

Stan VanDerBeek's Movie-Drome: Networking the Subject

"Culture is moving into what I call a visual velocity. Sometimes I wake up and think to myself that it looks like it's going to be a 60 mph day."¹

The subject is a curious-looking thirty-one-foot-high metal dome structure situated in the wooded backyard of a rural outpost of experimental artists living in Rockland County, approximately thirty-five miles north of Manhattan, during the early 1960s.² Lacking any formal entrance, visitors entered the dome from underneath through a trap door in the center of the floor, which unfurled into a wooden ladder when opened. Once inside, everyone spread out over the rough flooring lying side-by-side. There were no assigned seats, only vague directions from the artist to lie with your head facing upward and your feet pointing towards the center of the space. With equal parts nervous tension and the anxiety of not knowing exactly what to expect, the experience would begin in a series of fits and starts. The noisy, ungainly motors of over a dozen projectors for 16mm film and slides would turn over, clicking and humming at various intervals. Suddenly, undulating beams of light and discordant voices mixed with synthetic noise electrifying the air, illuminating the darkened space and immersing the viewers in a continuous audiovisual flow, a visual velocity.

On-the-spot illustrations (projected while they were being drawn) and roving lights were superimposed with collages of stock newsreel footage and found films. The space pulsed with the multi-directional movement of the projectors (they were affixed to a turntable or wheeled carts) and the distortion of mixed sounds and voices emanating from unspecified sources. Political speeches, newscasts, promotional announcements, and pre-recorded music tracks collided with one another, testing the quadraphonic sound system and reverberating off the curved aluminum panels that served as both the dome's exterior and interior. The heat generated by the electronic components combined with the body temperature of the thirty or so participants to intensify the dense, humid atmosphere.

The projected representational images were comprised of portraits of political figures, news clippings of current events, photographs of media personalities, and promotional print ads relaying contemporary slogans and fashions. These images were no different from those that permeated both the popular media and the artwork being exhibited during this period, and on their own would have appeared quite banal, perfunctory even, for an artist working in New York during the 1960s. However, it was the illogical juxtaposition of the images, the speed and frequency of the edits and the layering of sources that estranged expectations. A second level of defamiliarization occurred focusing attention on the work's own techniques and thereby distinguishing this experience from other contemporaneous cinematic or multimedia art presentations. This experience exceeded the function of a standard theater or exhibition setting even in the eyes of an experimental-art audience accustomed to the staccato pacing of "underground films," to the dramatized spontaneity of Performance Art and Happenings, and to the spectacular effects of commercial media technology that was beginning to widen commercial film screens, multiply the reach of television and accelerate the rate of telecommunication. Within this intimately scaled dome, the phenomenological experience of multiple image-projection itself became the subject of the work.

Satirical imagery abounded in the projected animated collages: Nikita Khrushchev's head was held in a vice wrench, the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower morphed into crudely rendered nuclear missiles, floating television sets were cracked in half, and pixilated computer graphics slid in and out of sequence with no discernible pattern. The first realization was that your view was not confined to the rectangular frame of a painting or the elongated window of a cinematic screen, nor to the clear boundary produced by the raised stage of a theater. Instead,

¹ Stan VanDerBeek in *VanDerBeekiania: Stan VanDerBeek's Vision*, 1968, documentary film, 27 min., © Creative Arts Television, 1997.

² The *Movie-Drome* was situated in the back of VanDerBeek's home on Gate Hill Road in Stony Point, New York, which was part of an artist's colony called "The Land" where VanDerBeek's former Black Mountain Professor and frequent collaborator John Cage also lived.



Stan VanDerBeek
Movie Mural No. 2,
 orig. printed in Nan R. Pien, "*Light Art*," in *Art in America*,
 May/June 1967 (Brant Publications, Inc., New York)
 photographer unknown
 photo © Art in America

the spherical dome formed an edgeless surface for projection while an infinite stream of light and sound bounced off the participants and enveloped the space in a complete multimedia environment. The standards for viewing, conditioned by the demand for rapt attention in theaters and solitary contemplation in art museums, quickly dissolved along with any formal expectations based on narrative structure. The images floated in a three-dimensional visual field, coalescing neither spatially nor temporally, and so dispersed rather than unified a specific type of viewing subject. The inter-dispersal of unique and found images, the utilization of all surfaces – material and bodily, the unique combination of pre-determined audiovisual and aleatory effects, and the uninhibited mobility of the participants fused into a dynamic immersive experience dubbed the *Movie-Drome*.

