

# The Television Laboratory at wnet|13 news

August, 1973 Vol.1 No.1

## Television Turns the Cameras on Itself

On May 11, the Television Laboratory at Channel 13 aired a ninety-minute live program entitled *The Television Show*. The program was billed as "a video consciousness-raising event" and was a pilot for a possible series intended to cover the medium from cathode to cable. The program was telecast live from 10:30 until midnight out of the Lab's own Studio 46, where the use of two synthesizers and other specialized equipment gave the program a unique look.

*The Television Show* was conceived and hosted by David Silver, a young Briton known particularly to Boston audiences for his controversial series "What's Happening, Mr. Silver?" In a live panel format reminiscent of television's earlier

days, Silver was joined by *Newsweek* critic John Leonard (alias Cyclops), Nam June Paik, "the father of video art," award-winning filmmaker Ed Emshwiller, and public access specialist George Stoney of the Alternate Media Center in New York City.

As an added dimension to the live spots, a bank of phones was installed in the studio and Silver often invited viewers to phone responses to questions posed throughout the show such as "What's your favorite TV memory?" and "Does television have too much power or too little?"

Also, in keeping with the total television feeling, the set consisted primarily of a wall of television monitors, each tuned to a different

New York City station, enabling viewers and panelists to keep tabs on the alternate programming.

In addition to the live spots, *The Television Show* integrated pre-taped material into its format covering many of the diverse aspects of the medium. Highlights of this material were:

Some vintage Ernie Kovacs kinescopes provided especially for the telecast by Edie Adams; a report on the *Star Trek* phenomenon filmed at the 1973 Start Trek Convention in New York; samplings of the work of Top Value Television (TVT), a group of independent producers who use ½" tape as their primary recording mode; a segment of Ed Emshwiller's highly-acclaimed art piece "Scapemates" which illustrates the applications of computers to television; a glimpse at "Global Groove," Nam June Paik's latest undertaking as a leader in the avant-garde; a parody of television's new fall season by satirist Marshall Efron; a look at television at its most intimate — in the hands of the public via public access and cable stations, which cover everything from a mother's plea for the return of her lost son to the Ku Klux Klan broadcasting its own message; and a profile of Andy Pahoben, the Parker Towers superintendent who turned a closed circuit security system into the building complex's own television station, with himself the host of Parker Towers' late night talk show.

*The Television Show* was made possible by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, and was produced by David Loxton and directed by Fred Barzyk. ◀▲



David Silver, backed by monitors, takes an on-air call from a viewer.

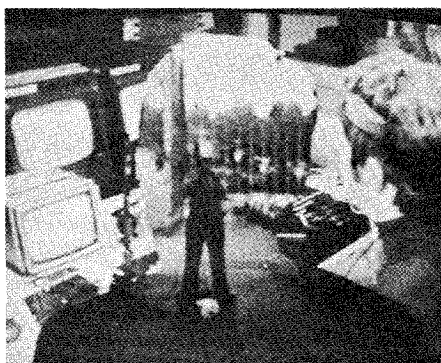
# Filmgoing/Videogoing: Making Distinctions

By Douglas Davis

Thinking about the differences between video and film — which is nothing less than thinking about the essences of each — must begin in the experience of seeing. What we see depends on how we see, and where, and when. There is the experience of going out to see a film, an experience that begins early in our lives, with the approach of the theater marquee, the press of the crowds, the seat found in the darkness, and then the huge, overpowering screen, larger than any imaginable life, images as big as a child imagines a building to be. Later the act of perception takes place in a dwindled space, brought on by reaching adulthood, and by the change in taste. The screen may be smaller, the noises around us less exuberant, but still we have gone to this space, gone out to sit in the dark before large moving images. We go “out” to see a painting or a drawing, too, to a public place, to a museum or a gallery, or a cathedral. Since the nineteenth century, however, since the growth of an audience that could purchase works of art and hang them in private spaces (instead of an audience limited to princes and cathedrals), we have seen these museums or galleries works intended for small, private spaces, for city apartments and suburban homes. We see them even in the public museum in environments grown increasingly intimate; we focus in upon these images in light directed so as to draw us further inside them; we focus, stand, and then move on, noiselessly, from one work to another, in control of our own time. The scale of man to image is equalized, particularly in this century, when the epic or public painting has only lately begun to appear again. And then there is the experience of seeing video.

