

WOODY VASULKA

THE BROTHERHOOD

NTT INTERCOMMUNICATION CENTER
TOKYO OPERA CITY, TOKYO, JAPAN

Did I tell you? I'm a war child from Brno (Czech Republic). I used to autopsy those downed German airplanes at the end of World War II, the ones the other boys had been flying on their training mission. I was eight years old and they perhaps, 16, those Nazi pilots. A lot of crashes. Our game was taking their airplanes apart, these German advanced fighter planes. I grew up on that war, I'm part of it.

—Woody Vasulka

The Brotherhood is a dynamic spatial poem to the passions and pathos of war. Fashioned from the broken "toys" and surplus of the military-industrial complex (primarily Los Alamos and Sandia Laboratories), these multimedia installations, *Tables 1-6*, by Woody Vasulka force us to face the raging conflict seated in the human psyche toward the horror and futility of combat. *The Brotherhood* is a looking glass reflecting the dark night of the human soul and its red-blooded polestar of destruction, violence, and greed. *The Art of Memory*, Vasulka's 1987 video masterpiece, was the first expression of his perceptions of the male identity in connection with aggressive behavior. *The Brotherhood* extends this focus.

"After 20 years of making video, film, and music, I have rediscovered that I like to drill holes, to get physically involved in the world, however, not for a need of becoming a sculptor. I just want to bring into this world a machine system from which I can learn," Vasulka said. The first pieces in this machine cycle, *Table 1-Translocations*, *Table 2-Automata*, and *Table 3-Friendly Fire*, were built during the early '90s. *Table 4-Stealth*, *Table 5-Scribe*, and *Table 6-The Maiden* were commissioned for the Tokyo exhibition. All of the installations were controlled by computers and activated by MIDI interface. In his essay for *The Brotherhood* catalogue David Sears Mather wrote:

The Maiden is the most embodied of the installations, since the electronic, pneumatic and mechanical components converge atop a biomorphic structure, akin to animal anatomy. *The Maiden* also operates more gesturally than do the other tables, since pneumatically powered pistons move distinct parts with fluid motions and familiar rhythms in response to viewers.

This work was constructed from an aluminum chiropractic adjustment table, stripped of its padding to reveal the underlying structure. "Team Vasulka," a group of artists and technicians, developed a tortured series of movements for the table using a vocabulary of twisting, gyrating gestures: erotic contractions and releases expressive of birth, sexual arousal, and death. These gestures evoked a haunting gynecological nightmare.

The Maiden is a theatrical performance piece activated by human sounds picked up by a microphone standing prominently in front of her elevated triangular "stage." A soundtrack of avant-garde text written by Melody Sumner Carnahan and spoken languidly by Gene Youngblood established a chimerical contrast to the violent movements of the table. Vasulka's wife and long-time collaborator, Steina, created sensual monochrome video imagery of streaming heads that appeared on two large silver fans positioned on the stage behind the table, which opened and closed when triggered by the appropriate pitch. Her tactile footage of a simulated Mt. Fuji and *The Maiden* herself was projected onto a large video screen on the back wall of the "theater." *The Maiden* was not a geisha hiding shyly behind her fans, but an expressive entity dancing provocatively in front of them.

What made this piece so demanding was that the gallery visitor had to perform in public in order to activate the work. The visitor was urged to take a risk, to erase any inhibitions, to step up to the microphone and enter the realm of fear that one faces as an artist. Although Japanese culture created Karaoke (literal translation—empty orchestra), Karaoke is posturing and mouthing words to an existing audio track, where one takes on the persona of the original performer. Vasulka did not ask his audience to pretend. *The Maiden* exposed the fragility of self-expression of all those who dared to address her. One was asked to strip away the cuticle one builds up to protect oneself, to uncover one's own creativity, and to develop a dialogue with the artwork. How well the visitor communicated depended on the daring and patience he or she had to improvise and experiment with the voice in a public place. As a visitor began to understand and discover which notes or series of notes generated movements, he or she became an actor creating a unique choreographic conversation. How often does an artist ask his audience to step into a creative role and engage its ingenuity in pursuit of developing a potent dialogue with a work of art? Risky business, especially in a culture of deep-rooted discreet behavior and guarded emotions; a culture where public display elicits shame and where ostracism is more dreaded than violence. During interactions with *The Maiden*, Japanese women tended to be bolder in approaching the microphone to vocalize or to sing than the men. The gallery assistants, young female students, who practiced for hours, became well versed in the vocabulary of the piece and were extremely accomplished in their performances with her. They inventively lured men to the microphone with non-threatening demonstrations of whistling or clapping.