The aluminum dome's unruly acoustics made it impossible to correlate a particular sound with a singular image. Within the fixed economy of one's attention, the viewer had to actively decide what would register as information and what would dissipate into noise. The *Movie-Drome* functioned as a demonstration model for a type of multimedia interface that could engage intimate groups. In an idealized form, multiple *Dromes* would be linked to one another through a global satellite network programmed

to simultaneously transmit thousands of streaming images and sounds to various *Movie-Dromes* located around the world generating a real-time, shared multimedia experience.

Movie-Drome was the consummate work-in-progress for the American multimedia artist Stan VanDerBeek (1927–1984). Already firmly established in the New York experimental film scene when he began orchestrating mixed-media projects specifically for the *Movie-Drome* in 1957, he would finally construct a prototype in 1965. The Bronx-born artist started producing films using various collage and animation techniques in 1954, when he returned to New York City after studying fine arts at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.³ Encounters with diverse influences such as John Cage and R. Buckminster Fuller, who taught at the school during VanDerBeek's two-year period of study, instilled the utopist drive and interest in social consciousness consistent with most of VanDerBeek's media projects. Rather than developing out of an infatuation with emerging consumer electronic and portable video technology, it was his own personal frustrations working with theater, painting and sculpture that specifically provoked VanDerBeek's focus on multimedia art. In a 1967 interview with Willard Van Dyke, then the Director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art, VanDerBeek rationalized

³ All biographical material comes from the IotaCenter Research Library and Media Center (Culver City, CA) archives on VanDerBeek compiled by Dr. William Moritz.

the extension of his practice to multimedia and computer animation as a means of contending with what he regarded as the "new sense of dynamics of art: motion and space."⁴ Recognizing what he identified as "the limitations of the four walls of theater" and the "visual boundaries" of painting and sculpture, VanDerBeek sought a medium that would move beyond optical representation and deal with motion and time "while accommodating all of th[o]se other ideas of painting, sculpture and theater."

Movie-Drome as Medium

The result was VanDerBeek's conceptual framework for the *Movie-Drome*, a prototype networked-theater that operated as a medium through which "cultural inter-communication," his means for a type of "transnational, non-verbal communication" could be activated. While he also held associate professorships in film and animation at Columbia in 1963-1965, it was mainly through grants and residencies that he was able to financially support his practice. During the early 1960s, VanDerBeek was awarded residencies at institutions ranging from NASA and Bell Laboratories to Cal Arts and the Ford Foundation.⁵ He financed the construction of the *Movie-Drome* through a Rockefeller grant awarded in 1963 for "studies in non-verbal communication." However, *Movie-Drome* first began to materialize in built form in the fall of 1965, after VanDerBeek attended "Vision '65," a three-day conference sponsored by the International Center for the Typographic Arts. He had been invited to the conference to present his multimedia projects, which integrated computer animation and multiple-screen projections. Fueled by a reinvigorated sense of direction, he returned home and immediately finished construction on a prototype for the *Movie-Drome*.⁶

The keynote conference speakers were Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, whose cross-disciplinary recognition and popular appeal caused over five hundred designers, educators, scientists, politicians and artists to converge on the campus of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. In what was billed as a "teach-in," various participants including VanDerBeek, Fuller and McLuhan, advocated cultural change along two specific trajectories: the development of a common "universal non-verbal language of signs," and the need to use computers in a capacity more creative than their then-current application as large-scale calculators.⁷ Moreover, the studied presentations delivered in characteristically dramatic form by both Fuller and McLuhan enthusiastically detailed how media art offered a categorical challenge to the dual forces of anxiety and utopia preoccupying many artists in the period 1960-1965.

In his presentation at "Vision '65" and in subsequent publications, VanDerBeek labeled the *Movie-Drome* a proposal, an attempt to rectify the lack of cultural intercommunication, which in his terms reflected the "global crisis" of the period.⁸ His sentiments echo those espoused by Fuller during his keynote address at the 1965 conference. Throughout his lengthy lecture, Fuller pointed out numerous examples of how the world's "technological do-more-with-less revolution has been a by-product of the scientific preoccupation with weapons." He concluded by

proffering the ominous assertion that "man on earth is now clearly faced with the choice of Utopia or Oblivion."⁹ VanDerBeek's conception of the socio-political climate of 1965 as a time of "global crisis," a year caught in a vacuum of concurrent periodizations (postwar, cold war, nuclear age, Vietnam era, information age, and so forth), was not the only Fuller-influenced aspect of VanDerBeek's project. Fuller's patented geodesic dome structure was an obvious reference point for the physical construction of the *Movie-Drome*.

