Busing as Media Theory:

Stan VanDerBeek's
Panels for the Walls of the World

by Kirsten Gill

This presentation is part of a multi–site project that marks the first time Stan VanDerBeek's fax murals will be transmitted to multiple sites simultaneously since VanDerBeek's realization of the artwork in 1970.

Phase I of "Panels for the Walls of the World" will be transmitted by the Stan VanDerBeek Archive in Brooklyn, NY and installed in stages at DOCUMENT (March 5–April 23), Hyde Park Art Center (March 19–May 22), and EXPO Chicago (April 7–10). Phase II of the mural will be the focus of an exhibition at the Box in Los Angeles in September 2022.

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For now, let's call VanDerBeek "the operator," and his studio at MIT's Center for Advanced Studies "the control room," since, with *Panels for the Walls of the World*, VanDerBeek reimagined the role of the artist as information processor, sifting through the world's images and feeding them back to a public, orchestrating a counter-hegemonic front in the battle for the "audio-visual programming" of subjects by contemporary image worlds.[1]

From 1969–1970, then, "the operator," working with a team of assistants, transmitted a collage mural by facsimile machine sheet-by-sheet from "the control room" to various sites in Boston and elsewhere. The fax machine – Xerox's Magnafax Telecopier, released in 1966 – was relatively new to consumers, and worked, similarly to television, via a cathode-ray scanning process. It was still a cumbersome, time-consuming tool: with each fax taking around 10 minutes, it was projected that 15 "units" of the mural could be sent each day from the control room to "other points in Boston," with each installation period lasting 4 weeks. As such, the mural would "'grow' over the length of the exhibition." [2] The announcement of the fax murals in Boston was accompanied with a call for image submissions. Although it is unclear if the control room ever received anything, feedback from the public was hypothesized as a means to generate content and continue the evolution of the murals' form: "The possibilities of 'feedback' from the six different [Boston] locations," the operator wrote, "would affect the content of the mural (i.e. graphic style, information announcements, day to day national and local news…) a very real penetration of graphics and visual dialogue through the walls of the environment, and decorating these very walls." [3]

VanDerBeek conceived the fax murals to be installed simultaneously in numerous locations, both in Boston and in museums across the United States and Canada. In actuality, only a few museums took part. Between February and April, the mural was sent first, as part of the Gyorgy Kepes-organized *Explorations* show, to the MIT Hayden Gallery and later to the Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Arts (now the American Art Museum); next to simultaneous locations in Boston – the Boston City Hall, Boston Children's Museum, the DeCordova Museum, and the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts; and, subsequently, to the Walker Art Center and the First National Bank of Minneapolis.

Today, VanDerBeek is far better remembered for his stand-alone film works and projects like the *Movie-drome*, a grain silo repurposed as dome-shaped viewing chamber, which tried to change how we watch moving images and has a special place in the history of expanded cinema. But the *Movie-drome* was only part of what VanDerBeek imagined as a global infrastructure for the exchange of images, which would form a new, universally comprehensible language superseding the tribalism and the untranslatabilities of verbal language. [4] *Movie-dromes* were envisioned as nodes in an image-exchange network, but would exist alongside other technologies of transmission. In this sense, *Panels for the Walls of the World*, and the other project VanDerBeek undertook while in residence in Boston, *Violence Sonata*, should be seen as equal parts in an expansive experiment in the psychodramatic mediation of social relations.

Violence Sonata, a video/television/live performance hybrid, was developed for Boston's local public broadcasting station WGBH. The program, which aired on January 12, 1970, consisted of a two-channel television broadcast, meant to be played on separate television sets placed side-by-side in viewers' homes. An additional component played out simultaneously in the WGBH studio, where an audience became embroiled in a live performance and a "thrash out" discussion session following the program. As the name suggests, *Violence Sonata* was a composition on violence. Magisterial video collages weaving together newsreel footage, original video, and documentation of the live studio performance, the television broadcasts give particular prominence to the themes of interracial relations and anti-Black violence. At its conclusion, the broadcast presented audiences with a poll asking, "Can man communicate?" (Home viewers were to call in their responses, which were largely affirmative). Among those invited to attend the live studio performance were members of the Black Panther Party and of the notorious right-wing John Birch Society (at the time based in the Boston suburbs), a fact which pointedly demonstrates the intention of convening an otherwise unconceived audience.

Motifs travel – these are "pictures in motion" – between the two projects. But, unlike *Violence Sonata*, the fax murals did not announce an explicit theme, and are harder to make sense of. This is partly because we have to read the mural on at least three levels: first, on the particulate, at the

1 Stan VanDerBeek in Jacob Proctor, "From the Ivory Tower to the Control Room," 102. *Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2011).
2 All citations from a January 1970 proposal for the "Telephone Mural Concept," courtesy of the Stan VanDerBeek Archive.
3 Ibid.

