

INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW With ERIC SIEGEL

By Jud Yalkut

One of the youngest proponents of the television revolution, Eric Siegel, born in 1944, won Second Prize of the N.Y.C. Science Fair at the age of 15 for his home-made closed circuit TV. The next year he won an Honorable Award in the same competition for "Color through Black and White TV." After high school, he was employed by several concerns in Closed Circuit TV, and in 1966, worked in the Educational TV Department of the University of London. In 1968, he produced the "Psychedelivation" video tape program for the closed circuit TV theatre, Channel One, and designed and built the special effects TV components for Serge Bouterline and Susan Buirge's "Televanilla" at the Martinique Theater. He exhibited his "Psychedelivation in Color" at the Howard Wise Gallery's "TV AS A CREATIVE MEDIUM" and "BODY, MIND AND VIDEO" at Brandeis University's "VISION AND TELEVISION."

JUD: You entered television at 15?

ERIC: At 15 I did the first outward thing with television, building the first TV camera, and it continued from then on, building more and more equipment. J: What had you been doing before that time? E: Electronics. Pure electronics. J: You were studying that? E: No, I was just doing it. J: So you entered into television through an interest in electronics quite directly—no other art form? E: Yes, it was electronics, and then I got turned on to TV through electronics by getting hold of TV equipment, and playing with it. And since I built the first camera I've continuously been interested in it, and still am. J: When did you actually first get to work with videotape? E: About 2 years ago, someone gave me an old videotape recorder in pieces—J: A Sony tape deck? E: No, a big 2-inch Ampex helical scan. And they said, if you can make it work, you can have it. Then I spent 6 months making it work. After which, I took the camera I had built and I started to make some tapes which you've seen at Howard Wise. J: That was a color machine? E: No, it was black and white. The Howard Wise tapes were black and white, and I made them into color with another electronic circuit. J: Which you built yourself? E: Yes, the first circuit was built inside of the color set, but now it's been expanded so that it's a separate thing which connects to the back of a color monitor, and it should be out on the market soon. J: Who's going to market it? E: I'll design and build it. I don't know who's going to market it, yet. J: When did you first show your videotapes? E: The first showing was just one day at the Channel One Theater—a preview, and the second showing was continuously at Howard Wise's. J: How did you get involved in the Wise show? E: Tom Tadlock told me about the show, and Howard Wise called up, said he'd heard about me through Tadlock, came up and saw the tapes, and said please be in the show. J: Did you know the work of other people in the field, like Nam June Paik, at that time? E: I saw some of Paik's work at MOMA's MACHINE show, and it turned me on—I liked it. I'd already had some of my tapes completed then, but I didn't meet Paik until the Wise show, didn't even know what he looked like, until someone said "That's Paik." J: Would you say anything influenced your approach to TV—anything from people working in the field to McLuhan? E: No, I was doing the work before I read or even knew of McLuhan. I found out afterwards. No, I wouldn't say there were really any external influences. It was just watching TV itself, what the stations were doing, saying "Oh, forget it," and just trying to do completely different things. Basically, I was making videotapes that I enjoyed watching myself, and my friends enjoyed watching, and at the same time trying to make the tapes so I was expressing myself through them, on a certain level. And that's what I'm going to continue to try and do. J: Were the Channel One tapes the same as the Howard Wise material? E: No, the Wise tapes were different material. The Channel One tapes were meant to be paid to see, and portions of the tape were straight video—you know, a camera pointed at a person talking and performing, and you have to do this straight kind of video if you're expecting regular people to pay, because they're not going to pay to watch abstract patterns for an hour—you have to give them something else. But things are changing, and there are ways of making TV programs now where reality and abstraction can be intermixed in the right proportions so that you can hold the attention span, and keep a rhythm going so

Excerpts from an INTERVIEW With BRICE HOWARD

by Sally Surpin, Richard Kletter, and Allen Rucker of Media Access Center, a division of Portola Institute

Brice Howard is the director-wizard of the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco. The Center is housed in one large room in a warehouse hung with strips of acetate, newspaper clippings, abstract sculpture, picture postcards... The real work, however, takes place in the three-by-four unit dimension of videospace and in the heads of people much in flow with electrons.