However, unlike Fuller's complex and mathematically precise structures, the *Movie-Drome* was fabricated in a more ad-hoc manner by re-purposing prefabricated industrial materials mail-ordered and delivered to his house in upstate New York. The dome's spherical shape and structural stability relied on conjoining individually cut aluminum wedges with bolts and weather sealant, which naturally formed a 180-degree dome. The *Movie-Drome* was a fairly crude structure modeled on a grain silo and fabricated without the use of heavy machinery. One entered the space, which hovered about six feet off the ground on wooden pylons encased in cement, through a trap door in its center. With help from four or five others, VanDerBeek managed to piece together the individual elements and pour the concrete foundation using basic tools and hardware.¹⁰ Referred to in various news reports as VanDerBeek's studio, the *Movie-Drome* was situated against a sloping hillside in VanDerBeek's backyard, just a few paces away from his family home, which was also re-purposed from an airplane hangar. The only structural element supporting the weight of the aluminum panels was a single, mast-like pole mounted in the center against which the top ends of the wedges were affixed. The interior side of the aluminum panels formed a seamless surface that functioned as an expansive screen or a monitor to connect to other *Dromes*.

In fact, VanDerBeek envisioned the *Movie-Drome* operating as a quasi-network based mode of communication. He invited groups of viewers to enter the *Movie-Drome* and would bombard them with an endless stream of sounds and images as they lay on the floor for hours at a time. The model he built in Stony Point was a prototype for a multitude of structures he imagined could be erected all-over the world and connected via satellite. To explain his vision, he conjectured that "in the future, a similar *Movie-Drome* could receive its images by satellite from a worldwide library source, store them and program a feedback presentation to the local community. Dialogues with other centers would be likely, and instant reference material via transmission television and telephone could be called for and received at 186,000 miles-per-second from anywhere in the world."¹¹ VanDerBeek's conceptual framework for viewing and experiencing information over a network and through multi-screen projections demanded a spatially and temporally unique audience not yet addressed by conventional cinematic forms. In his talk at "Vision '65," McLuhan would identify and elaborate upon these distinctions.

McLuhan used the conference platform to rehearse his conception of the "global village" and reiterate the effects he associated with new media tech-

4 Adrienne Mancina and Willard Van Dyke, "Four Artists as Film-Makers," in *Art in America*, no. 55, January 1967, p. 70.

5 Janet Vrchota, "Stan VanDerBeek: Technology's Migrant Fruit Picker," in *Print*, vol. 27, no. 2, March/April 1973, p. 49.

6 In an interview Johanna VanDerBeek maintains that Stan VanDerBeek, when writing his ideas for the *Movie-Drome*, was "beside himself with excitement from the success of the 'Vision '65' conference. [...] Buckminster Fuller was there and [that] Stan adored his domes." (Marilyn Mancino and Anne Morra, Interview with Johanna VanDerBeek, in *Il Grande Occhio Della Notte: Cinema d'Avanguardia Americano 1920-1990*, exhib. cat., Museo Nazionale Del Cinema, Turin, 1999, p. 110.

7 Eugene Hosansky, "Vision '65," in *Industrial Design*, 1966, p. 79.

8 Stan VanDerBeek, "Culture: Intercom' and Expanded Cinema, a Proposal," in *The New American Cinema*, Gregory Battock (ed.), Dutton, New York, 1967, p. 173.

9 Buckminster Fuller, Summary Lecture, in *Perspecta*, no. 11, 1967.

10 There is very little documentation detailing the structural qualities or actual construction of the project. The only known document is an 8mm home movie made by VanDerBeek called *Home and Dome* which was donated to the Museum of Modern Art Department of Film by VanDerBeek's widow, Johanna in 2000.

11 Vrchota, op cit.

nology on "human civilization." Within his provocative talk entitled "The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion," McLuhan pushed for the recognition of the reader as an active agent who must contend with what he labeled the current "invisible environment" of propaganda. He offered the example of the standard daily newspaper as a metaphor demonstrating the process by which "the reader becomes the publisher within the current age of decentralization."¹² He continued with the following loose analogy: "The reader of the news [...] enters the new world as a maker. There is no 'meaning' in the news except what we make – there is no connection between any of the items except the instant dimension of electric circuitry. News items are like the parts of a symbolist structure. The reader is a co-creator." To further accentuate his claim, McLuhan pointed to VanDerBeek's recent presentation at the conference and noted, "The newspaper is also very much like the delightful films of Stan VanDerBeek: the world of multi-screen projections is the world of the newspaper where umpteen news stories come at you without any connection and without connected themes." McLuhan's observations rearticulate the fact that VanDerBeek was not operating under the guise of complete objectivity, and instead employed multiple screens as a way to shift the agency of meaning to the viewer. Within VanDerBeek's taxonomy of experience, meaning is determined within the plurality of audience reception rather than a singular apparatus of projection.

