

Bringing Video Art To the TV Screens

By Judy Stone

Wipe Archie Bunker and Mary Hartman off your television set and imagine the screen as a canvas waiting to be filled with glowing works of art.

Imagine playing ping-pong on the TV set.

Imagine weaving your own textile patterns on the tube.

Imagine the games people could play. . .

Stephen Beck not only can imagine the infinite possibilities inherent in the television medium, he is one of perhaps a dozen video artists who knows how to make them happen. With a \$10,000 grant last year from the National Endowment for the Arts, this 28-year old Berkeley electrical engineer, has completed construction on a unique Direct Video Synthesizer which can do all the work mentioned above and more.

Beck's new nine-minute videotape, "Union," a compelling abstract composition in glowing color and electronic sounds, is one of a growing body of work that will be featured in "Video Art: An Overview," a week-long program, opening Tuesday at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Beck, a pioneer in video age art, speaks a language difficult for the average television viewer to comprehend, but the words pour out in his eagerness to explain the magical properties of his Direct Video Synthesizer, a 200-pound instrument composed of thousands of transistors and resistors with which he can control form, motion, texture and color.

It is the first video synthesizer constructed without any reliance on the TV camera.

It is hooked into a Sony video monitor in the studio of his apartment. It is a regular television set with extra circuitry for the wire connections.

Next to the set is "The Unknown Leonardo," a sketchbook of Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions. On an astrological collage covering one wall, Beck moves the positions of the sun and moon as they change in their orbits, keeping track of the movement of the planets. The bookcase is filled with abstruse technical works, as well as Jung, Borges, "The Tarot," "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" and other books of Eastern philosophy.

"Ironically," notes Beck, his bright blue eyes gleaming with enthusiasm, "the message from the mystics of the East like the Tibetan and Sanskrit sutras yield the hypotheses of modern day physics when properly translated: the wave or vibrational theory that there is no substance so the object itself is an illusion. Picasso was able to apply that principle and see everything from different planes."

Beck sees his compositions in a direct line of development from the work of Picasso, Kandinsky and Fischinger's early abstract films. His own work is now

in the Whitney collection in New York, as well as in collections in Europe and Japan.

"I think of the DVS as a musical instrument," said Beck, who plays piano and French horn. "It's like the organ at Grace Cathedral with knobs and stops and millions of keys. Just as the organist can pull stops to get tone colors, I push, pull and turn the 'pots' or knobs that control the resistors."

Beck — who is now developing a dozen TV games for National Semi-Conductor Corporation in Santa Clara — says he has tinkered with television "practically all my life". Or at least from age eight when his father, a structural engineer, gave him a small crystal radio, the simplest kind. When he visited children's TV

