HISTORICAL STATEMENT

STAN VAN DER BEEK: AN EARLY SPACE ART PIONEER

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In 1982 at the second Sky Art Conference in Linz, Austria, Stan VanDerBeek opened his lecture with this surprising statement: “I dedicate my lecture to the intelligence of the extraterrestrial whales.” Since the publication of John C. Lilly’s The Mind of the Dolphin in 1967 [1], we had become accustomed to the idea of sharing an intelligent brother-and-sisterhood with the dolphins and the whales; but what did Stan mean by his dedication to “extraterrestrial whales”? One year before his sudden death in 1984, this realistic visionary already considered everything part of an interconnected space, one super- and extraterrestrial network.

In 1976 VanDerBeek approached NASA with an idea for an earth resources satellite project in which large-scale letters (the size of a football field) would be documented from space, thus transferring the concept of a printing press from paper and type to the broad scale of earth and space. This grew out of Stan’s early computer graphics work, where, for example, he clustered a word like “movies” from an abstract layer of pixels. A year later, in 1977, Stan proposed that NASA convert the Kennedy Space Center into an artistic “Center for Inner Space.” He became an artist-in-residence at NASA from 1979 to 1980. “I gave them no chance to reject my proposals,” he told me. “When they refused one project, they had already another proposal on their desk.” These space activities had roots in his earlier artistic career, which was marked by two relevant projects.

The first is VanDerBeek’s large-scale Movie-Drome in Stony Point, New York (“drome” as in aerodrome). Influenced by Buckminster Fuller’s spheres, VanDerBeek had the idea for a spherical theater where people would lie down and experience movies all around them. Floating multi-images would replace straight one-dimensional film projection. From 1957 on, VanDerBeek produced film sequences for the Movie-Drome, which he started building in 1963. His intention went far beyond the building itself and moved into the surrounding biosphere, the cosmos, the brain and, yes, even extraterrestrial intelligence.

“This business of being artist-in-residence at some corporation,” he said, “is only part of the story; what we really want to be is artist-in-residence of the world, but we don’t know where to apply. . . . That’s one reason for all these transfer systems. . . . It’s a tremendous urgent unconscious need to realize that we can’t really see each other face to face. We only see each other through the subconscioussness of some other systems. Cybernetics and the looping-around of the man/machine synergy are what we’ve been after all along” [2].

Around the same time as the Movie-Drome, VanDerBeek proposed what can be considered the second highlight of his career, and his most futuristic project, which he called Culture: Intercom. The text reads like an anticipation of an Internet-based image database. Here is a short summary:

It is imperative that we [the world’s artists] invent a new world language, that we invent a non-verbal international picture-language. I propose the following:

- The establishment of audio-visual research centers, preferably on an international scale. These centers to explore the existing audio-visual hardware. The development of new image-making devices (the storage and transfer of image materials, motion pictures, television, computers, videotape, etc.)
- The immediate research and development of image-events and performances in the Movie-Drome. I shall call these prototype presentations: Movie Murals, Ethos-Cinema, Newsreel of Dreams, Feedback, Image Libraries.
- When I talk of the movie-dromes as image libraries, it is understood that such life-theaters would use some of the coming techniques . . . and thus be real communication and storage centers, that is, by satellite, each dome could receive its image from a world wide library source, store them and program a feedback presentation to the local community that lived near the center, this newreel feedback, could authentically review the total world image “reality” in an hour long show.
- Intra-communionics, or dialogues with other centers would be likely, and instant reference material via transmission television and telephone would be called for and received at 186,000 m.p.s., from anywhere in the world. Thus I call this presentation, a newsreel of ideas, of dreams, a movie-mural. An image library, a culture de-compression chamber, a culture-inter-com [3].

We should remember Stan VanDerBeek as a keen visionary, as a politically as well as artistically engaged space artist of the sixties and the seventies.

References and Notes