A: How would you describe the Center to someone who's never been here? If someone asked what does your Center do or what is your Center?

B: You know something that's wrong with those kind of questions is that you are assuming in a kind of a Euclidean geometric way that anything that I might say will represent what I would feel 30 minutes from now and that is a real serious problem...

A: or that the place is in fact definable.

B: Yeah, I recently was invited to write an article for the M.I.T. Technological Review apropos of something that concerned me, and I did, and in a way that's exactly what I was trying to say and it took me nearly 5,000 words and about 4 weeks. But in a kind of an old-fashioned organizational, institutional way, I suppose we're interested here fundamentally in search and discovery, and we have tried to sustain an environment in which gifted people can come and follow their heads within the context of the flow of electrons, which is the material which concerns us.

S: How did it begin to concern you? How did you realize that there was a flow of electrons?

B: Again, the when of that is spread out over a long long time. I want to be just as literal and specific and honest as I know how to and the other day something that someone particularly enjoyed asked me how long it took to make, and the honest-to-God truth was 52 years. I know that that sounds weird, but that's how long it took to make. What was your question? (Laughter)

A: How did you get into electron flow?

B: It was over a long period of time. It finally began to be clear to me that everything that we call television was a totally derivative condition.

R: Derived from what people had done with it rather than what it had done?

B: Derived from essentially 4 histories it seemed to me; the theatre, motion pictures, journalism and radio. And so, I asked myself having, I thought, discovered that, well what is non-derivative? Because is that all it is—just a representation of a whole lot of other history? And then, I began to try to understand what happens in the human-organism when we try to invent something? And it became pretty clear to me which may not make it clear to anybody else or may even be true to anybody else. But it became clear to me that what

television had been invented for was to transmit moving pictures through the air without any wired connections. Now in order to transmit a picture through the air without any wired connections, you had to use some kind of material that could be carried on a radio wave, cause that's the only way you can get it going. And that's what I began to get a hold of. You start to get these two, for me, clusters of energy thought going in your head, and you find a magnitude beginning to increase. And on the one hand, you're asking what is non-derivative; and you're asking how come we invented it anyway, and pretty soon you find out, at least I found out, that the only thing that was left, was the material of this means, was the flow of electrons. That was the material. Just recently, I began to appreciate that because I'd been struggling so desperately for the last 2 years to try and understand how you compose time in other than auditory terms. I have a sort of an unsophisticated, since I'm not a composer, understanding of musical components, understanding of how you could tie them together in that form. How do you put time together visually, and that's not talking about editing and cutting and all like that? And suddenly last week in the midst of the welter of this misery, it occurred to me. I jumped up and ran into the kitchen and turned the water faucet on, and it was going in my hand and I says, "that's the problem!" That's the problem! See? It's that water pouring through your hand. Now that's what we're trying to do with the flow of electrons. I mean it was an analogue, an analogue that got me much closer. Now there's something else that began to come clear to me and that was the only possible surface upon which electronic flow could be manifest was either the surfaces of the cones of speakers or that piece of glass which has phosphor on it. And then, I began to explore that, and I discovered that the conventions of television influenced enormously by theatre, motion pictures, journalism and radio made everyone feel more or less that where it was, was in that studio and not on those other surfaces. And so to come to that kind of a feeling it's very hard to explain to you because, for me, I had to be a unit manager of the National Broadcasting Co. handling thousands and thousands of dollars and getting 1,000,000 lumps a week while you're moving 11 truckloads of scenery around, costumes around, people around, unions—9 unions involved, to really begin to realize that everybody says it was in the studio.

R: I think in your description of a director in Videospace that comes out beautifully. Thought there was a bit of personal sentiment in that.

