



John Dorr, *The Case of the Missing Consciousness*, 1980, (Linda Strawn), videotape, color, 80 min.

Mitch Tuchman

What first impressed me about John Dorr's video features were their wacky narrative premises. This is how he describes them:

Sudzall is the story of a frustrated actress, Cordelia Coventry, who hasn't been able to get the parts she would like in theater and film. Finally she succumbs to a director of TV commerce to play the spokeswoman for Sudzall detergent. The commercials turn out to be wildly successful, but then Cordelia realizes that she has sold out. Along with the director, who is kind of half-idealist half-con man, she makes a commercial that pokes fun at the product. It happens that the product is under investigation for false claims, and this new, ironic commercial goes over well also. So it has a happy ending where Cordelia and her director have great artistic freedom—or, at least, so it seems. There is also a subplot about the Hillside Homo Hacker, who turns out to be the truant officer investigating Cordelia's daughter. The daughter has been pretending to be autistic to avoid attending school.

The Case of the Missing Consciousness is about Nick Malace, a detective or maintenance man, an outsider who is employed by a brain research institute where two women scientists work. I see them as a good scientist and an evil scientist. The good

scientist, Dr. H. Wyoming, is experimenting with out-of-body experiences. The evil scientist, Dr. Caroline Keiger, has Nick knocked out, and implants an electrode in his brain by which she controls him. There is a side effect that causes Nick to pick up a radio station. He thinks he's having two problems—blackouts and bad music—and he thinks the experiments of the good scientist are the cause. He keeps getting knocked out, and keeps waking up in strange places. The strangers he meets all somehow help him resolve the mystery. Ultimately, having had the electrode removed, Nick traps the evil scientist in an electrified cage, where she had previously trapped him in a sort of cat-and-mouse game. She is forced to listen to an entire weekend of terrible music.

Having attended Yale: "I started out writing for the *Yale Film Bulletin*, a publication that a friend and I put out in the mid- to late-sixties"; having passed through UCLA: "I did everything but write the thesis, which would have been on Griffith"; having experimented with filmmaking: "a whole mess of 8mm movies back from '66 through '68"; having toiled as a script supervisor on seven low-budget features: "I was having nightmares. All day long I would have to do continuity,

running over to somewhere where they'd say, 'You just missed three shots, and we're going on to the next one'"; having tried his hand at screenplays: "I thought, I'll just write my ideal screenplay. Obviously good things will come of it"; he returned to the East: "Goodbye Hollywood. I've had it. Enough of this trying to make it in the business."

The origins of *Sudzall Does It All* and *The Case of the Missing Consciousness* are in part circumstantial.

Two years ago a friend of mine got a Betamax. He also had a little black-and-white observation camera. He showed it to me, and I thought, "Wow, with camera and this machine I could make a movie." It would be very simple, or, at least, possible.

At that time I was working on a little play. We had some friends who were primarily stage actors, and I was working on this little play, which was *Sudzall Does It All*. So, anyway, here was the video equipment, and it just made sense. All right, we'll tape the play.

The general setting of *The Case of the Missing Consciousness* and the main characters were from an earlier script that I had done with Eric Sherman quite a few years earlier. In fact, it was a commission job for Art Linson, who later produced *Car*

Wash. It was called *Second Sight*, and the character Nick Malace was a detective involved with second sight at a scientific institute.

Last summer a friend of mine was working in a real brain research institute. I saw the opportunity to use that location, and so I wrote *The Case of the Missing Consciousness* as if it were an episode in a TV series.

In making each of these films Dorr had to overcome budgetary and equipment limitations and reinvent the wheel.

As we started out I was convinced that we had to shoot in sequence and edit as we went along. So, we started out doing that, and, oh God, the first couple of cuts we tried to do, well, there were several seconds of black, and everyone was groaning and thinking, 'This isn't going to work.' So we were trying to make the scenes as long as possible. The first couple of shots we did were like ten pages of dialogue.

By the time we got to the end of it, we realized that it was not necessary to shoot in order and edit as we went along.

Another friend of mine had a Betamax that

I could use. That made it possible to do video within video. I thought that was a great joke: to be at that very crude level and yet be able to do video within video. So I tried to work that into all the scenes.

There is no moving camera in either film. Each one involved a fixed lens so there's not even any zoom effect. And in both of them there was never any crew—or rarely anyone. There were times when the person who was operating the camera might be in the shot to begin with, then step out to move the camera during the shot, and then come back into it to play the rest of the scene. It was that kind of situation. A lot was simply a matter of locking off the camera, so people would walk in and out because there was no one behind the camera.

I like the fact that it's so inexpensive. I probably spent \$300 on the first one and \$500 on the second.

Despite difficulties Dorr is committed to the video medium.

Once having finished that first one, there was never any question. That to me was the light going on, saying, 'All right, no one can

stop you. You can just go ahead and make these—as long as you can get people to cooperate and be in them—forever.'

I was perhaps pushing that a bit too hard. When people would look at it, they would say, 'Are you interested in critical reactions?' I would say, 'No, it doesn't matter. No one can stop me.'

Sudzall is a tape made with tape equipment. Movies are movies, and it's a movie, but there are things about it that are inherently tape-oriented, I guess mainly the tape-within-a-tape thing. Anyway, I knew I had to get my own equipment instead of borrowing it. That was the next objective. I labored awhile, bought a portable recorder, which gave me better quality, and a color camera. Then I made the second one.

