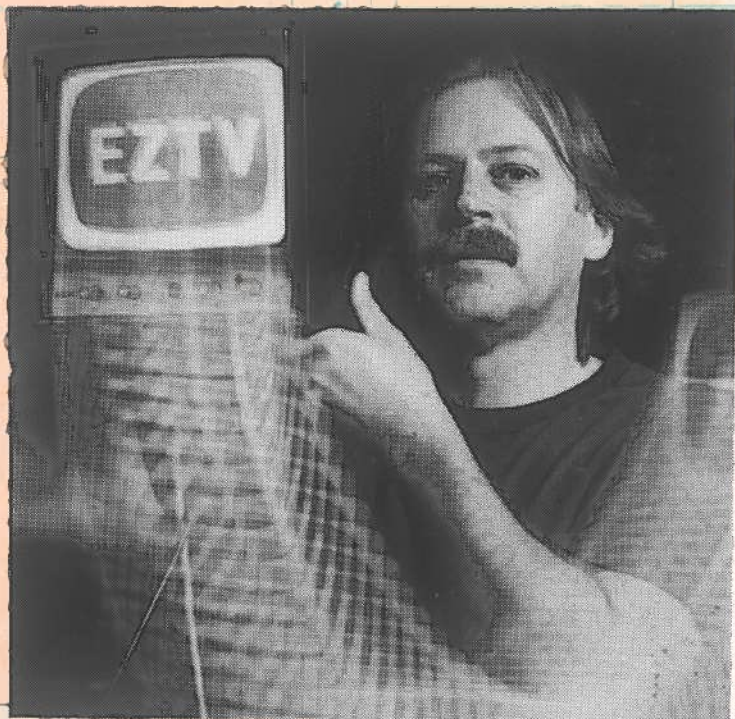


THE VISIONARY

LEWIS MACADAMS



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JOHN DORR

To be scrupulously honest, I have to begin with a personal note here. I have known video artist

John Dorr since 1983, when I came to him with the raw video footage that eventually became the core of the film *What Happened to Kerouac?* The video version (which came out two years before the movie) was Dorr's first video hit. We also made the new Pacific Arts video *Eric Bogosian's FunHouse* together. John Dorr came to my wedding (wearing his mother's jewelry!).

A friend once confided that she thought John Dorr had some kind of Dark Secret. If he does, I believe that it's that he's running away from a world where having ancestors on both sides who came over on the *Mayflower* actually matters. The only thing that seems to matter to John Dorr is work. The only recreation I have ever seen him take is to walk straight up the sides of mountains.

An aside here: I know John Dorr is one of the quintessential characters of this

town, but I'm not sure I can say quite why. Like many others here, he had a creative fantasy he was obsessive about. But it goes beyond that. There is a quixotic, eternal innocence to a lot of people who are on the "right side" here (the side of the angels), people whose personal visions and personal destinies are, like Dorr's, inseparable from a group vision of a gentler, kinder, saner world. In other places, especially other big cities, such people always seem to become more cynical, develop a harder edge, than do their L.A. counterparts — and I would bet it's unlikely that those of you reading this don't already know someone of this ilk.

Ten years ago the then 34-year-old Dorr, a Yale graduate and former UCLA film student, was a skinny, unemployed writer who hated Hollywood, did a lot of yoga and ate avocados off the trees in Wattles Park to survive. In the evenings, he would sit at the table in the converted garage he still shares in West Hollywood with George

LaFleur, get stoned, and write down his fantasies about some kind of alternative to the movie industry he despised. In 1979, as a vehicle for his ideas, Dorr registered the name EZTV.

Ten years later, at the beginning of 1989, John Dorr, thicker in the waist but clad as always in his trademark unpressed T-shirt, khakis and Birkenstocks (in the summer he exchanges his khaki trousers for khaki shorts), leans back in a squeaky chair, surrounded by 3/4-inch video equipment, and thinks back.