B: Well, of course—there is just for me in this world no way to be objective about anything. If it ain't personal, you're in trouble. As someone said the other day, looking at some of

that just when you feel like you're getting bored, it changes, and the change comes just at the right time, if you feel it out as you go. But the Wise tapes were all abstraction—music and abstraction. J: What was the music on that again? There was a section reminiscent of 2001. E: THE SYMPHONY OF THE PLANETS, the last piece, had music vaguely similar to 2001, but I must stress that I made the tape before seeing 2001. It must have been in the air, or something. The Wise tapes were edited so that the Einstein section comes first, then the Beatles section TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS, and then THE SYMPHONY OF THE PLANETS. J: How would you characterize your basic orientation to videotape? E: It's a way I express myself, as an individual. J: What of its relationship to other people? E: Well, that's not with the videotapes—that's with the other experiments that I do, like the Brandeis piece. It's vaguely, but not really, a direct expression of myself—it's more an expression of how people should perceive themselves, so in this piece they see themselves in color, delayed, and there's music playing. The music is meant to trigger them off to move, to dance—and they're supposed to watch themselves moving and dancing. Usually, this is a mind-blowing experience, if they've never seen it happen before—watching themselves delayed a few seconds. But this is another kind of statement. I'm not saying anything about myself—not giving anything of myself, in this kind of thing. It's really like letting people get high on themselves—you know—get all involved in themselves, because that's what they want to do anyway. J: It's a feedback situation. And the rest of your work is feedback of your own self. E: Right, the videotape is myself into tape. Right now, I'm getting ready to design a video synthesizer, which will enable me to do live video, like in the old days there would be a concert with a piano, now there'll be a concert with a video synthesizer. And this is something that Paik is into also. And it's the next step of video. They're making new video devices, or getting ready to, in Japan, with large displays in color, possibly flat—non-projected. J: Flat tube. E: Yes, that you hang up on the wall. So that, everyone knows that TV is going to change into something new—into an expanded medium, and a few people are getting ready for it, by making the new hardware that will enable the new kind of programming—the new kind of video communications that's going to happen. J: Do you think flat tube will make TV projection obsolete? E: Oh, yes—if they perfect it.

J: In Truffaut's film of Bradbury's FAHRENHEIT 451, people have wall size color television in their homes, during an era of book burning. E: Well, video will become like books, with the advent of cassettes, so if they'd be burning books, they'd be burning video cassettes. J: You don't think there would be Instamatic video cameras. (LAUGHTER) E: Yes, it's getting close to it already. Video will become like 8mm film is now. They'll have miniature plumbicon tubes inside miniature video cameras, with videotape cassettes you just throw in. However, I don't think the film industry should worry yet, because video quality is still lacking. But that's the fault of the equipment manufacturers—they're only interested in making money, not in making something right. So perhaps one company will make some equipment right, and when that happens people will find out, and the other companies will have to follow or go down. Right now, they're all making crap. J: Do you think the better equipment will be made by the Japanese? E: Possibly, but they'll have to get feedback from us—we have to write telling the Japanese companies what we want them to manufacture, instead of just taking what is given us—tell them what kind of new technology is needed, because American technology is just not going to keep up with it. The Japanese are giving us all our media—supplying us with the media tools, and we have to let them know what we want in the future. J: How did you find the video situation in Sweden when you were there? E: Video is state controlled—State controlled television. They have some experimental programming, however, it was quite boring—what I would call low-key—I don't know if they plan it or not, but it's meant to keep the people tranquilized. They don't want to excite the people, get them excited, for some reason, so TV is low key—it's boring. J: More boring than American television? E: In general, Swedish TV is boring, but it's more informative than American TV, which is just insane. The first priority with American television is the commercials must go. Commercial television must end. J: Do you think cable TV is the answer? E: Some kind of alternate system where you don't have to be bombarded, buy this and buy that, every fifteen minutes. The whole consumer crap must go. J: That first step is pretty far-reaching. E: At least let's get people talking about it—first let's just say, advertising must be stopped—let's get it around. Then, once it gets around, the momentum will carry through to the end. But a lot of people aren't even thinking about it. J: Do you think a show like Brandeis or Howard Wise can help change people's consciousness about the concept of television? E: It does have an effect—but not much of an effect, because not that many people come. A very small minority of people are getting exposed to what's going on. Nobody knows what's happening with TV. Nobody even knows that there's television art already—don't know the

Steven and Richard's work on the monitor: "I tell you the truth, I like it personally, but I don't think we can use it." Man, you just can't know what kind of a problem that cat has when he goes home at night. Right? So does that answer it, sort of?