Think about this act, this totality of perception. It falls somewhere between the experiences I have just

described, between film and painting. A small screen, lit from within, its moving images paradoxically built, as E. H. Gombrich points out, on the physical limitation in our vision: our eyes cannot keep up with the luminous dot that sweeps continually across the inner face of that tube. We do not go out to see video. We turn it on without any sense of occasion; often, indeed, we turn it on unconsciously and leave it there, the images moving across the screen, the sounds emerging from their tiny speakers without our knowing. The focusing, as in painting and drawing and sculpture, is inward, onto something. (While



*Talk Out!* 1972 by Douglas Davis

watching a film, the eye looks up and out; the mind is drawn helplessly away from itself, into a larger-than-life existence.) We give video our attention, not the reverse; even in moments of absorption the screen is left without compunction, for a drink, a phone call, an errand. There is no one around me, usually, that I do not know. Often I am alone before the screen, as I might choose to be alone before a painting. Yet there is a felt link to some larger consensus. The viewer is alone but he knows, subconsciously, that he is part of an audience, whose remaining members he can neither see nor hear.

The video experience is not, I am trying to suggest, a simple experience. It has affinities with film, painting, and theater, but there are as many contradictions. Even the experience we know, difficult enough to understand, is changing. Television screens are growing larger; audiences are becoming lonelier, more individuated, thanks to

cable television, half-inch videotape, and videocassettes, all of which provide specialized programming choices. Our attitude toward the screen — of which this essay is a part — is becoming more self-conscious. Even so, it is clear that video's affinity with other media, and particularly with film, is conditional. *How* we see it, physically and psychically, is the major condition. Film performers, seen on the street, carry an aura; they can overpower us, in real life. Video performers remind their public — when seen in the street — of next-door neighbors; we reach out to shake their hands instinctively.

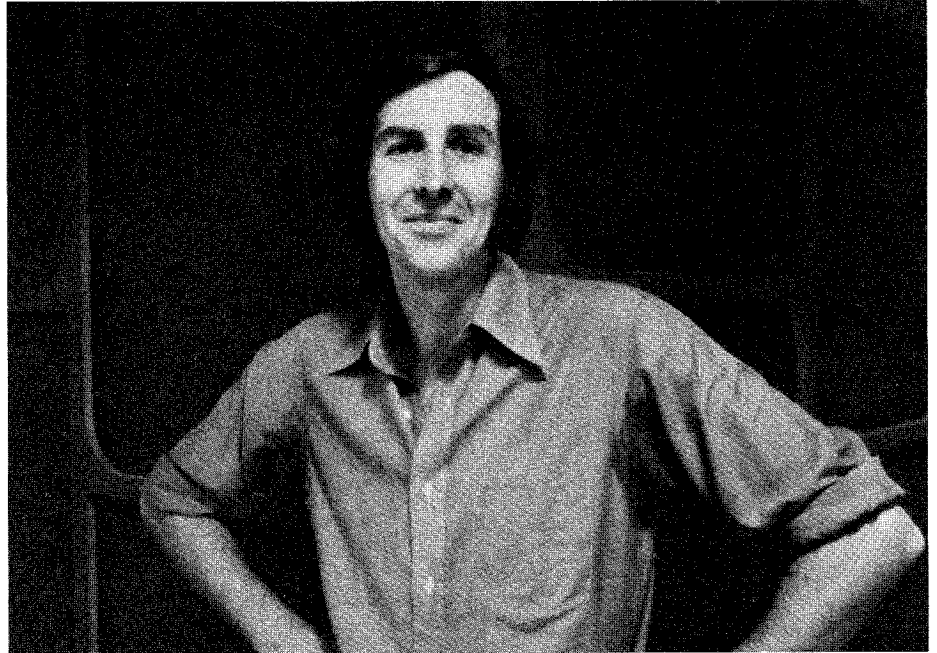
If I seem to be describing a medium that is less iconic in its nature than film, remember that I am doing so from a basis in perception. If we are going to capture video as a medium for high, difficult, and intense art, we will only do so by utilizing it for its own sake. Artist, critic, and public must act on the certain basis of how video is seen. The painter does not need to think this issue through; he knows (without knowing) the perceptual system into which his work will fit. So does the filmmaker. From the earliest age he is engaged in that perceptual system. We are all moviegoers first, even those of us who weaned on video. For television has not yet been defined. From its inception, it has been controlled by men and women forced to pay for its existence by reaching an impossibly wide audience. We have not seen video yet. Television until now has been made by sensibilities conditioned in popular fiction, film, and theater. I cannot think of a completely equivalent case in the history of the arts. It is the case of an enormously rich and potential medium coming to birth in the hands of people forbidden (by economics) to discover its essence.