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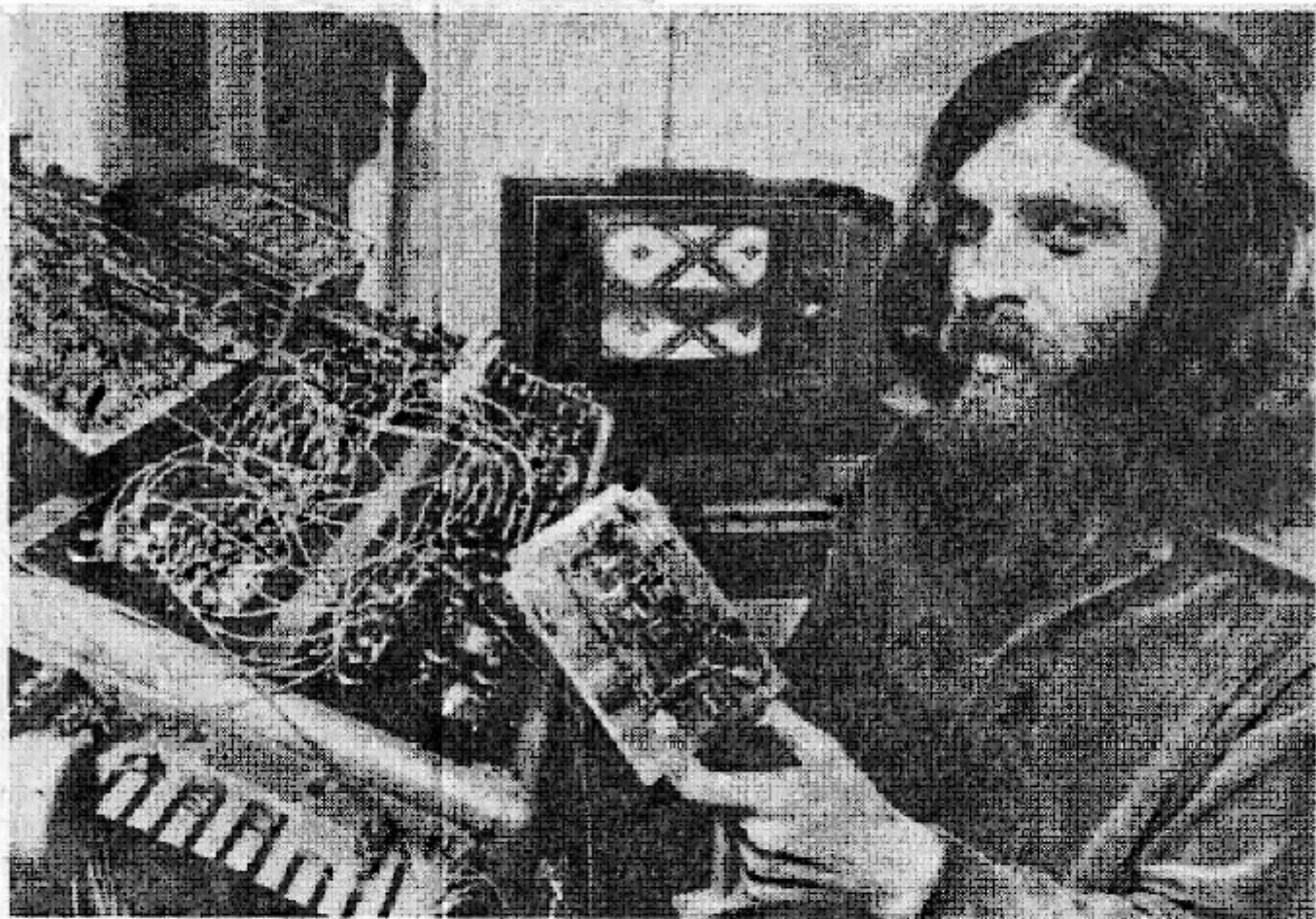
shows in Chicago, he was fascinated by the cables, lights and cameras.

At the University of Illinois, he worked with light shows and became involved in an electronic music studio. By 1968, he had built his Direct Video Instrument Zero, a 10 x 6 x 5 inch box that hooked up to a color TV set and enabled him to mix three channels of information into the color circuits. At first, he fed music into the color circuits — using the work of the

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Stephen Beck and his Direct Video Synthesizer with the TV monitor in the background

Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, John Cage and others.

"But this was limited because the image depended on the music or sound for the structure and I wanted to have control over the graphic elements."

In 1969, he saw "Heimskringla: Or the Stoned Angels" on a Videospace production from KQED, developed by the National Center for Experiments in TV here. It was the first full-scale production that utilized the magical effects possible within the television medium.

Beck flew here to see what was being done and won an artist-in-residence grant at age 20. He spent the next year beginning to build his large synthesizer and completing work at UC-Berkeley for his B.S. in electrical engineering. When Jordan Belson, a pioneer underground art filmmaker, visited the center, the two began collaborating. What Belson had been doing mechanically and optically, Beck was doing with his electronic circuitry. Their collaboration on the abstract videotape "Cycles" led to the NEA grant for Beck.