After returning from "Vision '65," VanDerBeek excitedly pounded out his ideas in a manifesto. Published in a multitude of exhibition catalogs and anthologies as "Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema, a Proposal," he itemized what he considered the current dire cultural and political context "that art production must address." In doing so, he defined the conditions for the *Movie-Drome* as a network for non-verbal communication. Within his manic, techno-utopian writing, he augmented McLuhan's reading of his multimedia projections: "the *Movie-Drome* flow could be compared to the 'collage' form of the newspaper, or the three ring circus (both of which suffice the audience with an abundance of facts and data). The audience takes what it can or wants from the presentation and makes its own conclusions – each member of the audience will build his own references from the image-flow, in the best sense of the word the visual material is to be presented and each individual makes his own conclusions or realizations."¹³

VanDerBeek's conception of the *Movie-Drome* as a real-time, programmable communication network mimics the characteristics of an online archive or proto-Internet and stretches the conception or role of theater or cinema. This is reinforced by the fact that in various accounts of the project he referred to the image "content" projected onto the interior of the *Movie-Drome* interchangeably as "cultural intercomming, image libraries, newsreels, and feedback." Moreover, the idea that the *Movie-Drome* was a medium to transmit VanDerBeek's non-verbal communications fits McLuhan's definition of media as a type of translation process. In his talk at "Vision '65," McLuhan emphatically asserted that all media are active metaphors in their power to translate experi-



ence into new forms. VanDerBeek's analogy of the *Movie-Drome* as a proto-personal computer of sorts and, as the "software," his "culture: intercom, ethoscinema, newsreel of dreams, feedback, image libraries" seems to be more accurate than the newspaper comparison McLuhan made at the conference.

Instead of using the delirious visual effects of film and media as tools for hallucinatory escapism or subversive action, VanDerBeek's writings convey a mixed reaction to what he perceived as the alienating impulse of technology. VanDerBeek's concern registered the fact that media, while social, is simultaneously material, a condition that McLuhan largely ignored during this period. Under the material conditions that define and often determine artistic production, media art cannot be seen as separate or distinguishable from the cultural mechanisms under which art production is negotiated. *Movie-Drome* can be read as an attempt to rectify or address the alienating effect of media technology through what VanDerBeek labeled the "transmission of emotion." His sincere, albeit naive, idea was to eradicate the formal distinctions between art and life by immersing subjects visually and aurally in waves of light and sound in an effort to tap into people's emotions. By creating an intense multi-sensory experience via the *Movie-Drome*, he wanted the audience to connect with one another as part of a larger global constituency rather than remain isolated within the privileged sphere of fine art. Intended to connect an audience not by Cartesian models of location but by a telecommunications satellite network, *Movie-Drome* would have functioned as a network-based mode of communication and formed a unique type of collective audience.

Stan VanDerBeek
Movie-Drome
1965
exterior view
Stony Point, New York
orig. printed in Nan R. Plene,
"Light Art," in *Art in America*,
May/June 1967 (Brant Publications, Inc., New York)
photographer unknown
photo © Art in America

¹² Marshall McLuhan, "The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion," in *Perspecta*, no. 11, 1967, p. 166.

¹³ VanDerBeek, op. cit.

This notion of a collective audience is a reference to the type of small crowds and gatherings that developed through live multimedia events at which the audience experienced a common phenomenological, not just purely visual, experience. These groups can be situated between the singular viewing subject understood as the bourgeois individual subject addressed by the nineteenth-century cinema or museum, and the dispersed audience associated with broadcast television, to which Frederic Jameson attributed "the type of subjectivity brought on by the age of corporate capitalism."¹⁴ The recognition of a collective subject serves to disrupt, or at least stall, the rapid, linear progression from a singular, modernist viewing subject that was the paradigmatic viewing convention for the period leading up to 1965, and the mass audience of broadcast television, which becomes the definitive model *after* that year. The networked component of the *Movie-Drome* distinguishes it from other models of multimedia Performance events or cinematic experiences. A networked project means participants are linked, not only to one another within a real-time experience, but also in an idealized form, to a broader community connected via shared interests and access to a broader network (both social and technical). Within a network, it becomes impossible to distinguish or isolate the conditions that determine individual subjectivity from that of the group experience. Rather than operating as a discrete individual in a mode of meditation, the subject is more a node within an interactive social network sustained by the technologies of production and reception.