In the exhibition catalogue Vasulka stated:

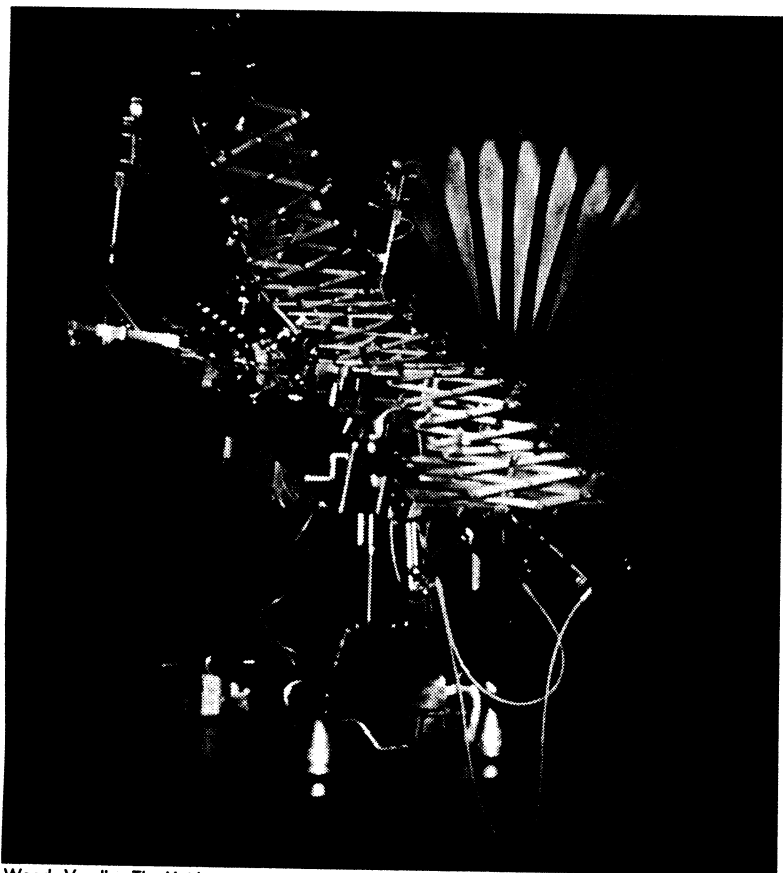
The Maiden was conceived without a mother. She knows her gender by signals from her own body, but up until this moment, when in flight, *The Brotherhood* has taken long and loving care in grooming her for this Maiden Voyage.

The Brotherhood's intent is to deliver the most lethal cargo to the very doorsteps of the carefully chosen enemy. *The Maiden* is the perfect choice for this mission. Raised in isolation and solitude, she does not yet grasp the magnitude of her mission. In flight now, she is overwhelmed by the concerns of her performance, and perhaps she is blinded by short but intense flashes of patriotic pride. After all, she was made exclusively in the USA.

In flight now, there is no home for her to return to. Hers is a one-way, kamikaze style mission. In case she fails, the only action for her to take is self destruction.

Is *The Maiden* a witness to war? A victim? A weapon? A chrysanthemum? A sword? "Don't get me wrong, I have a sort of kinky affection for the machines that can deliver death swiftly and without remorse. All of my life I have tried to deal with this intellectually," Vasulka said. The artist, however, shattered his own ideas of *The Maiden* being an instrument of destruction when he entered "the theater" and "played" his creation himself. The plaintive pathos of his saxophone tamed her violent contortions revealing the vulnerability that lives in all of our hearts. During this intimate conversation with his *Maiden*, Vasulka exposed the feminine and pacific depths of his own poetic soul. Does the inclusion of this female presence in *The Brotherhood* suggest a paradox—a paradox about male identity and the cruel and senseless machines of war?

SUSANNA CARLISLE



Woody Vasulka, *The Maiden*, interactive media installation, 1998
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