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# VIDEOSCOPE

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# RALPH HOCKING AND THE EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION CENTER

By  
ROBERTA GRANT

**R**alph Hocking aids and abets serious play with video systems in upstate New York. He is the founder and Director of the Experimental Television Center, Ltd. in Binghamton.

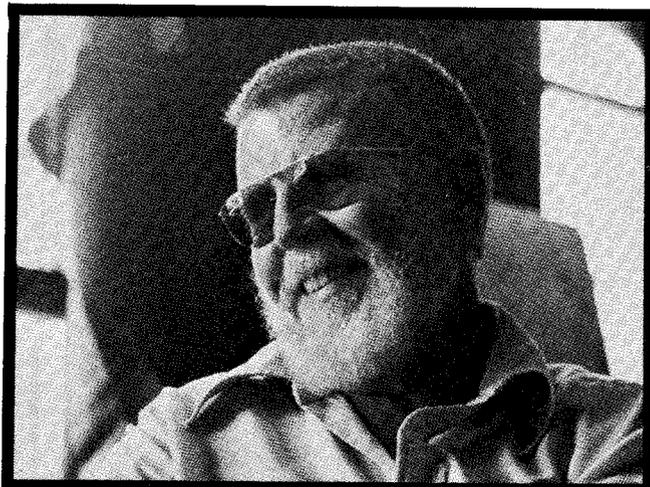
Established in 1971, the Center operates a large studio facility available to independent videomakers (free of charge to New York residents). It also offers an instruction program in video, workshops in video art exploration and a visiting artist series including tape showings, discussions and performances open to the public and involving such videomakers as Nam June Paik, Jean-Pierre Boyer, Ken Marsh, Gary Hill and others. The Center, funded primarily by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, operates workshops for high school students and also cooperates with the SUNY Cinema Department of which Hocking is the Chairman on video courses offered at the University as well as co-sponsored activities within and outside the classroom.

Ralph Hocking is nonchalant about the energy, creativity and exploratory processes he has nurtured. "I got into television by curiosity more than anything else. I saw that a lot of people were interested in it, interested in making their own statements with it, and I've known Nam June since 1968, so I thought I'd pull a few things together and see what came of it. Russell Connor came up with the initial money from the State Council on the Arts and we opened the Center.

"In the beginning, our policy was just to open the doors and let anyone borrow the equipment to see what they could do with it. We wanted to reach the artists, the students, faculty—everyone. 'Take it out and see what happens' was our approach. At the same time we started working with synthesizers. Abe brought us one in 1971 and we got people working with it.

"Then I became involved with the advisory panels on the Arts Council. The more I saw what was happening there, the more I thought the money from the Council should be supporting the arts primarily. So the Center started moving towards a tighter viewpoint. My initial encounters with Nam June made a lot of sense to me. I'm primarily concerned with what an artist can do with the electron. So now the Center has moved from a 'take it out and play' attitude to more of a focus on art and experimentation.

"We ask that the people who come here have a certain knowledge of video to begin with. We don't sit



