

STEPHEN BECK TALKS ABOUT VIDEO

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Berkeley

Berkeley artist Stephen Beck, a selection of whose video compositions were screened at the Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College, on March 27, is a natural-born artist of the electronic age. His pieces are hypnotically decorative, fresh, varied and inventive. His lighting for Katie McGuire's dance, *Pendulums*, recently performed at the Cat's Paw Palace in Berkeley, consisted simply of static blue, red and yellow lights, shining on McGuire and on many silver balls swinging from the ceiling, creating constantly changing and delicately blending color patterns — evidence that Beck's technique, complex or not, is subservient to emotional effect.

Stephen Beck: In this lifetime anyway I was born in Chicago, lived there about fifteen years. My father gave me electrical toys like electric trains and I guess on my eighth birthday he gave me a little crystal radio, what I think started me on electronics. This radio really fascinated me because I could lay in bed at night and put the antenna up on the roof and hear Cleveland. I never learned how to paint or sculpt. The medium I've used has been electronics. To me it was as natural as picking up a brush. Pick up a soldering iron and put a circuit together. I've just been doing that ever since.

I learned to play the piano and the French horn and played in orchestras and jazz bands throughout my school years. My family moved out of the city into the suburbs, part of the exodus of the sixties. In the new area kids were forming rock bands and stuff, so I started building amplifiers.

By doing that I got real interested in electronic music and the combination of electronics and music, and then I began to think, what can you do to make the sound from scratch? Hadn't heard of Moog or anything. This was before fuzztone, before the electronic thing hit, just before it by a couple of years.

I went to the University of Illinois, Urbana, one of the typical state colleges, huge multiversity. There was an electronic music studio and I got a job there because I knew enough at electronics. I went to college as an electrical engineer and actually have a degree in that field from Berkeley.

When I got down to Urbana I got into visual work more than I had before. I started to work with oscilloscope images. I lit a dance company for a year there, did a lot of lighting for bands.

[It was also at Urbana where Beck got involved with EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology), working on neon sculptures and the like.]

SB: I was also doing a lot of work at this time in inner visual phenomena, partially with things like phosphenes and partially, you know, with chemicals. Phosphenes are — you touch your eyeballs lightly, or if you go into a dark room for a couple of hours or a couple of days, depending on who you are, you'll start seeing these things just coming from anywhere.

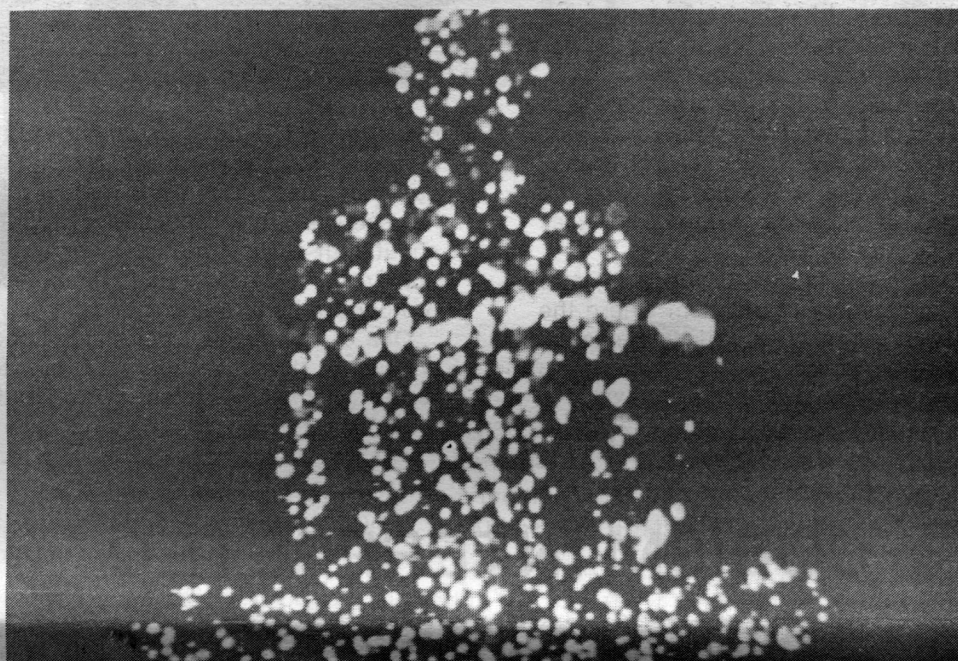
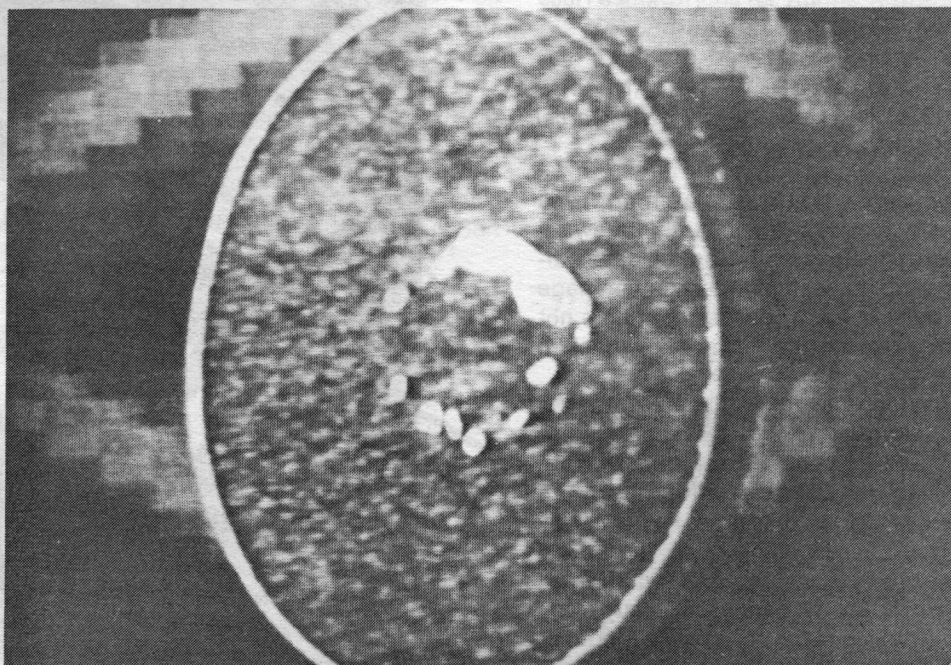
There are also these things called phosgenes, same basic phenomenon but slightly different depending on where and when they're produced. Some experiments that I read about in *Scientific American* — you can put electrodes here [touching his temples] and with an oscilloscope create visuals in your eyeballs. I was wiring up my friends and we were doing this in college in '68.