This is precisely why artists untrained in either television, film, or the theater are beginning to show us more about video than we have yet dreamt of. This awakening has nothing to do with the technology of half-inch videotape except insofar

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# An Interview With: Lab Director David Loxton

The Television Laboratory began in February of 1972 under grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. Subsequently in January 1973, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded the Lab the largest grant in the history of experimental television. In the following excerpt from an interview conducted by Jonathan Price, David Loxton talks about the Lab and its role in the world of video.



David Loxton, Director of the TV Lab

JP: Thinking about the uniqueness of the Lab, there are three synthesizers, plus a functioning studio. Are there any other mechanical things that make it unique as a center?

JP: Could you talk a little about the things a video synthesizer can do which couldn't be done before?

JP: What about the other synthesizer you have in the studio?

JP: Is that the one he demonstrated at "The Kitchen?"

JP: What that thing seemed to me to do is internal zooms.

DL: As far as the equipment goes, you have to define it in terms of what the other two centers have in Boston and San Francisco. The WGBH experiments in Boston were primarily oriented to see what happens when you take existing broadcast equipment, existing cameras, an existing studio, and see how far you can push standard equipment into rather extraordinary effects. In San Francisco at the NCET, the center went very much in the opposite direction; they never really had access to a studio but totally developed a non-studio environment, working almost only with the synthesizers. What our TV Lab has is a combination of both of those.

DL: Nam June Paik said he built his synthesizer because he felt there was, within television, a tremendous range of possibilities of manipulation and control in the presentation of images, shapes and patterns of colors which had not been explored. As an artist he was anxious to develop equipment which did not cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to create the freedom of images he was eager to create. In many ways what he did was put back into television all the bugs that engineers had spent fifteen to twenty years getting out. Eventually he decided to build his own synthesizer, a piece of equipment which would create a visual picture. There are two kinds of synthesizers. The basic premise of synthesization is that you can, without any external source, create images, shapes, colors, form, and movement, using certain things which are unique to the television system, like feedback, and you can control these things with voltage controls. That's one type of video synthesizer, of which Eric Siegel's here and Stephen Beck's out on the west coast are the best examples.

DL: That's the Rutt/Etra synthesizer. It was developed by Bill Etra, who is one of the artists-in-residence at the Lab, in conjunction with Steve Rutt, who is part of an electronics company out in New Jersey.

DL: Yes.

DL: It's designed on a modular basis, which means that it can be continually expanded. But the unique thing, as compared to the Nam June synthesizer, is that what was once only possible on film can now be done in real time electronically. Bill can take a full-size picture and

electronically compress it down and put it anywhere on the screen at any size, right side up, flipped, or whatever. That is something Nam June's cannot do; his is a full-scan system.

