

“I want to reach out to this technology, I want to incorporate this technology into my art and have the two mix together. What spellbinds me as an idea is that I’ll be able to sit someplace in a railroad station and write a movie, or maybe even pick up a telephone eventually and write a movie.” -Stan VanDerBeek at Bell Labs in the film “Incredible Machine” (AT&T, 1968)

With this quote we get a glimmer of a new way of thinking, bringing the art making into the world, out of the studio. Stan VanDerBeek was not only interested in the visual and material possibilities of using the computer as an artist, he was interested in the liberation the computer could provide. In *Poemfield*, our second presentation of Stan VanDerBeek’s work at The Box, we will feature five of the eight computer-animated films from the *Poemfield* series, in which he explored how the medium of machine could allow for creative and physical freedom. This exhibition was organized with the Estate of Stan VanDerBeek.

From 1966-1971 Stan VanDerBeek worked on *Poemfield* at Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey. In each film, powerful sequences of words gradually emerge from twinkling mosaics of geometric graphics, move around the frame, and eventually blend back into the parts from which they came. Poems written by VanDerBeek, or in the case of *Poemfield No. 7*, by the nonviolent activist A.J. Muste, appear to viewers as simple yet coded messages from a machine hacked by an artist-cum-social activist. The graphics in *Poemfield* were produced from a script written in a particular computer language and then input into an IBM 7094 computer. Images were then output onto the surface of a cathode ray tube and filmed. Combined with soundtracks by VanDerBeek’s contemporaries such as John Cage and Paul Motian, and expertly colored by Bob Brown and Frank Olvey, each *Poemfield* is a multilayered, moving image experience of the kind for which VanDerBeek is best known.

In the *Poemfield* exhibition at The Box, we will feature *Poemfield No.1-No.3, No.5, and No.7*. Two different colored versions of *Poemfield No. 1* have been restored in high definition for the exhibition and will be shown here for the first time. In addition to the films, a small selection of works on paper related to VanDerBeek’s pursuits in word-play and technology will be shown in adjacent galleries. These include typed pages of all the ‘computer poems’ that appear in the films, as well as earlier poems written by VanDerBeek; watercolors from 1955 that combine text and image; a single-column telephone mural presented in original collage form; and a series of colored, computer graphic prints. Furthermore, two related computer films made prior to *Poemfield* will be shown, *Collideoscope* (1966) and *Man and His World* (1967).

To make his computer films, VanDerBeek worked with computer programmer and physicist Ken

Knowlton at Bell Labs. One of several programs developed by Knowlton called BEFLIX (short for Bell Labs Flicks) was used to make *Poemfield* and is considered by AT&T as the first computer animation language. VanDerBeek was introduced to Knowlton through a mutual friend at Bell Labs, where engineers had just begun formally collaborating with artists through Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), an organization founded, in part, by VanDerBeek's contemporaries Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman. In 1968 VanDerBeek and Knowlton screened *Poemfield* and talked about their discoveries at an E.A.T. gathering. VanDerBeek eventually distributed each *Poemfield* individually and also included the films as part of his multi-screen installations such as *Found Forms* (1969) and *Cine Dreams* (1972).

VanDerBeek's belief in the computer as an extension of the mind kept him pursuing technology as a revolutionary means of expressing and engaging human consciousness and, for that reason, a necessary tool to master. Following his work at Bell Labs, VanDerBeek continued to experiment combining his witty, political, and lyrical art with computer technology as a resident at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, MIT, Cambridge; WGBH, Boston; Regional Media Center, University of Baltimore, Maryland; and NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, among other venues. In the last decade of his life, VanDerBeek was awarded over a dozen grants towards computer and new media research. The meanings, scope, and significance of VanDerBeek's contributions as an artist engaged with technology have yet to be fully grasped.

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