Immersive Subjectivity

VanDerBeek's more targeted aim, however, was to use this image-reception apparatus as a means of generating a multi-sensory experience distinct from any conventional theater. Within the domed sphere of the *Movie-Drome*, the arc of address was a complete 360-degree circle. Erasing the spatial boundaries of the screen and eliminating the conventions of narrative or authorship, VanDerBeek sought a non-mediated mode of communication. Because the audience was asked to lie down at the outer edges of the circular space, the screens above and around the participants took up almost the complete field of vision. The source of the sounds and lights was not centralized, and did not privilege a certain reading of the body or organization of the space: there was no front or back. By exposing participants to an overwhelming informational experience and submersing the body in waves of light, sound and image, the *Movie-Drome* produced an "immersive subject" through two different modes of address. The first can be read in terms of a phenomenological multi-sensorial experience. The subject was obviously immersed physically in the flow of light and images, but also in Quadraphonic sound. This enclosing of the participants in a small, intimate space made them deeply aware of being in a group. The second form of immersion was more psychological. VanDerBeek's ultimate aim was to employ the available forms of media, film, video, sounds and lights in such a way that

they vanish, are no longer noticed by the viewer. Thus, the immersive subject, like that of Heidegger's "world-picture" or Benjamin's "auratic scene," absorbs, as opposed to merely breathes in, the scene.¹⁵

This notion of immersive subjectivity differed greatly from the commercial widescreen cinema or planetarium vernacular that was developing simultaneously in the U.S.A. and Europe. From the fairground to art and science museums, various institutions had been relying on the novelty of large-format cinema to attract audiences. The technical effects generated by specialized viewing spaces such as the Imax theater, CinemaScope or planetariums are aimed at making viewers forget that they are sitting next to hundreds of other people in a multiplex structure. The goal is to create an environment directing viewer attention to the action occurring within the diegetic space of the screen, not to the built space or overall theater environment. The attenuating work for directors and producers who create large-format films is therefore always focused on perfecting and enhancing the imagery or quality of filmic representation. The ubiquitous desire to make the film seem "more real than real" relegates these practices to Baudrillard's "procession of simulacra." Rather than adjusting formal or spatial elements in a futile attempt to close the distance between spectator and viewer, VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* is a decided shift away from the concerns and conventions of image depiction. Instead, VanDerBeek worked to change the space of viewing in order to alter the conditions or habits of perception.

