

by Sheldon Renan

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E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.
1967

STAN VAN DER BEEK

Stan VanDerBeek

Born 1931, New York, New York
Lives Stony Point, New York.

Stan VanDerBeek is the Tom Swift of the underground, an inventor of processes and approaches. He is also a collagist, a collisionist, and like George Méliès, whom he claims as god-father, an illusionist. His earliest films, such as *What Who How*, are animated collages, his midway films, such as *Breathdeath*, are collages of film technique, and his latest works, including the environmental *Movie-Drome*, are collages of media.

He is a collisionist because he likes to bring disparate elements together at high speed, cut-outs of cars, pictures of politicians, pin-ups from *Playboy*, and so on, and give them some new meaning in the resulting crash. He is an illusionist because everything in his films is always changing into something else, cars into carnivorous creatures, hands into birds, and so on. The tone of his films has always been blackly humorous, and increasingly there have appeared overtones of social comment.

VanDerBeek graduated from a science high school in New York and went for a short while to Cooper Union to study architecture. In 1952 he went to the Black Mountain School of Art, not going to classes, but tending the school farm and working on painting and calligraphy. He had the use of a camera there, and so made "mythical" movies with a group of dancers. These movies were planned, performed, and photographed, except that there was no film in the camera. Nobody could afford film.

For two years following Black Mountain, he made flip books. Then he got a job doing backgrounds for a children's television program called *Winky Dink and You*. Part of the program's equipment was an animation stand and camera. VanDerBeek would come back late at night and tell the night watchman he had some work to do and would then use the camera and stand to make his first films. He was fired after six months (for being non-union) but continued for a year after that to return to the studio at night to tell the watchman he had late work to do. In this eighteen-month period he made *What Who How* (1955) and *Visioniii* (1955), both animated collages, plus four unnamed studies (1955-56) that involved both collages and time paintings. Later he made *Mankinda* (1956-57), which was a time painting, that is, a painting seen happening as it happens, combined with a poem and calligraphy. And he continued his collage animation work with *Yet* (1957), *Street Meet* (1957), *Astral Man* (1958), and *Ala Mode* (1958).

By 1958 he was set up with techniques and facilities and began photographing vast amounts of material, usually shooting much footage around a particular idea. Then he would just "slice a film off like a sausage." He is still editing this material. Out of it has come *Wheels #2* (1958-59), *Wheels # 1* (1958-61), *Wheels # 4* (1958-65), *Dance of the Looney Spoons* (1958-65), *Revenge of the Looney Spoons* (1958-65), and *Science Friction* (1958-65). He also worked at this time on a prototype for his later expanded-cinema presentations, *Three-Screen-Scene* (1958). In all of these films he used illustrations from magazines and advertisements for collage materials, making the inanimate animate, the large appear small, one object turn out to be another object, and so on.

His next step was to develop an apparatus that allowed him to combine live footage and collage animation, synchronized, on one film. His first such film was *Achoo Mr. Kerroochev* (1960), in which a cut-out of Nikita Khrushchev sailed over various newsreel events as they took place. This process became standard with many animated VanDerBeek films, including *Skullduggery Part I* (1960) and *Part II* (1960-61). Certain footage, such as a subjective view of a bare bosomed lady making a landing on an aircraft carrier, was used in several films. At the same time, too, he made *Black and Whites, Days and Nights* (1960), an animated cartoon of line drawings over a sound track of dirty limericks.

VanDerBeek also began to do live-action photography. He shot a large amount of footage recording Happenings by Claes Oldenburg and Allen Kaprow. The only work edited so far from this is the short *Snapshots of the City* (1961), of an Oldenburg work. He made the slapstick *Croquet Quacks* (1962-), and *Summit* (1963). *Summit*, a political satire on a meeting between Khrushchev and Kennedy, featured another technique, one possibly not used since Len Lye was animating in England, the manipulation of live actors with an optical printer. This allowed VanDerBeek to orchestrate their movements and to cause comical reverses of action and so on.

Breathdeath (1963-64) is VanDerBeek's most ambitious single-projector film. It is an antiwar film dedicated to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, and a compendium of VanDerBeek technique to that moment. It has scenes such as a picture of Richard Nixon with a foot suddenly coming out of his mouth, people dancing with little skeleton heads animated over their faces, a time painting painted on his wife's face, and blood pouring over a newspaper full of hydrogen bomb headlines.

In 1964 VanDerBeek received a Ford Foundation grant and, while working on his older style *A Damn Rib Bed* (1964-65), began to branch out. Given an animation camera with which it was possible to make dissolves, he made three films that were essentially loops, starting in one place, dissolving through a series of transformations, and dissolving back to that original place. These included *See Saw Seems* (1965-66), *If You Say So* (1965-66), and *Snow Show* (1965-66). He made an animated line loop in 35mm, called *Night Eating* (1965), reduced it to 8mm and made a cartridge out of it for tiny portable projectors. He made *Fluids* (1965), and *Phenomena* (1965), which used several layers of "zip tone" in motion to create optical patterns. He produced the simple *Facescapes* (1965) and *The Human Face Is a Monument* (1965), the content indicated by the titles. He made *The Life and Death of a Car* (1962-) and *Kar Bop* (1962-), which added live action of cars in motion, photographed with a special 180-degree distortion lens, to previously shot footage.