You could open your eyes and see all this stuff superimposed. Depending on the frequency and rate you would get very slow waves, or your field of vision would get brighter and filled with textures or patterns or stars. One guy saw a horse, a house. You'd see incredible details. Even in the most incredible abstract and nonobjective films, they can only hint at what you would get there, because there was no screen. We were experimenting and had people hooked up in series and parallel. One of the things that made me stop doing it, one guy passed out once.

[Beck built his first video synthesizer at Urbana in 1968.]

SB: I did lots of exploring and discovering these visual phenomena and got very interested in trying to present them, portray them, represent them, whatever. The synthesizer was sort of an outgrowth of that. Electronically produced color.

I began to realize that you could break an image from the visual field down into discrete elements, create those elements in a synthesizer, then put



STEPHEN BECK: Stills from *Union*, 1975, video.

those elements back together to make any image that you could imagine. I wanted to work with computer graphics but there was no chance to get in as an undergraduate, so I said, I'm going to build my own.

What I've sacrificed in technological complexity because I haven't relied on million-dollar computer set-ups, I've gained in personal control. And in fact I can do things that they can't, except at tremendously great complexity. On the other hand, I can't do a lot of things they can do, because they've got so much more.

I had to have something to base the engineering on, so I've really studied the image from a perceptual standpoint, and proceeded to define the four basic ingredients of color, shape, texture and movement, not ever claiming that that would be a complete and encompassing definition, only that it would let me build modules to create specific forms and combine them together.

[In 1970 Beck got a grant to develop his synthesizer at the National Center for Experiments in Television, which was connected with KQED.]

SB: It took about a year to get the funding and I wound up getting it out here, which was great because I wanted to come out here anyway.

It's an analog hybrid computer, a visual computer. I didn't really build the synthesizer for the technology per se. It was a way of being able to work with color and imagery.

The basic idea was that a TV set has pure luminescent color that can be electronically controlled. The phenomenon of video color is probably what attracted me to use it. Reality is a whole different ballgame as far as color.

DW: Reality doesn't glow at you.

SB: Right. Reality is the result of reflected photons. But here you're emitting photons, and I was really attracted to that glowing and to the idea that you could electronically shape it, that there was really no substance, no paint to run out of, no pigment involved.

One of the first modules I developed was a shading technique that allowed me to create not just hard-edge high contrast color, but I could get

really smooth contours. It is very painterly in that respect. You can just sit here and dial away.

[Beck's involvement with NCET took him on tours with his synthesizer, producing video jazz to music and dance, also a live performance over KQED.]

SB: While I was doing the piece I really got into an elevated state of consciousness, and at one point I wasn't even aware of turning any knobs or making any changes, I was just apprehending my hands doing this.

[Beck's finished pieces are composed slowly, phrase by phrase. Pieces like *Union*, *Shiva* and *Anima* are very popular, with a direct, physical appeal.]

SB: The Hindu and Indian religion and philosophies are actually sciences in their own right, of areas that Western science has never probed. There's a lot of inference in my images of science. In *Union*, for example, there's a spiraling column of color rising up this human form. It represents spiraling currents which are known to exist. You can actually feel these things — I've felt them. I was interested in experimenting with, if you show a form of the body on the screen with a certain form of energy in it or around it, what effects does the viewer experience in terms of having a feeling induced in him by seeing this?

A lot of people still call this stuff psychedelic. That's funny because they must not see anything in their dreams or when they close their eyes, or they must have never gotten hit on the head and seen stars, or they must never have any nonliteral visual experience.

The idea of controlling your own TV set is really what video synthesis is all about. It is not inconceivable that within the next calendar year one could buy a certain TV game system with a specific module that could make it do, like, Beck video effects in some limited way. Additions would come out that would play by themselves. Instead of using videotape for my compositions I'll use this system, and every time it will be an original. □