

AL ROBBINS WAS A WARRIOR ARTIST

Al Robbins was a warrior. Last year, video artist, Shigeko Kubota honored Al Robbins by calling him a samurai. Al had the cardinal virtue of the Japanese warrior, *makoto*.¹ *Makoto* has to do with purity of motive. *Makoto* is distrustful of the material world with its social and political corruptions. *Makoto* is a kind of sincerity that does not involve logical argument, pragmatic compromise, or common sense. *Makoto* moves by unquestioning spontaneity. It is a kind of sincerity that discards anything that hinders a man from acting wholeheartedly on the impulses of his true feelings. Al Robbins had *makoto*.

Al Robbins was a warrior. Al Robbins was a samurai.

But Al Robbins was not Japanese. Al Robbins was an American Jewish kid from the streets of Chicago. Like the Old Testament warrior, Samson, Al never cut his hair. Al Robbins was a modern Samson. The Samson of the Old Testament fought the Philistines. In the modern world, the term Philistine has come to mean a crass materialism disdainful of intellectual and artistic values. Al Robbins fought the modern Philistines. Samson's uncut hair was his covenant with his God. Al's uncut hair was part of his uncompromising stance toward the Philistines of today.

Al Robbins was a warrior. Al Robbins was an American.

Al Robbins was an American warrior. Al came of age during the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war was a dishonorable war. To come of age as a warrior, when your country is fighting a dishonorable war, is a difficult thing. Al said "I'm attracted to difficult things, the fight, full commitment. Then maybe I'm an artist."²

What does art have to do with "the fight"?

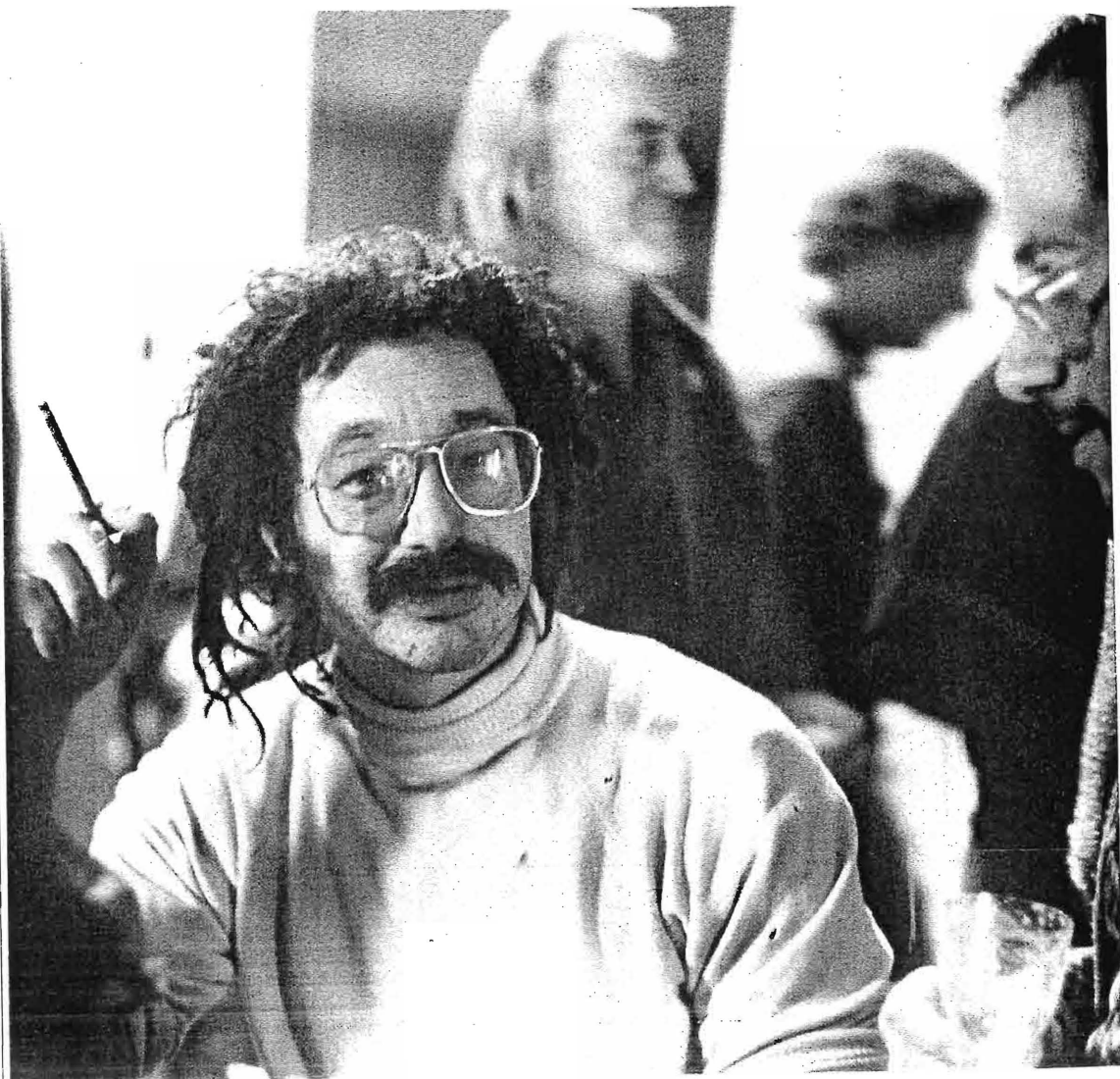
What does art have to do with war?

