

The House of the Horizontal Synch

By Dimitri Devyatkin
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This is being written to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Kitchen and Electronic Arts Intermix, part of the legacy of Howard Wise, who supported and funded both projects starting in 1971 until his death.

In early 1971, I began working with video, producing conceptual video “art” using black-and-white, _” reel-to-reel video, while living in Santa Barbara, California. After an eye-opening presentation by Nam June Paik at UC Santa Barbara, I came up to meet Nam June and he told me about an experimental video theatre, The Kitchen, just organized by Woody and Steina Vasulka.

Upon returning to my family’s home in New York in June 1971, I went to visit The Kitchen. I came for a Wednesday night open house screening, the second such evening at the newly opened theatre. The Wednesday open house had attracted a dedicated group of video pioneers. The Vasulkas had just signed a lease on the space and had begun inviting video artists to show their work. The original Kitchen space was actually once the kitchen of the old Broadway Central Hotel, a New York landmark since the late 1800’s. Manhattan’s first luxury hotel, located on Mercer Street, half a block north of Houston, it housed welfare recipients. In the heyday of the early 1900’s, the kitchen was run by the Trotsky Caterers. A famous Russian revolutionary, whose name was Leon Brodentshtein, stayed at the Broadway Central. He needed a new name to go home to Russia with, to avoid persecution from the Tsar’s secret police, so he took the name of Trotsky from the caterers. The kitchen’s other claim to fame was a shoot out on the front stairs involving Diamond Jim Brady and the affections of a lovely young lady. Apparently the other guy got riddled with bullets.

That June night was a decisive moment in my life. I had screened a short piece called “The Video Tunnel”, which I’d done in California with John Rogers. The circle of new video artists gave the tape a strong reception. Within 6 hours of meeting Woody and Steina, I held in my hands the keys to The Kitchen and to the Vasulka’s private loft, the beginning of a long relationship of cooperation and mutual nurture. They were going to spend the summer in Steina’s homeland, Iceland, and they invited me to run The Kitchen and maintain their loft. Woody was from Czechoslovakia. I agreed to run the new video theatre and was offered the use of their video production and editing equipment. I spent the summer organizing video programs by day and learning how to use the equipment at night. When they returned, the three of us invited a young composer named Rhys Chatham to join us as music director, and we began an ambitious program of video shows and concerts, with events almost every night.

One of our early collaborations was a piece I conceived – “The House of the Horizontal Synch” featuring Rhys Chatham on piano, Woody Vasulka on Putney video synthesizer and me on electric violin. A microphone on the violin was patched to the horizontal synch input of a video monitor. As the violin changed pitch, horizontal lines on the screen changed width, a real time representation of the sound. These horizontal lines were keyed through an image of the violinist playing a theme and variations based on “The House of the Rising Sun.”



An important characteristic shared by all 4 of the founders of The Kitchen, Woody and Steina Vasulka, Rhys Chatham and myself, was that we were all actively pursuing our own creative work. We designed the space with the best equipment, design and planning with our own pieces in mind. We welcomed other artists to collaborate with us, and encouraged experimental and original works. From the beginning, The

Kitchen was a showcase theatre for video art, music and performance, as well as a forum for social issue video, computer art and an early convergence of art, politics and technology. Maintaining the Wednesday night open house as a tradition, we screened tapes from Gay and Lesbian activists, from activists in Harlem, rent strikers in the Lower East Side and immigrant groups in Chinatown. The Kitchen became the number one place for a video maker to have his or her tapes screened.

The New York State Council on the Arts Video Program, then administered by Russell Connor, spent around \$20 million a year on video art and “documentary” programming, and most of the recipients of those grants showed their work at The Kitchen, almost as a ritual of completion. We hosted many radical video groups, like Raindance, Downtown Community Television, Global Village, NYU’s Alternative Media Center, Video Free America, and many individuals, Nam June Paik, Shigeo Kubota, Skip Blumberg, Stan Brakhage, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, the Fluxus artists, LeMonte Young, Phillip Glass, Mary Lucier, Jonas Mekas, Shirley Clarke, Doris Chase, Douglas Davis, Ed Emshwiller. Several young electronics designers came to The Kitchen, who’ve had successful careers as the video world grew, including Bill Etra, Steve Rutt, Eric Seigel, Ernie Gussell, Walter Wright. I also organized an International Computer Arts Festival at the Kitchen, which drew participants from around the world in all forms of digital creativity.