S: Yeah, well, now we've got another question which is in a sense a very personal question which is like how did you over a period of time having come to that realization—how did you convince some people to give you money.

B: I didn't. I am such a fortunate human being, in that respect. I didn't.

S: How did the Center come about?

A: Well, it's a more basic question than that, it's like how did you begin to deal with the notions that you've just laid out? Did you just begin playing with materials in front of cameras and monitors?

B: Well, those two questions are really all bound up together in a nice way. KQED specifically personalized by Dick Moore and then President General Manager Jim Day and the Rockefeller Foundation specifically in the person of, I think, Boyd Compton, with maybe some lovely imaginative help from people like Morton Sobotnick, maybe others, I don't know. But at any rate over a period of some time they composed proposals. That is to say, the Rockefeller Foundation was obviously interested in having some kind of work and over a period of time a proposal was made to them. The response to it ultimately was that the Rockefeller Foundation gave \$150,000 and said in a year do what you can with this. Kind of generally moving around the question of what happens when you bring artists into a television studio. Although, I frankly don't think that sentence ever came out that way.

R: What made you decide to deal with the technology basically as it was rather than to try to adapt it in an effort to try to change the surface, change the space, change the set?

B: I think when you're dealing with an electron, you're always dealing with a finite material.

A: But I thought you said you were composing with water?

B: Well, don't get hung on my analogue. That analogue is just a way to get me cleared up. I'm not dealing with water, I'm dealing with, best I know how, electrons. Steven Beck is much closer to the flow of electrons by a long shot than I am because he knows how fast they go and he knows where to place them, so I think it's important to stay away from any kind of mystical thing that a lot of, particularly young people get into about electricity. I'm not putting it down. I'm just saying let's stay away from that for a moment. Therefore, when you do, you discover that as far as electronic manifestations are concerned, it's got to be finite or else you can't handle it. And it's a question merely

of slowing it down. Instead of talking about an hour or a minute or a second, you start getting into milliseconds, etc., but that still makes it finite. That means that you know the quantity of time that you are dealing with... If you want to think in terms of fields, a conservative estimate of maybe a million images in one hour. Now I don't know any human being who knows how to deal with that, but that's something that is finite in that it's true. You can count, and what an oscilloscope or a wave form generator tells you is exactly where it's all happening. Where means like where in the flow, and if you get down to the place where you want to feel with the kind of metaphysics that has analogues like you put your hand into the river, where's the river? You can do that. But I'd rather stick around with the hydraulics of that question until I understand it before I get on to the next one, cause I know the other one. Like the way I feel about human relations, natural events that move me, etc. That's what I had in the water, and I don't want to measure that.

R: One of the things that struck me in seeing your work... is that sound is recognizable whereas the images are live in the truest sense...

B: Yes, that's the result of limitations more than anything else. For example in this video tape that I've been alluding to, Steven Beck and Richard Feliciano, it is for me, perhaps not for other people, the very first time in my life I've ever seen video and heard video. In other words, what occurs in the meeting of those two individuals is video, and it's both sound and sight. As a matter of fact, you can see the sound as well as hear it. You can also hear the sound as well as see it. The greatest value it has for me at this moment is that we are there.

R: I'm not sure I know what you mean by that.

B: I don't know whether it's good or bad or indifferent or flawed or flawless or giant or midjet; all I know is that we're there and man, I'm so goddamned glad, I can just hardly bear it. Not because I don't dig a lot of stuff that's going on around, but because that question kept coming up, and by golly it had to follow that question long enough. What happens if you dump the optical system and you get to the material itself? How strongly are these other histories going to be at work now? Well man, we've dumped the theatre, we've dumped the motion pictures, we've dumped journalism, we've dumped radio in that moment—not because we don't like those things, but because that was where we had to go raising the question, and we're now to non-derivative stuff. However, the human beings involved are still, I'm sure, putting in the same stuff, cause we carry that around all the time.

