

# Meet the TV Lab, Part I

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The Television Laboratory at WNET/13, generally known to New York video cognoscenti as The TV Lab, is one of those pervasive but mysterious entities that form the substructure of the video-maker's world. The Lab represents the acme in video equipment sophistication to those who require it; it represents, through its endowment of certain videomakers with artist-in-residence status, recognition as a peer among peers; and it represents at present the only door to one of the gut hopes of the majority of videomakers—broadcast time in the Big Apple (and tomorrow the world).

The Keeper of the Gate is the Director of the Lab, David Loxton. It is no exaggeration to say that the Lab as it exists is primarily his creation, with Nam June Paik and Supervising Engineer John Godfrey in major supporting roles. It is Loxton's energy, toughness, vision, caution and an ability to interface the Lab with the broadcast TV world that has made the well-equipped, respected and productive place the Lab is now. Conversely, Loxton is also responsible for what the Lab is not, which we'll go into later.

"The Lab that exists today was really created in February 1972," Loxton said. "It was given a permanent staff and the old *Newsfront* program's black-and-white studio facilities at East 46th Street, with about \$50 thousand each from the Rockefeller Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. I had been producing some dramatic shows for NET, and was asked to take it over. Our mandate was not really broadcast-oriented then. Rather, we were to see if it were possible to create a place and an organizational structure that would support projects by artists working in television. It was a one-year trial period, really."

"We produced some interesting works that first year. Nam June Paik was the first (and still is) artist-in-residence, and he developed his synthesizer and did a number of projects on it. We produced *Carousel* and *Televisions*, two anthologies that included both existing video works (including some from WGBH in Boston and the National TV Lab in San Francisco) as well as works made that year in the Lab. The one that got the most attention was a two-channel program we did with Channel 5, *The Television Show*. It was a call-in talk show with taped excerpts, hosted by Bob and Ray, with the two channels treated as separate but interactive entities in both video and audio modes. But perhaps the most important achievement of that year, at least for the long term, was a special arrangement we made with the unions that enables us to go up to the final production stage with a minimal crew. Without that agreement, no artist could touch a switch, and



David Loxton, Nam June Paik, and John Godfrey, at TV lab with Charlotte Moorman

therefore no artist could do any first-hand experimental work; without that, we simply could not continue to exist, because we could not possibly get the funds to pay a round-the-clock union crew while the artists worked here."

The presence of Nam June Paik as a basic, continuing aspect of the Lab was also established that first year. Other videomakers notwithstanding, the dominant aesthetic of the Lab is Paik's. His synthesizer (the Paik/Able, made with engineer Shua Abe) controls the basic texture of the Lab's synthesized tapes, which is to say the majority. Paik's commitment to video collage and image manipulation is also evident in Lab-originated works—at least in those that were pushed through to the broadcast stage. At the same time, Paik's openness to different video ideas and styles, his use of portapak footage, and his basically playful, life-oriented attitude is also reflected in the Lab's finished productions to date. Yet Paik's first-among-peers position at the Lab is not only a reflection of his own abilities, but also is Loxton's creation. Paik is the Lab's best public face. Paik is The Recognized Creative Genius, and The Lab is his Creative Home. His presence therefore brings the incomprehensible work of the Lab more into line with public expectations. After all, who expects to understand the work of a Genius? Paik's residence makes the Lab's creative license acceptable.

In terms of alternative creative possibilities and uses of its facilities, the Lab experimented with public access. From June 1972 to '73 it was funded by NYSCA as an access center. "We made the Lab available to anyone who wanted to use it on a first-come, first-served basis," Loxton said. "We had all kinds of people here—people who'd never used a video deck before to seasoned video artists. We had poets, sculptors, engineers, and even an art critic, working here on short-term projects. During this time it became apparent that the Lab just wasn't being properly used in this way. We had acquired a lot of equipment by then and a few days simply weren't adequate to master it. So what we did was to create a number of long-term residencies of 12 to 18 months, during which the artists involved could let projects evolve at their own leisure. The first artists under

this program included people like Bill Gwinn, Ed Emschwiler, Bill Etra and the Vasulkas. A number of major works came out of this program and were presented as specials in 1973 and '74. That was really the second phase of the Lab's development."

If it were not evident from its programs, this account makes it clear that the Lab's development as a sophisticated video equipment center determines (to a great extent) what happens there. The man responsible (to a great extent) and a third major hand in the Lab is John Godfrey, who oversees the physical complex of the Lab, and has helped to create it from the beginning. To the Paik/Abe, Godfrey added a specialized Rutt/Etra synthesizer, which does specific things like electronic zooming and raster rotation; a Grass Valley Switcher, a supersophisticated piece of equipment that has even more sophisticated accessories, including chroma keys and outline generators; the first CVS-500 and later, the new CVS-504 time-base generator, which makes it possible to broadcast the relatively unstable portapak videotapes; and a PDP-8 computer that can do practically anything else.

Godfrey is also responsible for working with the artists at the Lab. As a result of his interaction with different artists, opinions of Godfrey run from "a terrific guy" to "a pain in the neck." The fact of the matter is that anyone working at the Lab has to work closely with Godfrey. The Lab at East 46th Street is his turf, and to a certain degree an artist's success with the Lab's equipment is affected by his ability to work with Godfrey and make use of his expertise.

Clearly, the Lab is laying groundwork for our future TV viewing possibilities. Next week, we'll take a look at its relation to Channel 13, its funding, and its selection of artists. We'll also cover its connection with TVTV, its view of other types of video, and the whole Video & Television Review, Channel 13's Friday/Sunday night VTR Program from the Lab.

For the rest of this month, Channel 13's sign-offs consist entirely of a series of short pieces about New York—*Suite 212*, by Nam June Paik made at the Lab. Anyone wanting to see pure Paik can do so any evening around 12:55 p.m.

## Imprint

in the last few months and she is relying on the Commission counts to hold up during the negotiations.

Under the statute that provides for conciliation, the City Commission of Human Rights had the choice of submitting an independent proposal or joining with the plaintiffs. The Commission chose to join WC=EO. Together this week they will ask for remedies for the NBC women whose professional lives have been stymied and for basic changes in the system that led to male favoritism.

"The Peacock's a Porker," commented *Variety* when the counts first came out in January.

"We'll see," says Stanley, gathering up her papers.

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