People go to war to prove their belief system is better than those of their enemies. If they win the war, if they outinjure their enemies, the certainty of their belief system is proven. People get desperate for certainty about their belief system when their image of themselves is threatened. America's image of itself has been threatened by electronic technology. How can this industrial nation be number one in the world if electronics is changing the world into a pluralistic global village? In desperation, America elected a second rate actor as President to project a fantasy of world domination. In turn, this President projected the fantasy of an Invincible Shield for America. Hollywood supplied the named for this fantasy, "Star Wars."

The artist has a capacity to deal with uncertainty. The artist does not work from desperate fear. The artist is willing to suspend his or her identity and wrestles with a new technology on its own terms. The artist does not

cling to a fantasy. In the flesh the artist absorbs the changes brought by a new technology and then encodes new perceptions out of that struggle. To the extent that the artist is successful, and to the extent that the artist's culture understands and recodes its identity according to the perceptions of its artists, wars can be avoided. Flaubert said, "Had they read my *Sentimental*

BY PAUL RYAN



AL ROBBINS, 1979 PHOTO: ROBERT HALLER

VIDEO PORTRAIT OF AL

ROBBINS



PAUL RYAN IS AN ARTIST

AND AUTHOR WHO HAS

WORKED IN VIDEO SINCE

1968. HIS MAIN PROJECTS

HAVE BEEN 1) THE

INVENTION OF

"THREEING," A REPERTOIRE

OF BEHAVIORS THAT CAN

STABILIZE THREE PERSON

INTERACTION. 2) THE

DEVELOPMENT OF THE

EARTHSCORE METHOD FOR

INTERPRETING ECOLOGY

WITH VIDEO. PAUL RYAN

WAS A FRIEND OF AL

ROBBINS.

Education they could have avoided the last war."

Al Robbins was a warrior/artist.

Al Robbins wrestled with electric technology. Al Robbins wrestled with electricity. Al went for the dynamic: motion, time, touch, action. Al lived with the physics of electricity. Al lived with the physicality of video. The grey tones of the cathode ray tube. The endless connectors. The frail tape he knew could crumble and erode. The original tapes on original machines with a sync pulse equivalent to Al's electronic signature. Al absorbed the glitches of video technology into his own nervous system. The sudden toss of his head while talking and his live trigger cuts while videotaping were transformations of each other. His proprioception and his kinesthetic sense were saturated with video.

Al Robbins was a video artist. Al Robbins was an American artist. Out of these struggles Al brought us tapes and installations and poetry that encoded new perceptions useful for an American culture changed by electricity. Perceptions that could make a real contribution towards that ideal of winning the war without entering a battle.

Al is dead. Like many warriors he died young. The war against the fantasies of the Philistines goes on. Part of that war is preserving Al's work, Al's memory. How much of a difference his work makes remains to be seen. America has certainly not recoded its identity in electronic terms. Until America does, it is extremely important to continue to remember Al, to preserve his work. With a video artist such as Al, remembrance is especially important. In the spontaneity of video perception, Al suspended his own memory, he trusted the machine to remember for him. He trusted those who watch his tapes to respect his risks. He trusted those who watch his tapes to remember him. He can no longer remember himself.

Al Robbins was a warrior. Al Robbins was an artist. Al Robbins was an artist/warrior.

I'd like to end by reading a section of a poem Al wrote called "War Poems/Shape of Light."³

FOOTNOTES

1. Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975) pp. 22, 23.
2. Al Robbins, "Artist's Statement" (Robbins Archives, no date).
3. Al Robbins, "War Poems/The Shape of Light," *Ubu #4*, John Mathews, ed. (Ithaca, New York: 1982), pp. 28-29.

or a knife//
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