The role of Howard Wise in supporting us from the earliest years was absolute. Woody and Steina Vasulka had known Howard from before. They were involved in early video art, having combined talents with Eric Seigel and Juan Downey in an early union. The Vasulka’s share of the funding became the seed capital for forming The Kitchen. Howard was always ready to help us, making introductions to NYSCA and the Rockefeller Foundation, using the new Electronic Arts Intermix as a sponsoring agent and making a personal contribution as well.

Our collective at The Kitchen came to include Shridhar Bapat. Son of an Indian diplomat, educated at the London School of Economics, Shridhar joined us as co-director of video programs. He and I became fast friends. We ran the day-to-day production of video events, ranging from tape screenings to full-scale performance pieces with scenery, props, and elaborate monitor arrangements. Shridhar had a high intellect, brilliant plans, a wonderful nature, but he was a lonely fellow who suffered from acute alcoholism. He died about 7 years ago after being homeless in the Bowery.

One event I was not involved in was a show put on by a former sergeant from Hitler’s Wehrmacht. Although the walls and floor were covered with thick plastic sheets, after the throats were cut on a number of sheep, the profusion of blood left a smell that seemed to never go away.

EAI also sponsored the annual New York Avant Garde Festival, and I worked closely with director Charlotte Moorman, especially on the legendary festival held on the Staten Island ferry. I particularly remember the closing night party of the festival, held on the ferry, at which I met John Lennon and Yoko Ono. John spoke with me for 45 minutes about video, music and new technology. After he lit a triangular-shaped joint, he kept putting off Yoko’s admonitions to leave in order to continue our conversation. I invited him to visit us, to see The Kitchen and to teach a class in music at the Free High School of which I was part organizer. The kids were overwhelmed the next morning to get a guest lecture from the immortal rock idol himself.

The Broadway Central Hotel became the location for the “Mercer Arts Center”. Landlord Sy Kaback (of air conditioning fame) built a fancy bar and performance area. Music director Michael Tschudin of the Center had a jazzy house combo, called “The Midnight Opera Company”. A cult favorite early punk group, the heroin-soaked “New York Dolls” who later achieved great pop fame, performed in the Kitchen’s space in the late hours after our shows were finished. In 1973, when I had already left the Kitchen, the entire Broadway Central Hotel physically collapsed. No one was hurt when the building imploded. Now there is a modern apartment building at that address.

The first two years of operation of The Kitchen were high spirited and non-commercial. It was a place for many different trends and types of people to come into contact with each other. We never charged an admission fee, but began to solicit a 50-cent contribution. Our funders, NYSCA, the NEA and the

Rockefeller Foundation, wanted us to collect a real entrance fee, publish ads in the Village Voice, and altogether have a more orderly establishment. They encouraged us to book better known artists, often those who had already established names, to reflect renown onto ourselves, while we preferred to invite unknown artists, to shine with even more glory as a place where new art came to life.

As the SoHo district lofts filled up with artists, the foundation circuit began to resemble a patronage system with artists pitching their projects during expensive lunches. The artists who frequented The Kitchen tended to be more those individuals whose work was already shown in galleries, like Bill Viola or John Sanborn, and less the street practitioners from the ghetto or progressive video guerrilla groups. By the time The Kitchen moved to its second address on Wooster Street – the era of Jim Burton and Bob Stearns – the nature of the place changed to more of a prestigious performance and gallery space. It reflected a changing purpose, reaching for an increasingly white, grants-supported arts and music crowd and less to people interested in social issue video. Bob was the first professional administrator we had and he brought The Kitchen a long way to becoming the survivable institution it has grown into today.

My tenure at The Kitchen lasted two years, from June 1971 to June 1973. Having continued my own video productions, I was awarded grants by the New York State Council of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, did video tours of Germany, France, Belgium and England. In the fall of 1973, I was invited to be an exchange student at the famous Moscow film school VGIK. (All-Union State Institute of Cinematography). I left New York in September 1973 for a year and studied under the great director of documentary films, Roman Karmen. Ever since, my work has been in TV news and documentary productions, now also in new media and streaming video. My programs have been broadcast nationally and shown on European TV. I've traveled in many countries, lived for over 6 years in Moscow and recently in Amsterdam. Now I live in Park Slope, Brooklyn with my wife Olga and two kids, Pavel 5 and Sonya 3.

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