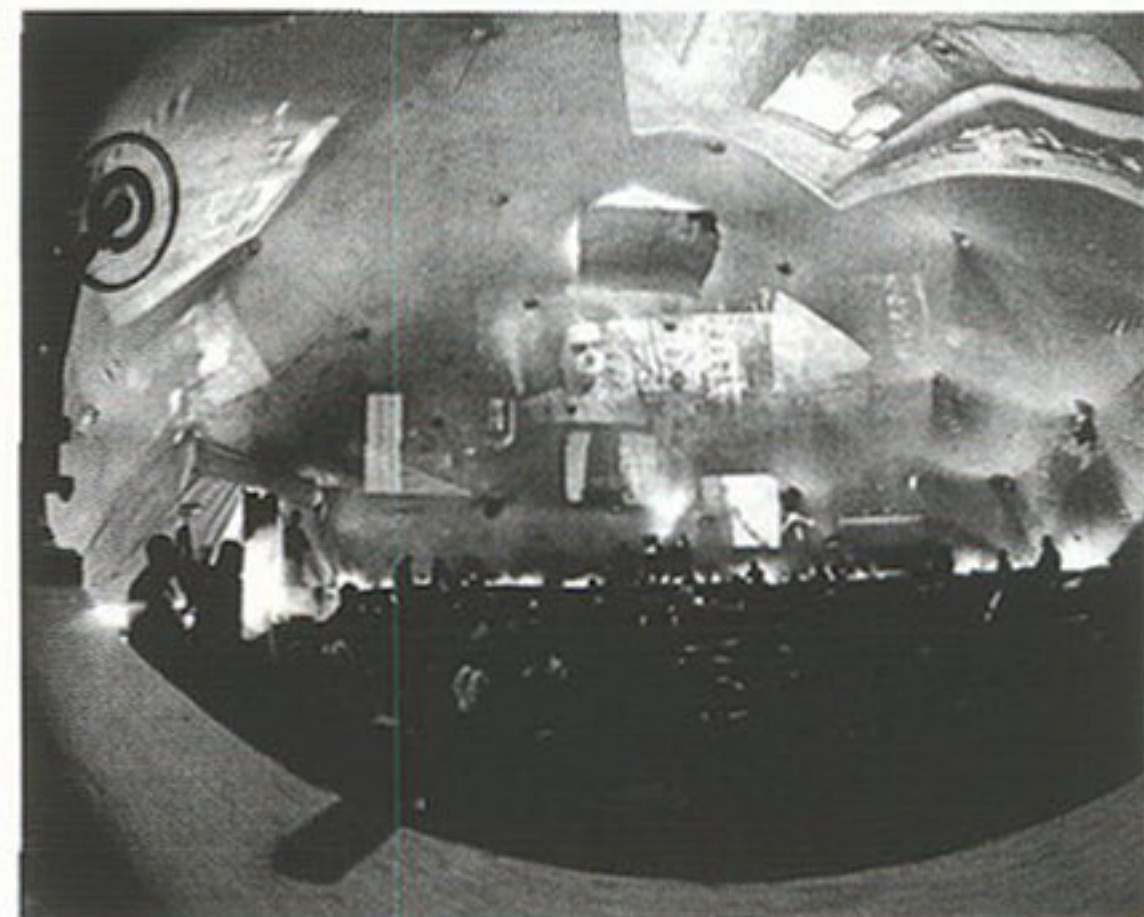
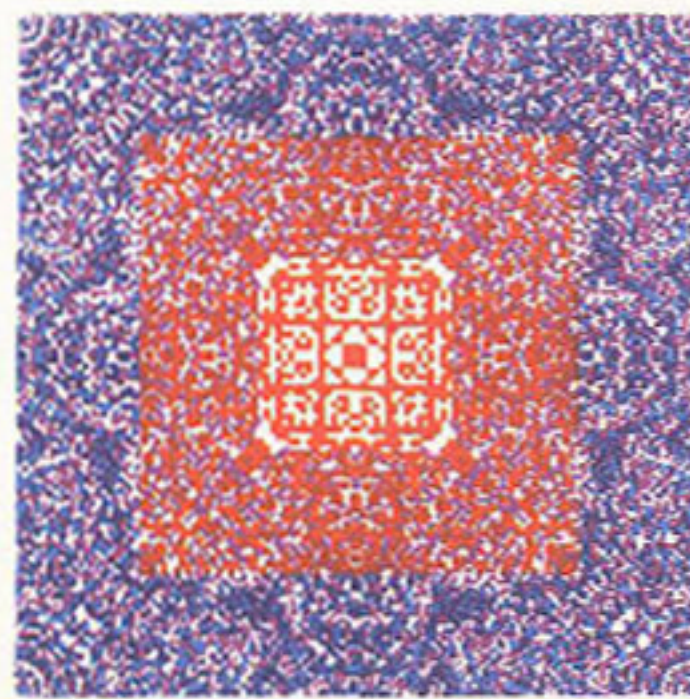




From left: Stan VanDerBeek, *Movie Mural*, 1968/2011, mixed media. Installation view, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, 2011. Stan VanDerBeek, *Mandell/as 1*, 1973, silk screen on paper, 18 x 18". Stan VanDerBeek, *Movie-Drome*, 1963-65. Stony Point, NY, ca. 1965.