Chip Kizzia

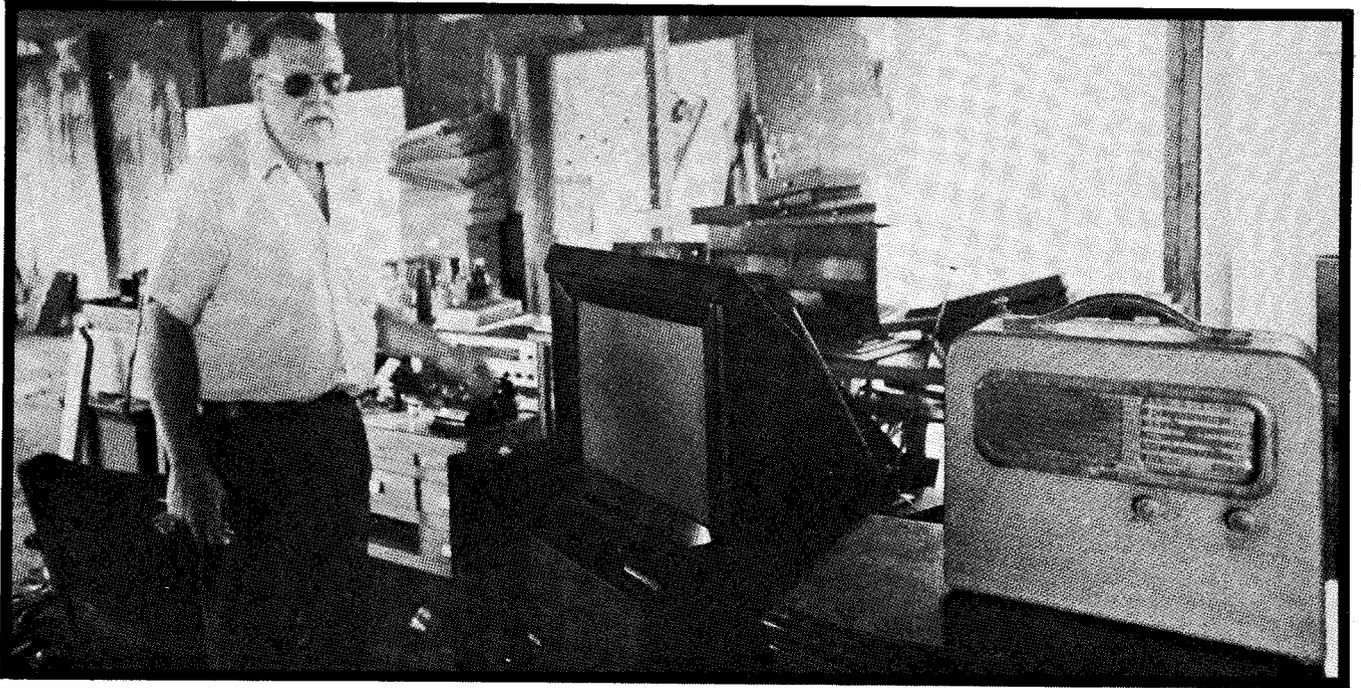
*Ralph Hocking*

here and help them. The main reason they come is to get at the equipment. If they want to bring fifteen people with them they can. We're not a very tight organization in terms of security—there's nothing we ask for."

*VIDEOSCOPE* asked Hocking about the first tapes done at the Center. "A lot of the first tapes that people made here were boring as hell. But the *process* was very important to their lives. The main thing I understood was that people want to have control over the media. They don't want to just sit there and be told by broadcast or cable. We had a cable show for awhile where we could put on anything we wanted. But nobody was interested. They wanted to take a playback and monitor and put it in their living room to watch with their friends. That makes a lot of sense to me. The biggest problem with television is that there's no individual, personal control over it. It ought to be done through disc systems or computer recalls that you can punch into the library structure and watch in your house when you want."

Short of that ideal, Hocking isn't too interested in distribution. "A broadcast station is a conduit for distribution. Eventually people from the Center will get their tapes on the air, but I don't think I'm going to affect our culture by being on cable or broadcast because most of what is broadcast is entertainment, though I see great things happen in places like Channel 13. I'm not interested in entertainment, but I'm very open to any of the broadcast or cable stations using what we're doing. I don't have any tendency to build walls between us. In fact, I'm very friendly with the new station manager at the local PBS station. But all we have to offer them is the use of our equipment. I don't want to commit myself to any kind of ongoing regular programming.

"I suspect that Howard Wise at Electronic Arts Intermix gets a lot of tapes from people who work here, but I



*Ralph Hocking in the attic of the Experimental Center which houses ancient electronic gear.*

don't pay too much attention. I still think the nucleus of the whole thing is control over the image, getting to look at it as long as you want. I think that concept could fit in with the library system. That's the kind of distribution system I was pushing for five years ago. I'm not too concerned with it now. I am concerned about the ways you can access cables with computers, though. It would be great to try it out on campus.

The link between the Center and the campus is the basis for some present and future experimentation since the Center serves the community and the academic community is part of that. "We've been working on a computer project, tying in with computer synthesis, which is growing because of our involvement with the campus. There's a school for advanced technology there which is now interested in tying into the whole video thing. Also, we are talking to the music department which has a monstrous Moog setup.

"We're still just scratching the surface of synthesis right now. A lot of tapes I've seen have used it in a very superficial way. It lacks depth, basically because we don't know enough about it yet. It's a very young concept—there's no history to fall back on. I'm into switching right now. But it's driving me nuts. I have to watch it frame by frame to understand how the machine can give me that live multiple image. I want to spend more time on keying, too. It's one of the few things unique to video. Feedback is another, but I told my students I never want to see a tape with feedback on it unless the feedback is part of a structure they're using. It's a lot of fun and I still do it. I'll run feedback and walk by it and it's like having a pet dog or something. So I get all my students to experience that and then I tell them I want to go a little deeper and see if we can structure something and pull it together."

Hocking described some of the problems of teaching video: "When you teach, first you have to get people to see, then the main thing is to get into processing, manipulating the possibilities. Start out with one camera and a monitor, look at it, look around the room with it, translate it, play with the brightness and contrast and the video level. Introduce a recorder into that chain and then introduce an SEG and another camera, then another camera on top of that and possibly some audio generators. That's about as far as we go with equipment in the beginning course. I think it works pretty well. The problem comes when I try to teach synthesis to people who have had this course. The transition is just too great. I'm going crazy trying to figure out how to bridge from one to the other. I'm trying to find a conceptual nucleus to work from. I struggle everytime I teach to figure out what the hell I'm trying to do. I keep coming back to some very basic ideas of how you see things. I try to get people involved in very minimal constructions they can really spend time with, to discipline themselves. At this point people are not disciplining their art.

"I don't draw too fine a line between documentation and analysis and synthesis and those sort of things except for purposes of clarity. I want to have separate courses, but eventually I want them to come up with basically the same thing. Whether they're putting together a tape synthesis that has no imagery from cameras or working straight from a portapak, I want them to see that it's got to be the same thing: a strong visual statement.