I want to talk about one other thing. Did you ever see the thing Andy Warhol did in *Playboy*? It was Polaroids. To get a full shot of a person he would take a close shot of the head and torso and midpart and then the legs, and then put the four Polaroids together. This was quite awhile ago, but for some reason it really intrigued me. I thought it was

“No One Can Stop Me!” An Interview with John Dorr

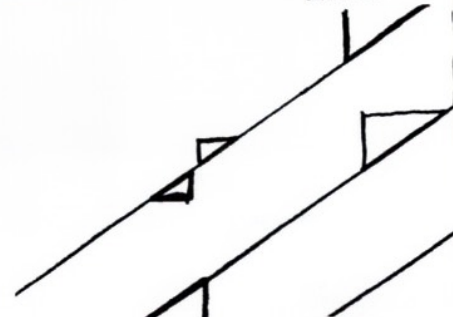
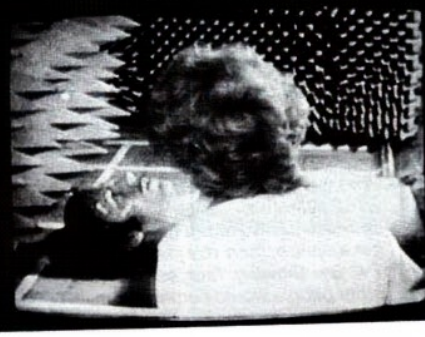
top: John Dorr and Linda Strawn struggle over a remote control device.
bottom: John Dorr and Linda Strawn



Sheila Day and John Dorr



Scenes from *The Case of the Missing Consciousness*, top: Linda Strawn, bottom: The henchmen have Nick Malace in their clutches.



wonderful because it solved a very specific problem. With a Polaroid camera, if you take a picture from a long way away, you can only get so much detail, but if you come up real close, you just get a big closeup. So you can see the whole thing by taking four and putting them together.

For some reason that connects in my mind with the idea of doing two-screen video things. My purchases for the summer have given me two recorders and two cameras and two TVs. I haven't really done anything yet except think about it, although a year ago I started writing a script that would be done as a two-screen thing. It's a sequel to Sudzall, Sudzall II.

You know, the people who object to video, my friends from all this movie background, say, 'It's just a little screen, a tiny picture.' It is true. Even though you can blow it up on a big screen, the detail isn't very great. Anyway it's sort of similar to the Warhol thing. If you have two screens going, you can really get a

minutes or less. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in making long things.'

So, they just weren't the right people. And there really were no right people. At the time, there was nowhere I could show it, because when you put it up to 3/4", you lost even more quality.

Then the LAICA screening came along. I was just finishing the second one, so I showed them both. At that point, both from having the screening and having two tapes, it made it a little more legitimate. To me it was legitimate all along, and I felt very confident I would go on making them. But in order to have a market for them, other people have to make them. To me if there are a million video recorders out there, there must be people making movies on them, people who want to make movies because they can. There must be people out there. And if enough of them are making them, then you have pressure to get them shown in whatever way. So, the next thing that

there must be some—that's part of my plan. And it is a plan, more than a fantasy or a dream because I know I can do it. I know that it can be done, so it will be done.

Today's independent feature filmmaker has a way of becoming tomorrow's Hollywood filmmaker: David Lynch, Claudia Weil. The major difference between those people and myself is that those people went to a great deal of trouble to get together a rather large amount of money to make a single independent work. They really had no choice but to use it as a stepping stone because it's much too difficult to get independent money to make independent features on that kind of level, whereas I'm not involved in going out and drumming up money at all other than what I can get from my own labors, so that I'm not in that pickle. I can continue making tapes without having to worry about that. So it's much easier for me to retain my independence than for them.

My only interest right now after years of



John Dorr, *Sudzall Does it All I*, 1980, videotape, (George Lafleur & Irene Roseen), black-and-white, 70 min.

lot more. You double the amount of picture. That's one thing that intrigues me as viable, not just a gimmick.

Making video features is one thing. Getting them shown is another.

I tried LAICA, and the guy who saw it at LAICA liked it, and said, 'Well, I'll present it to the board here, but you'll have to have a 3/4" version. So then I found out about the Long Beach Museum of Art and went down there and made a 3/4" version.

At that time I thought, 'Now these are the people who should be the means...it turned out they weren't. Their interest is really something else. Their interest is showing art video works. The first thing they said to me was, 'It's too long. You should make things that are twenty minutes or less.' And I said, 'I don't want to make things that are twenty

interested me was getting other people to do it. And the thing that made me the happiest about the LAICA screening was that a friend of mine said, 'I want to do it, too.' At that time I had said to several people, 'If you want to use my equipment to make one of these, you can use my equipment to make one of these.' One person took me up on it, and that's what I've been doing all summer on the weekends, shooting his first tape.

I have a similar fate in mind for all 'three plus the one I'll be working on this fall. Who knows exactly what form this might take, but I see opening a little video theater, showing video features and other types of things, because it takes nothing to open. If you can get a space, then you just have to turn on a TV. By showing four somewhere, maybe other people would come forward—I'm sure

knocking on Hollywood's door or looking for grants, asking other people for money, for entrees, and all of that, and getting nowhere, but almost getting somewhere so many times and then getting nowhere, my only interest now, the only thing I'm expending any energy on is doing it entirely independently, doing things that are entirely within my control. Anything else that may happen may happen—I don't know. But I know that I can do things that are within my control, and that's enough for the moment. As long as I'm able to do that—and I don't see anything to stop me from doing it—that's where my energies are. I don't need to go out and do the fall of Babylon. I'm in no hurry. I've got plenty of projects I want to do, plenty of things I want to do at this speed and this level, so I'm not anxious about it.