Stan VanDerBeek

MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER
CAMBRIDGE, MA
William Kaizen

STAN VANDERBEEK remains best known for the experimental films he made during the 1950s and '60s, which placed him at the forefront of avant-garde cinema. This first retrospective exhibition of VanDerBeek's work, curated by João Ribas and Bill Arning, offers the chance to more broadly consider his visionary engagement with the postwar communications revolution. Indeed, seeing this much of his work together makes it seem both utterly contemporary and oddly quaint. VanDerBeek's use of multiscreen projection and his transformation of the white cube of the modernist gallery into the black box that dominates so many large-scale exhibitions today mark him as a harbinger of art's current obsession with moving images. But the many formats he used—including 16-mm film, slides, broadcast television, fax machines, and mainframe computers—are outmoded in the age of new media, lending the exhibition a not entirely unpleasant, if slightly musty, whiff of retro-chic obsolescence. The utopianism that underlies his technological restlessness has aged less well. His work fits better with the technophilia of the mid-'90s and the first wave of Net art than in today's atmosphere of heightened technological skepticism.

VanDerBeek, who died in 1984 at age 57, didn't live to see the rise of the Web, but his writing is a strong precursor to the celebration by *Wired* et al. of global, rhizomatic computer culture that proliferated during the original Internet boom. This exhibition is named after one of his most farsighted essays, "Culture: Intercom," published in 1966 in *Film Culture*, in which he anticipated many of the ways we now interact with online images. In it he calls for the development of a "non-verbal international picture-language" that would be delivered via a "culture-intercom,"

where, through the push of a button, the world's treasures would be instantly available. VanDerBeek's notion of an international picture-language is in line with the long-standing modernist dream of a visual Esperanto that would facilitate cross-cultural exchange and greater understanding among the whole of humanity. In the essay, copies of which are displayed in the show, he describes vast data banks, accessible from anywhere on the planet, where groups of people effortlessly share audiovisual information regardless of national boundaries.

VanDerBeek's own approximation of a culture-intercom was far more spectacular than some push-button gadget. From 1963 to 1965 he operated a "Movie-Drome" in his backyard in upstate New York. He simultaneously projected an encyclopedic variety of films and slides across its planetarium-like interior in shows designed, he wrote, to allow the audience to "grasp the flow of man." The Movie-Drome was the most ambitious realization of his multiprojection work, but he made numerous similar pieces. These include *Movie Mural*, 1968/2011, the exhibition's centerpiece, which has been re-created from notes and photographs of its original installation. Video projectors, speakers, chattering slide carousels, and an overhead projector are arrayed across a table, with several more projectors sitting on the floor. These beam a multitude of images over three freestanding walls arranged in a semi-circle. The images—including a film on the history of cinema, figurative drawings, and a slide-show world tour of architectural and sculptural monuments—spill out onto the surrounding gallery walls as if the work were unable to contain its own excess of information. The reconstruction here made me wonder precisely how much the work had been updated for the show; it looks sensational and perhaps all too contemporary in its engulfing disarray. Yet there is no doubt that by building on the mnemonic atlases and imaginary museums of previous generations, VanDerBeek was one of the first artists to foster an experience of sensory overload that audiences now take for granted.

During his lifetime VanDerBeek received the most acclaim for his single-screen films, and they remain among his best works. This is especially true of his collage films, whose formal ingenuity is matched by their anarchic humor. The exhibition features a large selection of films, transferred to video, some of which were screened in their original format in several evening programs. As well known

as he was for these films, his video work has never been recognized; the exhibition importantly begins to redress this. It features the most extensive collection of materials ever assembled on *Violence Sonata*, 1970, the artist's remarkable two-channel television broadcast on civil rights and the threat of nuclear Armageddon made for the Boston station WGBH. Several of his other videos are screening along with the films, though the exhibition misses the opportunity to bring together his many other television and video projects. The side-by-side projection of four of his "Poemfields," 1966-71, is an important hybrid exception. Made with the use of a mainframe computer in collaboration with Kenneth Knowlton at Bell Laboratories and trans-

VanDerBeek was one of the first artists to foster an experience of sensory overload that audiences now take for granted.

ferred to film and then video, these works feature poetic texts written by VanDerBeek and are among the earliest instances of computer animation. Their ever-shifting patterns of pixelated colors, with scores by Paul Motian and John Cage, offer an unparalleled example of psychedelic high modernism in an experimental format usually missing from histories of video art or avant-garde film.

VanDerBeek was a humanist at heart. He held fast to the utopian notion that, given proper artistic guidance, technology would free humanity instead of destroying it. This was a common failing among art and technology boosters during the '60s, inasmuch as it paradoxically ascribes too much individual agency to both men and machines while ignoring the subtleties of institutional structures, identity politics, and social networks. To his credit, VanDerBeek was more sensitive to these issues than many of his contemporaries, as seen in his engagement with race and gender in *Violence Sonata*. This exhibition provides a welcome chance to remember an artist who grappled with the early promise of postwar communications technologies and to consider him in light of the world today, where global communication circuits lead to uncharted risks as well as unexpected revolutions. □

"Stan VanDerBeek: *The Culture Intercom*" travels to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, May 14-July 10.

WILLIAM KAIZEN IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF AESTHETICS AND CRITICAL STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, LOWELL.