"I'm going to teach a course in documentary, but I'm not calling it 'Documentary Television'. Many documentaries are just visual fluff. A lot of people in-

volved in documentaries are still waiting for somebody to jump out of a window so they can tape them on the way down. It's a very stupid viewpoint. I'm going to call the course 'Video as an Analytical Tool' or something like that. It'll be straightforward, down-to-earth portapak and small studio setups. I'm doing it basically because nothing has been happening in television on this campus for the last ten years."

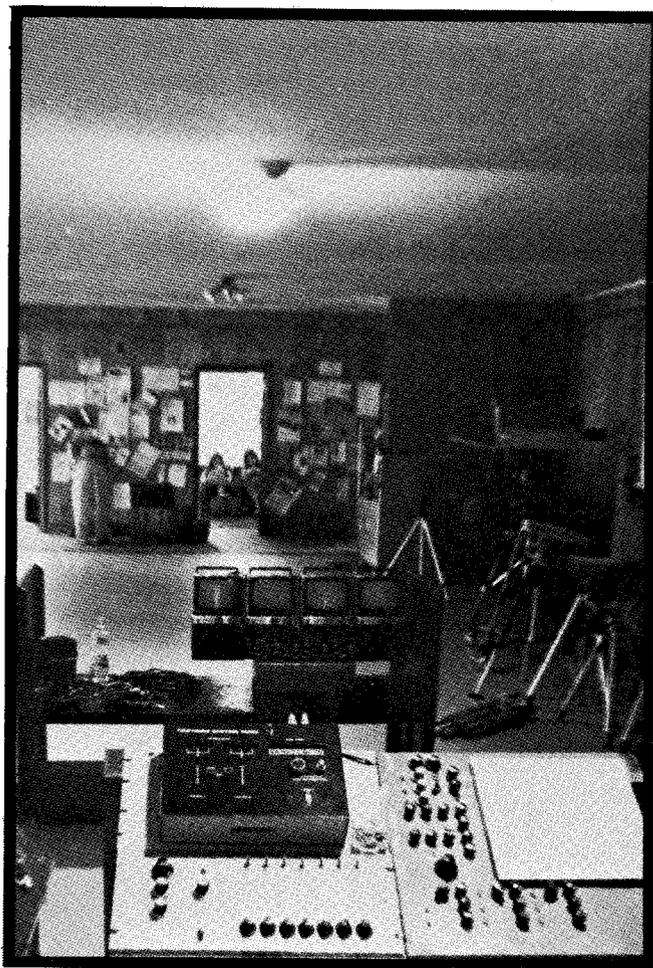
When Hocking first arrived at SUNY Binghamton in 1969, the University was constructing a new center for exploring television as an instructional medium. "The more the building went up and the more the big Ampexes came in, the less it made any sense to me. The whole program has gone through some changes since I've been here, the most recent being that they fired the director and gave me all the equipment. It's all 2-inch stuff, which used to be pretty exciting, but now having four black and white orthicon cameras is like having four dinosaurs. And with time base correction it's fairly ridiculous."

Hocking returned to the new course he's teaching. "I figure that if I can get hold of fifteen or twenty people each semester and indoctrinate them in the possibilities of video, then they can go to sociology and the other departments and see how they can use it. I'm going to start pushing video with the faculty, having workshops so they can start borrowing equipment and see all the different concepts. Then I'm going to try to decentralize the whole thing and make all the departments buy their own equipment!"

Based on his participation in both film and video, *VIDEOSCOPE* asked Hocking about the relationship between them. "The big thing that fascinated me initially about video was that there may be a real difference between this and anything else. And there's not. You're still stuck with the same old stuff: time, space, linear structure, and large and small as they relate spatially. It's all the same."

**"I'll run feedback and walk by it and it's like having a pet dog or something."**

"In general, I don't pay much attention to structure, such as how to cut. I don't want to emulate film that way. I think one of the things video is capable of utilizing, that film doesn't take advantage of, is *time*. The length of a statement can be very long. I mean, I would like to watch the six o'clock news until nine o'clock. But that doesn't happen too often. Generally, people are not making long statements that are very interesting. Most of what you see are attempts at heightening the excitement of the event through mani-



Chip Kizzia

*The synthesizer at the heart of the Experimental Center.*

pulation of sound tracks, quick cuts, flip-flop things, stuff that just doesn't lend itself to understanding what's going on.

"There's a certain animosity right now between filmmakers and videomakers, but I think it's lessening. I just heard that Tony Conrad, an excellent filmmaker who teaches film at Buffalo, is teaching a video course this year. I think there are more and more people on the campus here who are in film and want to get into video. I want to interconnect things, slush them together and see what happens."

A lot is happening in terms of video at the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton: the waiting list for studio facilities is filled months in advance. Says Hocking, "We could double the number of artists here any time we wanted to if we had more staff and more space. We're involved in a lot of projects right now. A lot of people who have gone through the whole process here are now putting on shows at various universities and museums. Half the time I don't know what's going on, which is fine. I'd say that we're evolving into a larger structure but it's going slow. I refuse to go faster. We're still doing basically the same thing we started out to do: we make tools available to artists." ■ ■ ■