JP: I wondered if you could do two things: first, talk a little about the individual pieces that have been made, and two, try to sum up what is unique about video art. I'd like to try to get at some of the things that distinguish video from film, TV, photography, drama, and some of the other things that people confuse video with.

DL: I would hate to see the Lab be presented as simply a place where video art takes place, because the philosophy is broader, and talks about television and includes something like "The Television Show." Video art is part of it. The Lab is supposed to be doing a totality of experimentation, and an analysis of what television is now, and hopefully, through some of the things we do, of what television could become. We do a lot of video art because I feel television should have its unique grammar and vocabulary of expression. So in letting an artist explore the possibilities of television, we're hoping that out of that will come a much broader understanding of what television can be. Already Nam June Paik and Ed Emshwiller — some of their works — are beginning to be felt throughout television. It's a redefinition of the television medium.

For instance, the double channel show, ("Two's Better Than One" — New York's first full-scale stereo television experiment — Ed) did not include any video art; what the double channel show was about was to try and give a viewer a new consciousness of what television can do. With the idea of two sets, placed six or eight feet apart in your living room, and Bob and Ray walking back and forth and talking in the center, we were trying to create the sense of a live theatrical environment via those two TV sets.

On "The Television Show," what most of it was about was an alternate system of television. It was a fairly heavy political show, because of the excerpts we chose to show, like the Public Access tapes and the Michael Shamberg convention reports; it shows there are an awful lot of people making television now, and it shows that television has very different applications than the ones we're used to.

JP: George Stoney was very good in showing the Ku Klux Klan.

DL: He raised an incredibly heavy issue. He himself said, that the last thing in the world he wanted was the Ku Klux Klan getting on television and expressing its points of view. But on the other hand, he felt very strongly that television should now be made accessible to the general public, where it's now controlled by the powers of commercial television, or even the powers of public television. He simply raised that question. There's a whole damn show to be done about that one question!

JP: One of the things that happens with people who hear about video is that they get struck with machine fear. Is there anything reassuring you can say to people like that?

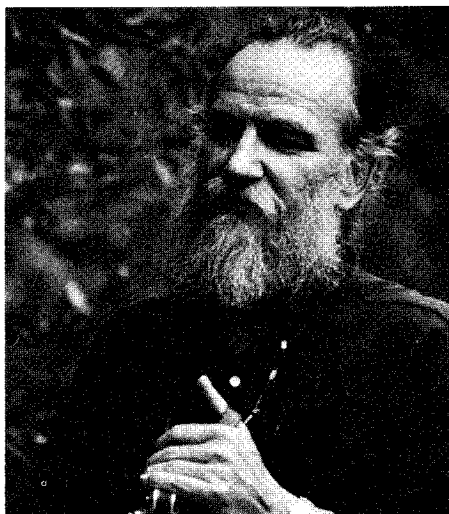
DL: I don't know . . . the Lab is becoming a very freaky and frightening place because it is so very sophisticated. Even in the first stage of Nam June's synthesizer, there were 10 million possibilities of images it could create by itself. Now you add to that the Rutt/Etra synthesizer and our switcher and our two cameras and suddenly you've expanded the range of what you can do to absolutely unlimited possibilities. You go into the studio now and you look at those two synthesizers side by side and each one with thirty or forty control knobs and switchers; you then look at the mixer switcher which has eighty other buttons and fader bars; and then you realize that out in the studio are two cameras, and a film chain somewhere else. The simple possibilities of combinations create this absolutely insane monster of possibilities. And you need the brashness of a Nam June and the sublime confidence of an Ed Emshwiller to say I know exactly what I want to get out of that. For someone who just comes in out of the blue, to face that technology is frightening.