4 On the concept of "untranslatability," see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York: Verso, 2013).

level of the collaged material, taken from newspapers, magazines, etc., and the juxtapositions created; and second, on the whole, in which the image particles coalesce to compose a larger picture. Third, since both pictorial details and the larger picture were meant to morph three times during the mural's installation, we must account for another dimension, the mural's change over time, or its animation. If we consider, along with this poly–dimensionality, the intention to include material submitted by the public, the indeterminate plasma of the work presents a certain resistance to our reading. The overwhelming amount of shifting material seems to act in defiance of the common understanding of montage practice as allegorical: a procedure of appropriation, fragmentation, and re–composition that creates a new, furtive meaning for the images assembled.[5] Its pieces plucked from an endless media stream and only provisionally tethered to a grid, the mural is a testament to the "visual velocity" with which VanDerBeek described the intensifying flood of images and a record of the media preoccupations of the era. One *New York Times* reviewer of the work in the *Explorations* show derisively called it "globaloney" – "a slap–up of random images drawn from everywhere." [6] Across the mural's flux, however, strong patterns do take shape. More than a mere index of the news saturating the media in the late–1960s, the overall scope gestures at a quite intersectional understanding of interrelated phenomena: racial oppression and anti–Blackness, neoconservative politics, U.S. military aggression, anti–communism, poverty. It is no surprise, then, that the above reviewer relied on a neologism coined by a conservative politician to dismiss the mural as nonsense. The dense interweaving across each of the mural's phases of pictures from the ongoing war in Vietnam and U.S. civil rights and Black Power movements, along with the material stuff of America, our commodities, coheres in the form of a critique of what Martin Luther King, Jr., described as the "giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism." [7]

Let's draw a few particles forth from the mass of images:

Clippings from headlines reading "Nixon Okays De Facto Segregation in Schools" and "Bus Policy Opposed by Nixon" juxtaposed with the text fragments "Die," "Lessons in Survival," and a photograph of flag–draped coffins returning from Vietnam.

A mid–speech, live–and–well Fred Hampton, who, following his classification in 1967 as a "radical threat" by the FBI, and after the bureau's failure to undermine his activities and his meteoric influence among Chicago Black radical movements over the course of the ensuing two years, had been assassinated while he slept, drugged by an insider agent, just a few months before the mural's dissemination, in December 1969.

The one–dollar bill with the image of Bobby Seale, co–founder of the Black Panther Party – among other things a movement for self–determination and a critique of U.S. racial capitalism – superimposed over George Washington's face.

These are all very topical images. Fred Hampton had just been murdered. Bobby Seale's trial as a member of the Chicago 8 had taken place that fall, and the judge's order to have him bound and gagged in the courtroom had sparked outrage. And school desegregation and the controversy over busing were very much on the news. In the few months before VanDerBeek moved to Boston to take up residency at MIT's Center for Advanced Study, both the New York–based national broadcast *Black Journal* and the Boston program *Say Brother* ran features on Black students and the work being done by Black activists to combat the deeply entrenched segregation of the Boston public school system. Without having any way of knowing whether VanDerBeek saw either of these programs – it is certainly possible – I nevertheless want to suggest that he had the issue of school desegregation on his mind with the concept of the fax murals. With the emphasis on simultaneity (across an array of institutions, fostering equity of access) and penetration (of sites, of institutional walls), along with the interest in education, *Panels for the Walls of the World* presents something like a media theory of desegregation.

Black Journal and *Say Brother* were among a wave of new Black public affairs programs that emerged in the late 1960s. As Devorah Heitner has shown, the new Black television programs originated, at least in part, out of a strategy of containment, in which government officials, television executives, and charitable organizations such as the Ford Foundation conspired to use more inclusive media representation as a

5 Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* (September 1982): 43–56.
6 Grace Glueck, "'Explorations' Spotlights Use of Technology in Art," *The New York Times*, Monday, April 6, 1970.
7 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence," Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967.

means to avoid further racial unrest following the explosive last years of the 1960s.[8] Yet this dubious backing did not temper the radicality of the discourse, as shows like *Black Journal* and *Say Brother*, with all-Black direction, were left to do their own thing.