It was 1979 when John Dorr discovered video. As he recalls it, a friend of his named Leonard Lumpkin worked at a place that bought a surveillance camera. Lumpkin, it seems, happened to have one of the first Betamaxes — the first home VCRs. So one day, Lumpkin brought the surveillance camera home from work and hooked it up to his VCR. Boing! John Dorr came over to see, and suddenly all his stoned fantasies fell into place. "I looked at it and I said, 'Here's a way we can make a movie for nothing!'"

Now, the '70s, as some of you oldsters may recall, were the Porta-Pak Years. There were radical documentarians, like TVTV, shooting video, and there were video artists like Nam June Paik and the people centered around the Long Beach Museum. But there was nobody doing what John Dorr wanted to do, which was to use home-video equipment to make extremely low-budget movies.

SudZall Does It All!, a play he was working on for an actress friend, was rapidly rewritten for video. Dorr's friends became his actors. A two-hour tape cost \$10 at the time, so that was the budget. Dorr didn't realize then that the VCR could edit, so he shot *SudZall* in sequence. "I'd push the pause button while we figured out the next scene." It only took a few days to make what he considered his first feature. "We could take it and show it to someone on their television! That really inspired me." He immediately went to work painting houses to get money to buy his own camera, then wrote and produced a second and third feature, *The Case of the Missing Consciousness*, and *Dorothy and Alan at Norma Place*, the latter about his hero, Dorothy Parker. When he finished those he started loaning out his camera to his friends and helped them make movies, too.

In 1982, Dorr rented the West Hollywood Park indoor basketball court, set up folding chairs in front of two 25-inch TVs, and sold tickets to his and his friends' movies. *The Case of the Missing Consciousness*, made somebody's Ten Best Films of the Year list. Dorr decided he wanted to start his own video-movie thea-

ter.

There followed a near miraculous series of congruences. Dorr's father died, leaving John enough money to buy video-editing equipment. A video-buff friend of Dorr's decided to take a straight job in the movie industry and gave Dorr five or six thousand dollars' worth of production equipment. With the last of his inheritance, Dorr took a lease on a former Nails Club — 700 square feet and a loft — in the New Orleans House, a decaying slice of '40s Santa Monica Boulevard, and EZTV was born.

The day EZTV opened, Michael J. Masucci, a young photographer fresh in L.A. from New York, walked by and saw the empty boxes of video equipment. He came in to see what was happening and never left. From the first, EZTV operated like a cooperative. Everybody used the equipment to make their own work, and somehow they made the rent.

Dorr originally conceived EZTV as a video theater, a venue for the new independent video movies, but then reality began to sink in. The first year of EZTV, there were a number of exciting new indie-vid features: James Dillinger's wild tale of Orange County teens run amuck, *Blond Death*; Steven Seemayer's downtown art fable, *Sushi Ole*; Dale Herd and Barry Hall's *Dreamland Court*; as well as Dorr's fourth feature in less than four years, *Approaching Omega*. The EZTV video theater was running two shows a night, seven nights a week, but it soon became painfully clear that people would pay \$5 to sit on folding chairs in a drafty room to watch very, very few videos.

Dorr's inheritance was gone. He sold the only thing he had left to sell, his movie memorabilia. One month, EZTV made the rent by having a garage sale. Then *What Happened To Kerouac?* came along, and EZTV sold more tickets in two months than they had in the previous two years. Dorr immediately decided he had to have six times as much space at seven times the rent, and moved EZTV into a 5,500 square-foot former record shop on the building's first floor.

It was a decision he would regret many times in the years to come. Dorr sublet like crazy to a gaggle of smaller video companies. He rented out the front of the building to two competing clown traffic schools. He rented out his production and post-production equipment day and night. Essentially, he lived in an editing bay. But somehow, EZTV survived.

But the struggle took its toll, and EZTV went from being a collective to being a business. The original EZTV group of video idealists fell apart. "We had to

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