R: Right. That leads to the next question. How or are you interested in cutting that out, in other words

alternatives of what they're watching at home. The only effective way is getting on the networks. There has to be a network program consisting of television artists, which is broadcast across the country, so it reaches the backwoods of Arkansas. Television is the last communications link we have to change this country—the whole country is tied together with television. The only way to effect a real change in this country, to get it together, is through television. One of the major network chiefs admitted to the fact that he's broadcasting shit, and said that's what the public wants. What television artists are doing right now, is fanning the fire, trying desperately to let it be known that TV art exists, that it's a real thing, that there are people who are turned onto TV and know what and how to do with it. And when the word gets out, people will start clamoring to see it on their home TV screen. However, if they don't, there are alternatives, because the video cassette recorders will be out in about two years or less, so you won't need the networks after a while—you could rip out the tuner from your TV. J: It would have to be quite a different kind of network to implement what we're talking about. E: Right—control rooms with pillows on the floor. We have to get onto a network, not work FOR a network, because there's a certain atmosphere in network TV stations—if you come in and your mind is okay, you'll find it gets messed up somewhere along the line. Right now, we have to take the technology that exists, and exploit it, use it, for our own benefit, not for the benefit of the advertisers. I don't think there's enough time to start making a new technology—AFTER we've gotten rid of the evils, and can sit back, relax, and have a smoke, THEN we can start making the new fantastic Aquarian age technology—the pleasure technology. But we can't do that yet. J: One of the lessons I think we've learned from the Art and Technology collaborations is that the artist has to learn some of the technology himself. As Paik says, you have to make your own mistakes so you can make your own discoveries. E: It's true. I admit that I've had it easy. But, probably, individual artists will find technical people to work with them. That's an immediate solution. J: That's happening right now. Perhaps eventually the engineers will become artists themselves. E: The future trends will be art and science and technology all coming to a point at some point. (LAUGHTER) It's all going to become one—all headed in that direction. And if the scientists would realize that now, and the engineers, and the people controlling the whole formation of what's happening on this planet, if they would all wake up and say, it's all going to come together anyway, so we might as well come together right now, then we could really start correcting a lot of the shit that's fucking us all up. J: Do you feel any affiliation with the movement now? E: No, I feel as an individual, I feel totally alienated from all movements. J: Apolitical. E: Completely. I'm just concerned about the planet that I live on. The major concern that I have is mind pollution. Aside from the noise we hear in the streets, when you go home and turn on your TV set, you're getting mind pollution, and your brain is being screwed up and fucked around with—the commercials are the biggest culprit. They have scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, all working on the staffs of the major advertising companies, knowing all the tricks, how to influence people's minds, so that they can make their millions. If I can get into TV, I'd like to try and clean up some of that pollution. Some TV programs could consist of a beautiful abstract trip for an hour, with the right kind of music—and that too can trigger off thoughts, but you're not triggering off any specific thoughts—you're triggering off a flow, a pattern of thoughts. J: In which each individual's thought patterns can take their own form. E: Right. And one of the things that will get the country back together is when people get their minds back. J: What are your immediate plans? E: To build the video synthesizer which will be the preparation, the new instrument, for television. In the future, there will be people who will learn to play it very well, like any instrument, talk through it. J: Do you see the video synthesizer making television a performing art? E: I see it doing several things. It'll enable live performances because no sets are needed, you don't have to control actors—you can present abstract visions, images, with music. It'll work especially well with music, with live groups. And then, for making videotapes, there are two kinds of tapes you can make: the documentary which gets dated, and the other kind which doesn't get dated. For making non-documentary tapes, it'll be very useful—for things which don't have to do with time—actually they do, but they don't become dated because they're not anchored to one year. J: Are you more interested in color than black and white? E: I want to go to color, and then to three dimension, and then, whatever comes after that. But color for right now. Black and white is over. J: Do you think there's any hope in working through the ETV network? E: It's been hopeless so far. J: What did you think of the NET program THE MEDIUM IS THE MEDIUM? E: It was a one shot deal—appeasement. J: What do you know about KQED-TV in San Francisco? E: Nothing right now. I'll find out when I get there. The immediate plan is to do the synthesizer. San Francisco is a better city. New York is finished—it's over. It's an over city.

turning loose a flow of electrons which will be sensitive to at least more arbitrary input, such as heat or light?

