

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 "Psychedelevision" 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 "Psychedelevision 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



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 mentation 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



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.