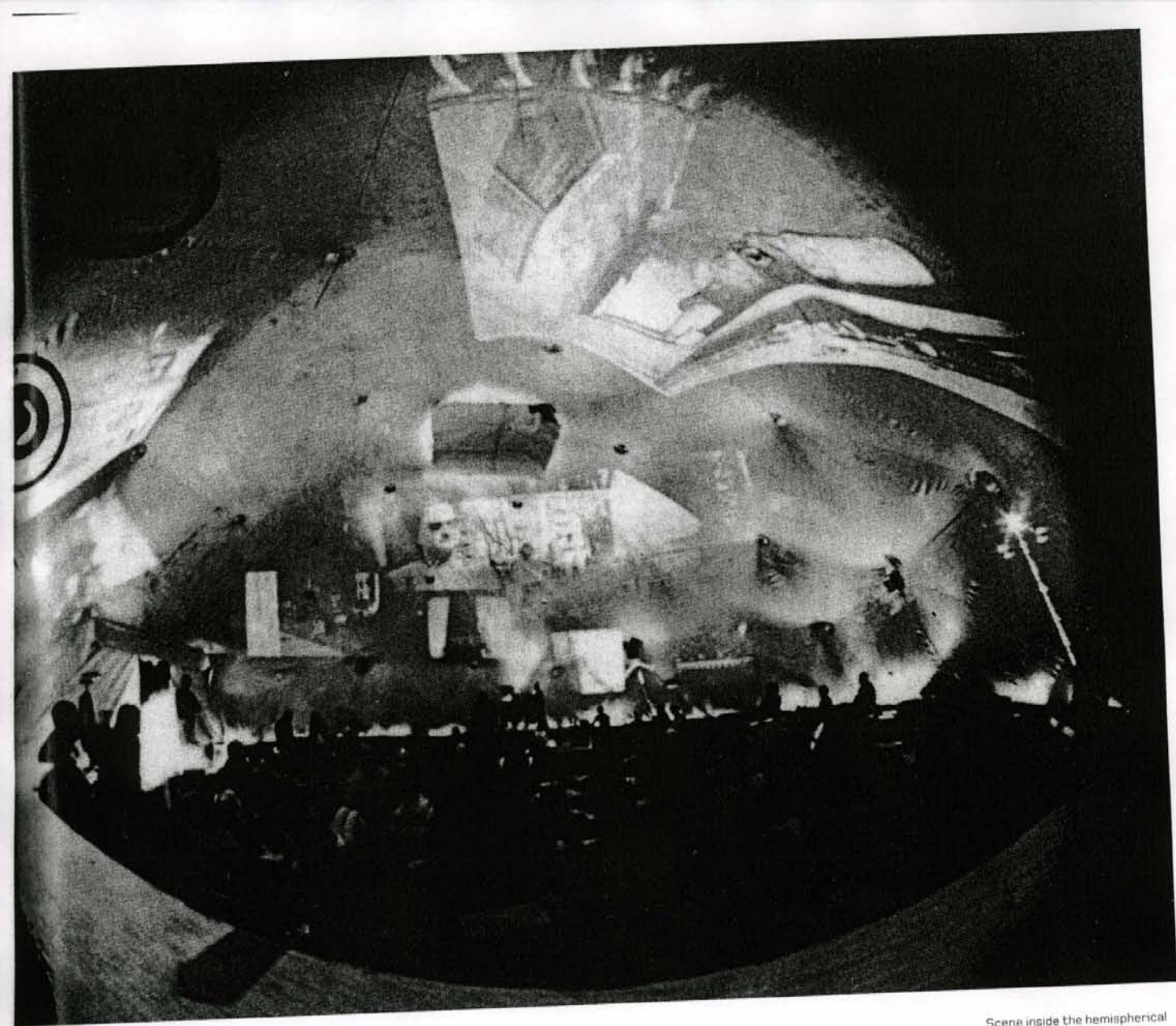
VanDerBeek eschewed singular, signature authorship – the taxonomy of fine art production during this period – and instead shifted the emphasis from reading each individual film as a fixed or self-contained object towards the interplay between films as the source of meaning. John Cage explained this element of VanDerBeek's practice as a "renunciation of intention" during a 1967 symposium on experimental art, and expressed the following sentiment: "I think that the closest to the renunciation of intention would, in my experience, be through the films of Stan VanDerBeek, a renunciation of intention which is effected through the multiplication of images. In this multiplicity, intention becomes lost and becomes silent, as it were, in the eyes of the observer. Since he could not be looking at all five or six images at once but only one particular one, the observer would have a certain freedom."¹⁶ Within the spectacle of the *Movie-Drome*, plurality of meaning is not due to differing interpretations of the same filmic images, but rather a more complex process akin to what Roland Barthes, in his pivotal 1971 essay "From Work to Text," referred to as the "stereographic plurality" of signifiers.

VanDerBeek's desire was to activate the audience in a type of collective perceptual experience not reliant on visual images alone. Moreover, rather than thinking of his role in terms of a curatorial process of selecting images, he repeatedly articulated his desire to construct a mode of communication that could be used by groups of people simultaneously, regardless of geographic locale. Basically, the *Movie-Drome* functioned as an interface to interact with a live audience.

14 Frederic Jameson, "Post-modernism and Consumer Society," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, John Belton (ed.), Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1996, p. 195.

15 Samuel Weber, "Mass Medias, Or: Art and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin," in *Mass Medias: Form, Techniques, Media*, Alan Cholodenko (ed.), Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 1996, pp. 90–92.

16 Hector Currie and Michael Porte (eds.), "Cinema Now: Stan Brakhage, John Cage, Jonas Mekas, Stan VanDerBeek," in *Perspectives on American Underground Film*, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, 1968, p. 9.



Scene inside the hemispherical dome used by VanDerBeek to create prototypes for his multimedia exhibits. orig. printed in Stewart Kranz, *Science & Technology in the Arts. A tour through the realm of science + art*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, 1974, p. 238 photo © Art in America

VanDerBeek's practice was distinguishable from contemporaneous multimedia art forms and experimental film in two further aspects: he had learned computer programming for graphic design purposes, and he recognized computers as responsive systems representing an alternative trajectory for art production by allowing for more direct feedback or interaction. In his own words, he "continu[ed] to explor[e] what possibilities could produce the most imaginative relationship between computer and artist, and that could also result in artistic expression reaching masses of people."¹⁷ The result was that VanDerBeek's conception of cinema becomes conflated, or begins to mimic computer operations. And for VanDerBeek, the computer (its hardware and software) offered the possibility of programming limitless combinations of images and fueled his ability to develop a continuously changing flow of images for the *Movie-Drome*.