Stan Vanderbeek, who has had quite some experience with video, spent a week in the Lab just getting to know a tenth of what is possible for him to do, and at the end of the week, working solidly eight hours a day trying things all over the place, he was able to come out and say, "I think I now know what I might be able to do." This was simply an exploration for him, and he's just scratched the surface. We're developing a very sophisticated people who really know the most sophisticated system in the country. ◀▲

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*Jonathan Price is a "concrete" poet and a free-lance writer who has spent several days in the Lab as a guest artist. He is currently at work on a piece for the "New York Times Magazine" on the Television Laboratory.*

# Profile: Ed Emshwiler, Creator of Scapemates



Ed Emshwiler

Photo: Carol Emshwiler

Of Ed Emshwiler's *Scapemates*, the "New York Times" TV critic John O'Connor wrote that it "moves briskly and effectively, from fingers and arms solidly framed in hard-edge shapes to bodies melting in prismatic undulation against a dazzling background of electronic impulses... The result, suggesting both eerie landscape and claustrophobic escape, works impressively going beyond experiment to solid achievement."

Solid achievement is not new to the creator of the internationally awarded film "Relativity." Ed Emshwiler, however, prefers to talk about his method rather than his muse because he prefers to let his works speak for themselves. But he did reveal that "Although it may sound corny, I always try to incorporate a kind of implicit poetry in my works; a statement isn't blatantly made but each person watching is given enough to have a personal interpretation."

Emshwiler had for some time been intrigued by the potential of analog computers for creative image making. "I hadn't liked any of the uses of the computer that I'd seen on TV but I felt challenged by the technology."

Using the computer of Dolphin Productions, a division of Computer Image Corporation, Emshwiler spent a few days experimenting for the TV Lab in the summer of 1972. Based on the success of those initial days, the Lab was able to obtain a grant from the National

Endowment on the Arts to help Emshwiler create the final 30-minute *Scapemates* program.

Emshwiler used the Dolphin computer to create the environment of *Scapemates*. He began with black and white art work, and then created basic shapes and movements electronically. He was able to achieve the unique three dimensional appearance of *Scapemates* at this stage of production. "All of the computer stuff I'd seen was so flat in appearance that I wanted to try electronically to convey depth. I also was challenged to use the computer for rectilinear forms as opposed to the curved forms which have predominated in previous computer video."

Emshwiler took the tape of the basic environment to the TV Lab's Studio 46 where two dancers, Emery Hermans and Sarah Shelton, were choreographed and electronically chroma-keyed into the video environment. "The dancers couldn't really see what was happening on the tape as they were doing it," remembers Emshwiler, "so they pretty much had to take my direction, but they were familiar with the tape before they tried dancing for it."

Final background and color were

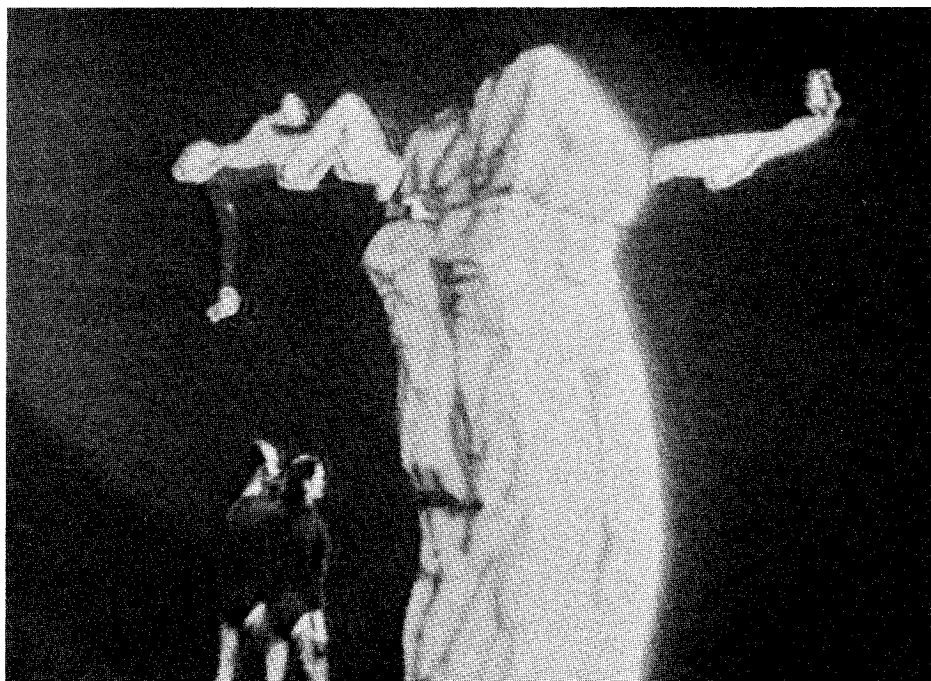
added with the TV Lab's Paik/Abe video synthesizer. Video editing was used to create multiple generations of imagery which added texture to the final TV image. Emshwiler composed the soundtrack using tape recorders and a Moog audio synthesizer.

