

Excerpts from an interview of Skip Sweeney by Woody Vasulka

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Woody: What were the tools you encountered, influenced, developed, worked with, named?

Skip: The first thing that comes to mind when you say "what are my tools" was sitting in a basement with a camera and a monitor. The first tools that I had were just a CV studio camera.

Woody: What was the craft of one camera and one monitor?

Skip: It was feedback. I would leave a set-up in my basement back room. A camera shooting into a monitor, just the simplest camera and a monitor at an angle. I was starting to get what I call the basic daisy feedback - just five armed or eight armed depending on the angle of the camera. And, the first tool was my finger on the contrast and brightness knobs - that drastically affected the response of the feedback....and, playing with the zoom, focus and tripod with its angle.

Woody: The position of the camera was important?

Skip: Right, in my first explorations I set it up at almost 180 degrees, shooting at almost the same angle as the screen.

Position became critical. Generally, I ended up wanting to be perfectly centered, finding the true axis in the tube. I was also playing with the termination switch. Using termination gave me increased gain. The next step - almost automatic - was trying to record some of this stuff, and I instantly discovered that a different affect was gotten by trading off contrast and video gain and super video gain with low iris and low contrast.

Woody: So, would you go into a much more precise description of how you actually achieved control, because feedback is normally very hard to control.

Skip: Patience.

I also found something early that gave me a tremendous amount of control that other people don't get when they start playing with feedback - the use of a mirror. By placing a mirror that was angled, and by its angle creating a circle. In other words, if the angle was more than 30 percent the image was circular. For example, if I brought a hand between the camera and the screen, I would see hands from above and from below: but, if I put a mirror up, the image was repeated and

kaleidoscopic.

Woody: Now let us understand. Where would you put the mirror?

Skip: The mirror was generally angled below the camera, balanced on piles of something.

Woody: The edge of the mirror was horizontal to the screen, tilted maybe 30 degrees?

Skip: Right. How far up you moved the mirror, how far down you moved the camera - all those relationships completely changed the image. In fact I discovered you didn't need a mirror, a piece of glass at that angle had so much reflective capability. But, by using the mirror I instantly got feedback where the range was amplified...you had to practically knock the camera over to lose an image.

Woody: It started to live?

Skip: Yes. It was also the first way that I found could fill the screen with an image. I tried as hard as I could not to let anyone know about mirrors...until people could discover it for

themselves, because it was such a simple trick.

...There was a whole other discovery - the Setchell-Carlson camera with a detail knob. I ruined three cameras fiddling with them, not knowing how to get them back into a legitimate signal. My tape JONAS' FAVORITE was a combination of finding that you could get tremendous detail on the Setchell Carlson. Everyone else always had the contrast and brightness set high, and I got into turning them in low ranges and playing with the internal controls - the gain and the beams. I started getting the ability to control the speed of the images. One of the first corollaries I developed was: the more you turned up the target voltage and the lower you turned the iris in combination, the slower the image got until you could really get it to crawl like slow motion. And, then, by removal of the pedestal, by dropping the pedestal down, the blacks became completely black. Pushing the beams high I got the waterfall effect, where things would roll off as if they were rolling off the edge of a cliff.

I could get feedback that was either pouring into itself, pouring out of it self or floating.

Woody: I know you have been involved with Bill Hearn's VIDUUM.

Skip: At the time (1968?) my interest in the VIDUUM was its ability to generate an image. I didn't do the VIDUUM any justice at all because I didn't care for the kind of complicated images the VIDUUM could create. I cared only for the very simplest images. That's something I struggled with from the very beginning - to try to achieve an image completely isolated from anything else. In other words, I wanted a simple black image where the white was keyed through and the image was simple kinds of circles that pulsed or waved to the sound of the music.

I guess the MOOG VIDUUM started to whet my appetite for keying and colorizing.

...I knew what I wanted to be able to do. I was very frustrated by not being able to turn something that was light, e.g. the white image of the MOOG VIDUUM to look dark. I couldn't do it because the GEORGE BROWN COLORIZER had no effect on the gray level. I think I developed an aesthetic of reversing what I was given, making brighter images dark and darker images bright, having the gray level be the heart of the colors I got.

Woody: To what degree do you feel that you have influenced those particular elements.

Skip: Those elements of Bill Hearn's colorizer? I feel like I'm

the conceptual architect...because it is exactly what I asked for. I asked for gray level control, separatable key levels and gray level and chroma and hue. I wanted control over each separately. Alan Shulman deserves a certain amount of credit. Alan was always working with Hearn when that first colorizer was built.

....My aesthetics are to do things very simply and straightforward.