At the same time that Black folk and other minorities were gaining access to broadcast space, the configuration of televisual audiences was shifting in other important ways. Changes in television sponsorship – the development of spot advertising and the practice of "narrowcasting" – were fracturing television's audiences into "interest groups" and "target audiences," breaking up the televisual public sphere into isolated communities and signaling the end of a mass audience that was perhaps always a myth to begin with.[9]

Against this backdrop, the antagonism toward media containment that *Panels for the Walls of the World* and *Violence Sonata* enact takes a more definite form. In a reflection written following the premiere of *Violence Sonata*, VanDerBeek proposed using television (or, rather "anti-television") as an alternative to "school space," which he described as "essentially a small, isolated container, pre-designed with one-point perspective." The text proceeds to call for the opening up of the ivory tower: "the university needs instant diversity... it still just builds walls to keep things in... or perhaps to keep things out, which is worse...." [10] These two projects used media strategies to cross the lines of segregation (whether "de facto" or not), to stage encounters, to convene new assemblies of viewer/participants. The audience for these projects was neither a generalized and abstracted "broader public" nor a target group, but rather a specifically heterogeneous, polarized, and isolated cross section of the local community. Considering television's consolidation of interest groups alongside the strategic dispersals and redistributions of busing allows us to understand the significance of VanDerBeek's *re-assemblies*, or heterogeneous assemblies that analogize struggles for school desegregation, like busing, in defiance of norms of containment. With the fax murals, VanDerBeek expands the montage principles of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and re-signification such that montage becomes not just a procedure acting on the stratum of the work's surface – and it's re-surfacing, as it were, and

transvaluating of images – but to the fragmentation, juxtaposition, and re-signification of *site itself* and the communities convened therein – just as the busing strategy was meant to work on schools.

One image taken from the installation of the fax mural at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, a Black arts school in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, helps to draw these fragments together. Taken by the photographer Henry Horenstein, the image shows a young girl striding in front of the mural, which is installed above a row of school chairs. Her figure is silhouetted against the mural's mostly white ground. The staging of the scene is unmistakable, calling to mind an iconic artwork from the debates over school desegregation: Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), a portrait of six-year-old Ruby Bridges on her way to an all-white public school in New Orleans, escorted by a phalanx of U.S. deputy marshals. But *Panels for the Walls of the World* updates the stylistic and media conservatism of Rockwell's social realist painting, and its tinge of white liberal paternalism, with a cybernetics-age epic of recycled news images charting the rise of Black Power and transnational liberation consciousness.[11] Adhering to a logic of distribution rather than a historical definition of medium, plugged in to the media ecology of the moment, the fax mural is electronically distributed, inherently mobile, and, in theory, capable of infinite re-assemblies.

8 Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
9 See Lizbeth Cohen, A Consumer's *Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); and David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).
10 Stan VanDerBeek, "Afterthoughts After 'Violence Sonata,'" January 15, 1970. Courtesy of the Stan VanDerBeek Archive.

11 For an excellent read on the Norman Rockwell, see Bridget R. Cooks, "Norman Rockwell's Negro Problem," *Cultural Critique* 105 (Fall 2019): 40–77.

Biography:

Stan VanDerBeek (1927–1984) was a prolific multimedia artist known for his pioneering work in experimental film and art and technology. Born in Bronx, NY, he studied at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York (1948–1952), and Black Mountain College, Asheville, NC (1949–1951). He lived in Baltimore until his death in 1984.

During his lifetime he was the recipient of numerous grants and awards including a Ford Foundation Grant for Experimental Films (1963–1964); Rockefeller Grant for Experimental Films and Studies in Non–verbal Communication (1967–1968); National Endowment for the Arts Grant for Experimental Film and Video (1977–1978); Guggenheim Fellowship (1979); National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Grant for Computer Animation Research (1981–1982); and awards at Bergamo Film Festival (1960); Oberhausen Film Festival (1961); Expo '67. Montreal (1967); and Mannheim Film Festival (1968), among others.

From 1969–1970 he was artist–in–residence at WGBH–TV in Boston, MA under a Rockefeller Grant for Studies in Experimental Television simultaneously with a Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT in Cambridge, MA.

Various projects included the construction of Movie–Drome an audio–visual laboratory for simultaneous projection, at Gate Hill Coop, Stony Point, NY (1964–1966); Computer Animation Series at Bell Telephone Laboratory in Princeton, New Jersey (1964–1968); Violence Sonata, a live theatre event for two television channels produced as an artist–in–residence at WGBH, Boston MA (1969–1970); Panels for the Walls of the World, a fax mural made as one of the first artist–in–residence at MIT's Center For Advanced Visual Studies, Cambridge, MA (1969–1970); Cine–Dreams, an overnight multimedia presentation for planetarium, Rochester, NY (1972); and Steam Screens, projections onto Joan Brigham steam installation, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1979).