Ed Emshwiler feels that *Scapemates* is the first work of a new art form utilizing computers. He firmly believes that computers are "a terrific way to choreograph visual material. It gives an artist access to dimensions that previously could not be visually expressed." That's about as close as Emshwiler will get in revealing the underlying mystical feeling which most viewers powerfully experience when watching the program.

Originally a celebrated avant-garde filmmaker, Emshwiler, while not renouncing film as a medium, is pretty much committed to video in the foreseeable future. "There's something about the sharpness and the potential for electronic control of the picture which you just can't do with film, that makes me feel that I want to work with video for the time being." ◀▲

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In the next issue of VISION look for a story on Mr. Emshwiler's latest video work, *Pilobolous and Joan*. — Ed.



Totem sequence from *Scapemates*



## Lab Notes:

*Ed Emswiller's* video art piece *Scapemates* was lauded by "New York Times" TV critic *John O'Connor* as "going beyond experiment to solid achievement." The 30-minute program which was originally aired over WNET in New York was recently broadcast by WGBH in Boston as part of its *Music Image* series. "Boston Globe" critic *Percy Shane* referred to *Scapemates* as "the most striking entry in the series yet."

*Bill Etra* has completed work on a new video synthesizer in conjunction with *Steve Rutt* of the Rutt Institute. The Rutt/Etra synthesizer is now housed at the Lab's Studio 46 along with the Paik/Abe synthesizer. A fuller description of both synthesizers is included in "Getting Technical" on page 8.

Noted video artist *Stan Vanderbeek* spent a week in May with the Lab exploring the potentials of Studio 46 and its equipment. He will return later in the year.

*CEMREL, Inc.*, a national aesthetic education organization based in St. Louis is producing a 20-minute television pilot which will explore children's aesthetics. The program is being produced in conjunction with The TV Lab and the School Television Service at Studio 46.

Lab Director *David Loxton* participated on a panel of the Video and the Arts Conference sponsored by the *South Carolina Arts Commission*. Other participants were *Chloe Aaron* of the National Endowment on the Arts, *Thea Sklover* and *Lee Ferguson* of *Open Channel*, and *Alan Miller*, conductor of the *Denver Symphony Orchestra*. Loxton spoke about "Media as a Vehicle for the Arts" and showed tapes from the Lab.

In the past six months, the Lab has been visited by video artists from Sweden, Germany, Mexico, England, France, Canada, and Venezuela.

*The Kitchen*, New York City's underground video gallery, invited the Lab to exhibit several of its pieces and to demonstrate synthesizer techniques. *The Kitchen* is located at the Mercer Arts Center and is a regular showcaser of video art of all types.

*Woody* and *Steina Vasulka*, resident artists at the Lab, are working on several projects in the general area of human perception in relation to video. They are working with New York Medical College psychologist *Peter Crown* on a plan to create video directly from the functions of the human body such as skin temperature and respiratory rate. The Vasulkas also plan to start cataloguing video effects in an effort to develop a specialized language for the new TV technology.