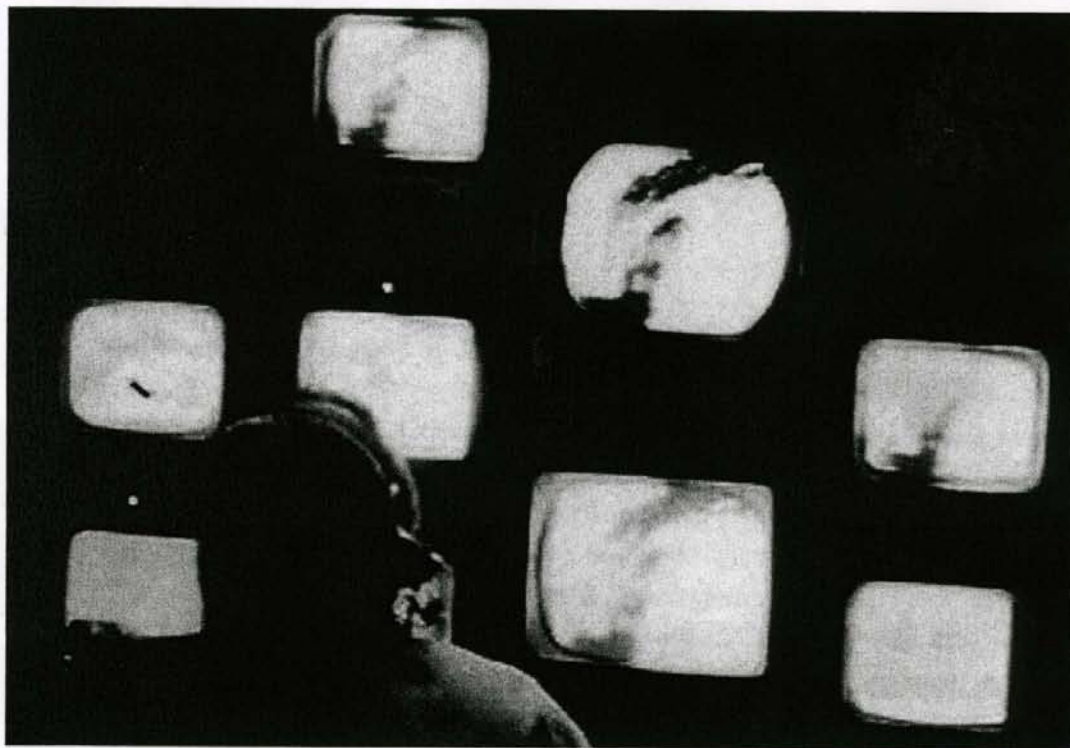
Although VanDerBeek did have extensive experience in broadcast television, his interest in programming a constant stream of images is never referred to in terms of television. While the *Movie-Drome* did

not overtly function as "a disciplinary instrument for the production of normalized subjects," which Jonathan Crary claims is inherent to television, *Movie-Drome* was still susceptible to the same dual effect.¹⁸ That is to say, while the *Movie-Drome* may have opened up the possibility of de-territorialization, it clearly points to a heightened awareness of privatization and centralized control. The satellite and fiber-optic cable telecommunications system by which VanDerBeek intended to store and transmit his films for the purpose of extending cultural understanding was the same system simultaneously being developed by the US military and government to safeguard its ability to maintain control under a nuclear attack. In 1969, after years of development, the ARPANET (now DARPA, the Defense Research Projects Agency), was implemented as the first large-scale decentralized network system that allowed users to transfer files, communicate and store information through a network.¹⁹ While VanDerBeek may not have envisioned *Movie-Drome* functioning as a means of remote social control, it pointed to the very possibility.

¹⁷ Vrchota, op. cit., p. 53.

¹⁸ Jonathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (eds.), New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and D.R. Godine, Boston, 1984, p. 289.

¹⁹ John S. Quarterman, "The Global Matrix of Minds," in *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, Linda M. Harasim (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, p. 36.