He was at this time becoming more and more involved with expanded cinema and working as an adjunct to dance works. For a Merce Cunningham dance piece, he made the three-screen *Variation 5* (1965), which included shots of Cunningham dancing, the astronauts floating in space, and Nam June Paik's electronic television distortions. He did *Sight* (1965) for a Bob Morris dance work, and photographed Yvonne Rainer's *Room Service* (1965). He made *Pastorale: Et Al* (1965), which is photographed portions of a dance combined with a dance by dancers carrying little

movie screens, on which is projected the film dance, this done by Elaine Summers and Bert Supree.

VanDerBeek has been especially involved with multiple projection pieces. He calls them "movie-murals" and "news-reels of dreams." They were done in anticipation of the dome he built at his home in Stony Point, the Movie-Drome, an environmental movie theatre with all surfaces to be covered by projected images. He put on his first multiple-screen presentations at the New Cinema Festival in 1965, at the Film-makers' Cinematheque. One was *Move-Movies* (1965), a "choreography for projectors" in which there were two projectors facing the stage, plus five portable projectors being carried around the theatre by assistants. Parts of the work were shown on the audience itself. Another was *Feedback # 1* (1965), which used five slide and motion picture projectors and two sound tracks in a sort of movie mix.

VanDerBeek's movie-murals are part of a plan to develop a new visual language that could be used to communicate broad concepts of existence among all the cultures of the world. He calls this plan *Culture Intercom* and wants all the governments of the world to build movie-dromes like his own, to connect these through satellite television stations, and to allow them to exchange "images" so as to speed communication between cultures and to bring them some better and more immediate understanding of themselves and of each other. He sees a race between world destruction and world communication, with the lack of the latter accelerating the former.

VanDerBeek is presently editing a live-action film of country hi-jinks by Claes Oldenburg and crew, *Birth of the American Flag* (1965-). He has done for CBS "an electronic collage" with videotape called *Panels for the Walls of the World # 1* (1965). He has also made two computer-generated films, *Collide-oscope* (1966) and *When in the Course of* (1966-).

He has continued with various other activities while his film work has remained central, and a recent exhibition of his work listed the following: calligraphy, stills, paintings, polaroid constructions, sculpture, rollings, wooden boxes, and collages. He is also interested in architecture, having built both his house and the Movie-Drome.

by Gene Youngblood

Stan VanDerBeek: Mosaics of the Mind

"We're just fooling around on the outer edges of our own sensibilities. The new technologies will open higher levels of psychic communication and neurological referencing."

E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

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For the last five years Stan VanDerBeek has been working simultaneously with live-action and animated films, single and multiple-projection formats, intermedia events, video experiments, and computer graphics. Clearly a Renaissance Man, VanDerBeek has been a vital force in the convergence of art and technology, displaying a visionary's insight into the cultural and psychological implications of the Paleocybernetic Age.

VanDerBeek has produced approximately ten computer films in collaboration with Kenneth Knowlton of Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey. They are descriptively titled *Poem Fields*, *One* through *Eight*, plus *Collisdeoscope* and a tenth film unfinished as of this writing. The term *Poem Field* indicates the visual effect of the mosaic picture system called Beflix (derived from "Bell Flicks") written by Knowlton. A high-level set of macro-instructions was first written in Fortran. The particular translation or definition of this language for each film is then determined by the subroutine system of mosaic composition called Beflix. A new set of Beflix punch cards is fed into the Fortran-primed computer (an IBM 7094 interfaced with an SC-4020 microfilm plotter) for each new movie desired.

Whereas most other digital computer films are characterized by linear trajectory figures moving dynamically in simulated three-dimensional space, the VanDerBeek-Knowlton *Poem Fields* are complex, syncretistic two-dimensional tapestries of geometrical configurations in mosaic patterns. "The mind is a computer," says VanDerBeek, "not railroad tracks. Human intelligence functions on the order of a hundred-thousand decisions per second." It appears this brain capacity was a prime motive in the production of the *Poem Fields*, whose micro-patterns seem to permutate in a constant process of metamorphosis which could very likely include a hundred-thousand minuscule changes each second.

"The present state of design of graphics display systems," VanDerBeek explains, "is to integrate small points of light turned on or off at high speeds. A picture is 'resolved' from the mosaic points of light." The artist seems to feel that this process bears some physiognomic similarities to human perception. "The eye," he notes, "is a mosaic of rods and cones."



STAN VANDERBEEK: AN EXHIBITION OF FILMS, DRAWINGS, COLLAGES & MULTI-MEDIA PROJECTS
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