*The Muses de Arte Moderno* in Mexico City is sponsoring a major international video exhibition beginning July 12th. *Bill Etra*, resident artist at the Lab, will serve as its representative and will exhibit a collection of the Lab's works. This will be Mexico's first video encounter. Other scheduled participants are *Nam June Paik*, *Stan Vanderbeek*, *Ed Emswiller*, *George Stoney* of the Alternate Media Center, *Doug Davis*, art critic for "Newsweek," and *Ann Turner* from the National Center for Experiments in Television.

The research division of *Bell Labs* recently invited the Lab to present a collection of its works. The visit was arranged by *Ken Knowlton*, a name familiar to video artists and filmmakers for the unique computer films created by himself and *Lillian Schwartz*. Both Ken and Lillian have spent several days in the Lab as guest artists. ◀▲

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far as its appearance made personal investigations possible, as the arrival of the easel painting (as distinct from the frieze or the fresco) made another art accessible. It has to do with thinking afresh, looking at video as if for the first time. I cannot stress too much the necessity of this freshness. When I talk to students about video I always begin by asking them what "television" is (because I don't know myself) and we always conclude, at the end of this session, that we aren't sure of very much. The more I work in it, the less I know. Nam June Paik once told me that he always discovers more in his work when he sees it broadcast than he put into it. I do not claim that all artists are like this. James Rosenquist once refused to work in experimental video because the screen wasn't large enough. "Come back when it is at least three feet by five feet," he said. He brought the conditions of painting to bear on what he saw, as a filmmaker might, who fills up the tiny screen with epic-sized images. There is nothing more intriguing to me than the size — and the variety of the size — of the video screen. I once telecast on cable in New York City a color tape (*Studies in Color Videotape II*) that focuses upon a moving red light image at the very end. Depending on the size, shape and nature of the receiving set, the viewers see many different lights, in some case highly luminous, multi-colored images. The reactions depended upon the condition of the set, which is a condition of the medium to be faced and used, not denied.

Let me return again to where and how we see video, to catch it there in a very special moment. Alone once more, in the home, not formally seated, or surrounded by large numbers of people. In that moment, we can also be connected to the uncertainty of real life. Film is always prepared for us, its time telescoped by the making hand. In the theater we inhabit the same time in which the players perform, but we know that the next step, and the step after that, has been

predetermined by the playwright. What we have come to call "live" video links with "life" in a highly concentrated form; when we are watching "live" phenomena on the screen we participate in a subtle existentialism. Often it is so subtle that it nears boredom. Yet we stay, participating. The endless moon walk, the endless convention, the endless (in another way) *American Family*. In all these cases, the "live" dimension kept its audience there, before the small screen, alone, at home, waiting, because it knows that anything may happen next, as in life. I mention *An American Family* deliberately; though edited, it made less attempt to structure and pace narrative events than any popular television series yet. Often, long stretches of meaningless, boring conversation were allowed to play out, unstructured. "Live" time approached life time. For this reason and because we knew the *Family* was "real," we stayed, waiting, aware that something unpredictably "live" might occur next.

Video is not life, of course, any more than any art is. Unlike the other arts, though, it approaches the pace and unpredictability of life, and is seen in a perceptual system grounded in the home and the self. I do not know how we moviegoers are going to understand this, thoroughly, but we must. The link between the formal occasion that is film and the private occasion that is video must be both recognized and forgotten. There will be no video art until we approach this medium as if it had not existed before. ◀▶

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*Douglas Davis is Newsweek's art critic and author of Art and the Future to be published this year by Praeger Publishers, Inc. Davis himself is an artist who has worked extensively in new graphic techniques and video-tape and has recently completed a guest residency with the Television Laboratory.*