B: I think that would just be delicious, but I am fundamentally interested in aesthetics and aesthetics for me means composition, form, the human mind trying to get its inner visions out. That's what I'm mostly concerned about.

S: Are you still using the cameras around here?

B: Well, things have been kind of slow around here lately. But at the moment there seems to be some other kind of thing going on and a lot of it is the result of what's happened to Steven and Richard joining us.

R: And the shapes, I also remember again from this small thing we've seen, the shapes were in dramatic opposition to the very quick thing, and very planned subliminal things on television—various slow almost caressing forms caressing each other, playing with the depth of the surface. Is that still part of what Richard and Steven are doing?

B: Well, it's a curious thing. I wish I knew more so I could tell you what I'm trying to say. When you understand that opposite, you sometimes can find, which is to say, if I continue to press an insistence upon two dimensionality, then true other dimensionality begins to emerge. So that there is no question but what in these manifestations, this experience on this video tape you're talking about, that there's a very great sense of volume. But it's still a two dimensional surface.

R: Have you thought about it at all or do you hope to play with laser holography?

B: That takes a kind of a money that I can't let myself think about. I'll tell you the truth if it came down on us and laid on us the 1st National City Bank, we got so many places to go it'd just blow our heads. First of all we'd have about 150 more people around, and the invitations would be flying so fast, and the tools would be like spawning, but think, when you talk about lasers and stuff like that, you're talking about a huge sum of money and shit—we've got to sweat over a couple dollars. So you can take those trips, and we can have a great lot of fun with them, but they don't help any. When you're really stuck with an honest-to-God detail you're trying to understand. And for the moment, I'd rather deal with those precise details as best as I can perceive them than get into that other stuff.

R: What's the most common encouragement that people come here with?

A: Beginning somewhere and ending somewhere?

B: Right. Aristotle—beginning, middle, end—the middle is the Golden

B: Hah! Beautiful. I'll tell you what I feel it is, it's sitting down in front of the television set and waiting for something to be given to them. And conformed as a program, and certain decisions, etc.

Mean—blah, blah, blah... Which is based upon an enormous amount of expertise that people who live around television have.

R: Which they have to unlearn, you mean.

B: Yeah. Like J'sus, people who look at television boxes are experts about looking at television boxes. I don't mean they know what's going on in there, but they spend a lot of hours. The average American housewife, 5-6 hours a day is up like that. That's a lot of looking experience. So when you come into a situation like ours, you sit down, and you are an expert in these old habits.

S: What I was going to say is that here I've been working with this stuff for awhile. I thought, I'm getting out of these sets, and we had a teacher workshop last weekend and some teachers had made a tape, and they were watching their tape back on the monitor, and it was time for lunch, and lunch was outside, and I was sitting there watching it with them, and I was thinking—I know what they're thinking cause I'm thinking the same thing. We want to eat lunch, but we want to watch the tape. All of a sudden I realized well, we'll turn it off and go eat lunch and come back and it'll still be there. It took me 10 minutes to come to that and when I told them it was a shock to them.

B: Yeah. You know it's these funny kind of enormous maturations that happen in a split second that really take us along. And I think that television and electronics have a lot to do with speeding that process up. Isn't it marvelous?

A: Do you get the same kind of feeling when people are watching your tapes that they should attend to your tape the way they attend to television?

S: Right. Cause they know it's gonna be over.

R: I find myself—if I know that something's coming up that I remember—if someone's sort of looking away, I almost grab them by the neck.

B: Yeah, but that has a lot to do with that old John Locke stuff, too,—property. Like this is a piece of property of yours and how come they don't appreciate its value as you do.

R: You try to put people inside the making of that, all the aesthetic decisions, all the formulation problems.

A: I guess you should just leave it there, and when they take the interest they'll pay attention.

B: I'm so old-fashioned about that, I really get disturbed if there's something I care about very deeply and I'm busting to share it with somebody, and their attention is drawn to something else in the midst of it. Whatever is drawing their attention gets to be for a split second a real enemy.

R: I think that's really natural.

B: Well, it's all natural, I don't know anything that isn't. Sept. 25, 1970