His filmography includes over one hundred experimental and innovative 16mm and 35mm films and videos in black and white and color spanning collage, animation, computer graphics, live action, performance documentation, found footage, and newsreels. Retrospective film screenings during his lifetime were hosted by the Museum of Modern Art, NY (1968); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY (1970); Film Forum, NY (1972); Anthology Film Archives (1977); The American Film Institute Theatre at the John F. Kennedy Center, Washington, DC (1979). Multimedia presentations were held at venues including Lincoln Center, Philharmonic Hall, NY (1965); Guggenheim, NY (1980); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY (1979); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1981); Tokyo, Japan (1969); Athens, Greece (1970); and Shiraz–Persepolis Art Festival, Iran (1971).

He collaborated on projects with many peers including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Nam June Paik, Kenneth Knowlton, Paul Motian, Claes Oldenburg, Gerald Oster, Sonia Sheridan, Elaine Summers, and Robert Brown and Frank Olvey, among others. VanDerBeek also published his own writing such as his manifesto, Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema, a Proposal (1966) in publications such as Film Culture, Tulane Drama Review, and Art in America.

He has been the subject of many reviews in publications such as Artforum, Art in American , Film Culture, Frieze, The New York Times, and The Village Voice. Books published on VanDerBeek include The Experience Machine by Gloria Sutton (2015: MIT Press); and Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom (2012: MIT List Visual Arts Center and CAMH).

VanDerBeek taught at various universities including Columbia University, New York (1963–1965); SUNY Stony Brook (1967–1973); and University of Maryland Baltimore County (1975–1984). He became the Chair of the Visual Arts Department at UMBC in 1983 and founded an art and technology center at UMBC called the Image Laboratory in 1984. He also presented multimedia projects around the world as a film artist–in–residence at universities such as University of Southern California (1967); University of Illinois (1967); Colgate University (1968); University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (1970); University of Hawaii (1971); and University of South Florida (1972–1975), among others. He was a computer artist–in–residence at Pennsylvania State University (1982) and KET, Lexington, KY (1983) and had a residency at NASA, Houston, TX (1979).

Past exhibitions include New Media–New Forms, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York (1960); Cinema Frontiers, AG Gallery, New York, NY (1961); Bewogen, Beweging, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1961); Projected Art, Finch College Museum of Art, Contemporary Wing, New York, NY (1966); New American Cinema Group Exposition, Turin, Italy (1967); The New Vein: The Human Figure, 1963–1968, Organized by the National Collection of Fine Arts International Art Program, Washington, D.C. (1968); The Projected Image, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (1968); The World of Stanley VanDerBeek, The Visual Arts Gallery, New York, NY (1968); Cybernetic Serendipity, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, United Kingdom, traveled to Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (1968); Found Forms, Cross Talk Intermedia, Japan (1969); Explorations, MIT Hayden Gallery, Cambridge, MA and National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (1970); Information Center, Bienal de São Paulo with the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies, São Paulo, Brazil (1971); Multiple Interaction Team, MIT, Cambridge, MA (1972); Machine Art: An Exhibit of "InterGraphic" by Professor Stanley VanDerBeek, University of Maryland, Baltimore (1976); Stan VanDerBeek, CHAMBERS in nine parts and VAPORS SCREEN, part of the First Intermedia Art Festival Performance Series, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY (1980); Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1983); New American Video Art: A Historical Survey, 1967–1980, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1984); and Fluxus, etc.: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX (1984).

Recent exhibitions that have featured VanDerBeek's work include Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1996); 1960s Electric Arts: From Kinetic Sculpture to Media Environments, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA (2005); Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom (2005); Stan VanDerBeek, Guild & Greyshkul, New York, NY (2008); Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom (2009); Amazement Park: Stan, Sara and Johannes VanDerBeek, The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY (2009); Gwangju Biennale 2010, 10000 Lives, Gwangju, South Korea (2010); Stan VanDerBeek: The Culture Intercom, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2011); Ghosts in the Machine, New Museum, New York, NY (2012); Xerography, firstsite, Essex, United Kingdom (2013);

Venice Biennale (2013); Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2015); Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2016); Merce Cunningham: Common Time, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2017); Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980, The Met Breuer, New York, NY (2017); and Thinking Machines: Art and Design in the Computer Age, The Museum of Modern Art, NY (2017); Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2018); Art in Motion, ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany (2018); Bauhaus Imaginista, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany (2019); In the Vanguard: Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 1950–1969, Portland Museum of Art, Maine (2019); Private Lives Pubic Spaces, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2019); Immortality: 5th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art, Ekaterinburg, Russia (2019); VanDerBeek + VanDerBeek, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Asheville, NC (2019); CONSOLAS: Democracia para la imagen digital (1972–2003), ETOPIA_Centre for Art and Technology, Zaragoza, Spain (2020).

Upcoming exhibitons include Signals: Video and Electronic Democracy, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2023).

VanDerBeek's work can be found in numerous public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.