## vision news

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### Editors

Diane English  
Danny Goldberg

### Design

Joel Shukovsky

### Photographs

Carl Samrock

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### Director

David Loxton

### Administrative Assistant

Diane English

### Unit Manager

Darlene Mastro

### Supervising Engineer

John Godfrey

### Assistant Engineer

Knut Olberg

### Artists-in-Residence

Peter Crown

Ed Emshwiller

William Etra

William Gwinn

Nam June Paik

Joseph Seale

Alphonse Schilling

David Silver

Steina Vasulka

Woody Vasulka



Send Comments and Information to:  
Editor, The Television Laboratory  
News, 304 W. 58th Street, New York,  
New York 10019

# Getting Technical: A Look At Studio 46

by John Godfrey, Supervising Engineer of the Television Laboratory

Since everyone in the first issue of VISION seems to be taking a crack at defining television, I'm going to try to define it in technical terms, and more specifically, in terms of Studio 46 — the home base of the TV Lab.

At one time not so long ago, Studio 46 was your ordinary small, unglamorous and rather dusty television studio. Two years later, it is the product of a pygmalion-type transformation. Besides purchasing and in some cases *creating* the equipment there, we've tried to make the place as accessible to human beings as possible. The institutional green walls were covered with wood paneling, the control room was redesigned, and the studio space was divided in such a way as to become modular — able to accommodate research, production, and post-production simultaneously.

The following is a list of equip-

ment which is housed in the studio.

1. Two Shibaden Plumicon color cameras with auxiliary gear.

2. A black and white film chain which takes 35mm or 16mm optical sound. A Riker colorizer is used with that film chain to colorize films and slides (this went into general use in the early sixties when color film chains came into use but it is still useful for adding color burst and background).

3. A 1400-8 double re-entry Grass Valley switcher with the following accessories: two chroma-keys; two background generators; two matte color generators; a downstream borderline generator, capable of color matte, borderline, drop shadow, or outline; a wave form generator/wipe generator, with border and modulation positioner; two auxiliary busses for routing; and a potential for auto-dissolve and auto fades instead of manual levers.

4. A Paik/Abe video synthesizer which takes 21 inputs (for instance, so it can simultaneously take inputs from seven small Sony cameras

seven external sources, and seven audio sources); a colorizer encoder and a second color encoder which is separate output; and two image converters capable of xyz modulation.

5. A Rutt/Etra video synthesizer which allows electronic zoom, position and modulation of any video fed into the monitor in thirty billion ways (that's a rough estimate). The synthesizer is a totally expandable system.

6. Two IVC 870 one-inch editing video recorders and two IVC 825 one-inch record and playback video recorders.

7. A Panasonic NV-3130 half-inch EIA-J color standard editing deck.

8. A Sony half-inch Porta-Pak.


9. An Ampex 7800 one-inch monochrome video recorder.

10. A Sony three-quarter-inch video cassette recorder and player.

11. Several color monitors, vectorscopes, etc.

12. A CVS 500, digital video signal corrector with a 95 microsecond window capable of dubbing one-inch wide band color or Porta-Pak half-inch black and white or tapes with non-horizontal locked edits to two-inch tape suitable for TV broadcast. This piece of equipment may set off a revolution in television production.

13. A CCA 30 input, 10 channel stereo audio mixer capable of handling high and low level input, plus two equalizers and a stereo compressor-expander, a Revox quarter-inch tape deck and a QRK stereo turntable.

14. As you will see we have adopted primarily IVC as our basic recording mode for "notebook" and reference purposes. Studio 46 itself is connected by two-way Telco Line to Channel 13's main studio, Studio 55, for 2" recording and playback purposes whenever necessary. Final assemblage of works is often completed at Studio 55's post-production facility where there is access to three AVR's, five Ampex 2000's, an IVR 1200, a post-production switcher, and an HS-200 slo-mo freeze-frame machine with computer control. 



John Godfrey sits between the recently installed Grass Valley Switcher (foreground) and the Rutt/Etra synthesizer (background).

In the next issue of VISION, this column will feature a detailed description and evaluation of the CVS 500 digital video signal corrector.