sex with robot and all these things are very Japanese. But this man was in jeopardy because the device wasn't gentle, it wasn't a maiden, it was crude, there's actually a lot of energy in those pistons of compressed air, it couldn't have broken his leg or hand but he bragged it, and I watched these two people doing this and I said, wait a minute, this is the paradigm, this is the end of my interest, because this is a dangerous thing. But then of course this was all about the war, and one piece even had the episode, it was called Friendly Fire when Americans, this was the first Gulf war, target their own people. They killed two guys that walk away from the burning tank and they shot them from the helicopter and this is the whole episode in that piece.

Most people don't decode it because of course it's a coded thing and it's context is so absurd to put it into this kind of installation. But at least it's there and people subconsciously feel that this is what it is, and then me it's enough because I understand the other aspects. So anyway, I weight these things differently than I probably should or the gallery would function. And it was just interesting why people let me bring it again somewhere else, what is the key, because these two pieces at least were at least exhibited many times, Automata and Friendly Fire, they'd been exhibited many many times and so forth. So it means that it became in a way part of the art world activity, but on whole different level which I like. That's what I always wanted to be, to have a certain territory for myself that I don't have to share much. It's probably some kind of arrogance that I must admit. But then you cannot dazzle the world because that's not that kind of activity that's really a spectacle. Except for people that understand it like...there was this group, Italians, people that build machines and interactive exhibits. And they came and looked at it and they came to me and said, O.K., you are the master. And I looked at them and I liked the guys what they did before and after and so you have this kind of personal relationship to what you do.

But all the codification there I exercised to the degree that I understood and could possibly rationalize and I had people that could write it into the reality or into the functionality of the apparatus, but it was rather like an industrial...it was architectural, what I call it actually that these are media constructions, and many people refer to it as architectural functions with a lot of codifications of media. And I used at that time video either as closed circuit testimony of the inner functioning or in a way as symbolic language that signs, like in that war and I included certain movies from the first war and the desert but that's all incidental to the whole construction and expression of the whole character.