Stan VanDerBeek at work in "the world's most expensive optical bench," the mixing/switching control room at WGBH-TV, Boston, Massachusetts.
photo © Gene Youngblood

Recognizing *Movie-Drome*

Towards the conclusion of his talk at "Vision '65," McLuhan outlined a major theme in his work: the process by which newer environments make older forms more visible. Recognition of *Movie-Drome* as an apparatus for producing and receiving images is only now facilitated by the advent of more contemporary forms of media art. I am referring to the recent institutionalization of new media and Net art, which have complicated the tropes of medium specificity and no longer deal with the traditional cultural domain of representation. Perhaps the most productive aspect of the recent institutionalization of these practices is that their inherently ephemeral qualities may destabilize the current system of classification, or at least challenge the dominance of the typology of medium. The complications that arise from commissioning, exhibiting or collecting media formats and software subject to relatively rapid obsolescence have forced institutions to define art work independently from medium. This has permitted the recognition of artistic practices operating within an interactive network, engaging a dispersed yet collective audience, and possibly reliant on a decentralized mode of authorship. Through telecommunication, networked-based art may shift the analysis from product to process. Such art demands attention not just in technologically determinist terms but also as a discourse object, as Erkki Huhtamo has asserted:

"The artistic approach to technology has now less to do with concrete artifacts, and the ideologically

'pure,' 'scientific,' theories informing them, than with the discursive formations enveloping them. This concerns not only the institutionally established and legitimized applications of technology, or cultural forms (as described by Raymond Williams), but unrealized projects and 'discursive inventions' as well."²⁰

The significance *Movie-Drome* holds for reading or redefining present day network-based media art projects may seem like an obvious point. However, there has been little, if any, sustained critical attention given to this project. As a filmmaker, Stan VanDerBeek's work is well-documented within the discourse of American experimental film history. However, as a visual artist, his work hovers on the outermost margins appearing occasionally within the historiography of Happenings. Moreover, there is very little published material specifically on the *Movie-Drome* project, even though it is representative of the multimedia art spectacles that developed during the mid-1960s and actively engaged audiences as participants in complex sound-image relationships. *Movie-Drome* embodies the structural parameters for these types of multimedia performance projects, which were derived from the more established praxis of cinema, photography, theater, dance and painting. With its employment of portable film projectors, mixed-media, surround-sound systems and informal, spontaneous staging, *Movie-Drome* can be read as paradigmatic of early multimedia experiments such as the more widely acclaimed multimedia art perfor-

²⁰ Erkki Huhtamo, "Archaeology of Media," in *Immersed in Technology: art and virtual environments*, Mary Anne Moser (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 239.



Scene inside the hemispherical dome used by VanDerBeek to create prototypes for his multimedia exhibits. orig. printed in Stewart Kranz, *Science & Technology in the Arts. A tour through the realm of science + art*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, 1974, p.238 photo © Art in America

mances associated with Fluxus, Judson Church, and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) that have won greater recognition (if not to say canonization) within media-art surveys. However, *Movie-Drome* can be read separately from these practices if one establishes within multimedia-art history a parallel genealogy that examines the modes of reception along with methods of production. Moreover, if the ways in which experience is processed are historically relative, then the modes through which experience is filtered, constructed and projected are also, by definition, transitory and ephemeral. These filters are not only contingent on year or location, but also on the technologies that constitute and signify subjectivity. As film, video, sound and projection technologies alter perspective, reception or distance within the realm of media art, so too does subjectivity shift.

If one purpose of multimedia art is to transfer sense experiences from one person to another, then modes of reception become as significant as the methods of projection. Low-tech projection equipment produced inside the *Movie-Drome* a sensorial spectacle of sounds, lights, images, bodies and noise whose meaning hinged not on objective form, but on the participants' experience. Rather than developing within a genealogy of image depiction that would connect this project with earlier visual devices such as dioramas, zoetropes or panoramas, the *Movie-Drome* functioned as a communication apparatus or, in VanDerBeek's terms, an "experience machine." More significantly, VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* points to

the notion of a programmable space, making it more related to projects that envisioned a system or circuit of information, for instance Alan Turing's Universal Machine of 1936 or Nikola Tesla's 1901 "Plan for a World System of Planetary Communication." By generating a perceiving subject that relies on more than just visual input, the *Movie-Drome* makes it evident that media art, unlike film or photography, is not solely limited to the concerns of image production or depiction. Moreover, this project, even in its half-realized state and crude documentation, makes it clear that media artists were attempting, and continue to address, larger systems of distribution and regulation; that they are concerned with the mechanization of information, not just with image refinement. Recognizing that media art operates within a wider circuit of meaning production, *Movie-Drome* may potentially work to expand definitions that determine, or at least set the limits of, subjectivity within media art. An alternate reading of a lesser-known multimedia project initiated almost forty years ago challenges the current methods of historicizing contemporary forms of media art. The myopic consideration given in particular to the *Movie-Drome* is clear confirmation that networked practices addressing a discursive subject have previously existed, but lacked the context to be fully recognized.