

John Sanborn: "23"

Statement about Art and Technology

Our use of tools is what separates us from the rest of the animals. Our sophistication with various forms of technology (from the knife to the atomic bomb) defines us as "civilized" creatures.

The artist has always defined his tools as part of the creative process. Paintings are steeped in color theory, the texture of the painted surface, and the tactility of the paint itself, as much as with the subject being painted. Music is written with the sound of an orchestra, or the abilities of the recording studio in mind, with the merger of compositional form, and musical "content" resulting in a work of art.

It is not surprising, then, to think of the charcoal used for cave drawings, the pencil, or the piano, as the advanced artistic technology of its time.

The so-called state-of-the-art "computer" and video technology of the media artist is nothing more advanced than the oil and canvas of today. As with painting, the use of tools alone is not enough. Tools used without vision, or technology utilized "for its own sake", is as boring as an incompetently played Mozart sonata. But very often the use of "new" technologies has forced the ideas out of art-making, leaving an empty shell of electronics.

For me, video technology is the natural extension of a creative thought process which analyzes and "edits" information. In my case the information is formalized as non-narrative or abstract stories. The visual motifs, combined with an overall conceptual structure, adhere to a logical development which in turn "makes sense" as much as more traditional narrative does, to the audience.

This level of communication has been lacking for the most part in "art and technology" projects, which has tended to shroud the artist, and his or her tools, in my mystery.

Nam June Paik claims to make technology ridiculous. I make technology human.

23

23 combines work of Mark Helias, Cyndi Lee, Mary Perillo, John Sanborn, Mary Ellen Strom, and Pierce Turner in a live performance at Ars Electronica in June, 1986. The general theme of the project will involve the problem of the individual trying to make order out of chaos, and of explaining the inexplicable. Dealing with day-to-day experience we expect to arrive at no specific answers, but more elegant questions.

The work is a combination of: text (displayed, spoken and sung), live musical solos (played along with pre-recorded music), pre-recorded video (dealing with treated dance segments, animated computer graphics and digital video effects as pre-montaged material for mixing with live cameras), live video mixing and effects (involving the use of a remote video camera), and live dance and performance.

The prerecorded tape will be a complex montage of both simple and sophisticated video technologies, all centered around visualizing a collection of metaphors, which illuminate the collaborators' versions of reality.

We will use doodles as signatures of the six collaborators, reflexive patterns as autobiographical introduction. Doodle categories will reflect the concerns of the artists: movement doodles, music doodles, video doodles. Are there cross-references between doodle forms (i.e. drawing doodles and movement doodles), and how descriptive are these unconscious forms? Another repeating image is that of a digitally created, slowly turning room, with large picture windows, each revealing different things outside the window. The

whole image is to be used as a set piece with musical setting and as a backdrop for foreground dance movement, as well as a transition between various scenes.

A second window image uses the video screen to cut a hole to the outside world, revealing dance outside the theatre. This dance is an example of a limitations work which is defined by its pre-set limits. Maps are another graphic tool. One is a map of the six collaborator's ancestor's migration to the US. Our view of the map zooms into the individuals, flashing upon personal intersections.

The final step of this mapping is a set of lines and standard "map" symbols, which slowly grows towns, cities and a topography, revealing itself to be a palm-reader's map of a hand.

Continuing throughout 23 are a series of Macintosh-created animations done by Joseph Prieboy. One is called the "Dance Analyzing Machine"—a satire on art and technology projects which uses the dance techniques of the choreographers as a basis for this low-resolution animation.

A major dance sequence is the "car crash test", with the dancers striped and numbered in a pseudo "crash-test" environment. A large scale video alteration on live dance, will interact with on-stage dance commentary, looking for meaning in simple movement, using scientific distance and time markers to accentuate time and distance alteration, and relay an intensity of feeling.

An assemblage of socially complex word games is displayed through an animated Scrabble-type game. Speaking the questions and some answers of this puzzle are the artists, whose association to the riddle give its clues impact. The impossible task of giving one word answers to the mysteries of life, here is made comically simple.

This is combined with a skewed game of musical chairs. In this competitive version of the game (which relates to the competitiveness of the art world, the rejection of the creative life, the feelings of alienation and being "left out", losing control), each player conveying a different artistic response when they are eliminated.

One character is an inventor who pretends to make up what is common-place, he re-invents his daily activities, how to walk, how to cook, how to eat; as if he never saw a cup, dish or plate. The background for this segment is a comic mix of discoveries (both real and made-up) which is interrupted by live camera close-ups of the character's inventions.

A Paintbox animation will be created to play with images of the six collaborators, taking them back and forth through different ages, opens a sequence of children's questions about life. These questions seem to have answers that only exist for us in a particular time, age and place. The Quantel paintbox work will be done in collaboration with Tom Lesser.

Wasted time is another theme we address, as directly related to the audience. Incorporating footage recorded earlier, outside the Brucknerhaus, characters are seen getting tickets and voicing pre-conceptions of the evening's work, and delivering instant reviews of the program in progress.

We take the idea behind a Rube Goldberg machine and apply it to a larger range of conditions. Movement becomes color, becomes sound, becomes picture. Based on the subconscious confusion of three and red and "F" sharp, the concept of "hearing blue"-based on "Scriabin" color field tests, psychological and IQ tests.

The final work will be a complex montage of both simple and sophisticated techniques and technologies, all centered around visualizing a collection of metaphors which illuminate the collaborators versions of reality.

Linz Ideas 23

- GENERAL THEMES—TRIANGLES/Overall pattern for his work? Three things happening at once, fascination with triangles, the third eye, music/video/dance. Going on a triangular route between three cities tracing triangles.
- SEARCHING FOR A PATH THROUGH LIFE—searching for meaning, putting together the pieces of an experience.
- SPECIFICS put out of list—DOODLES ... maybe beginning of work ... Doodles, Doodles movement patterns, musical phrases, repetitions ... over and over again ... different answers at different ages to same questions ... and then MOVEMENT DOODLES, MUSIC DOODLES, VIDEO DOODLES ... and so on DOODLES.
- CAR CRASH TEST—dancers striped and numbered in "crash test" environment—possible video alteration and the live on-stage dance. Music to support mostly video/dance scientific examination of daily questions—Down front dance puts action on screen in context.
- CROSSWORD DANCE ... animated text/music—word games, crossword puzzle, scrabble—one word answers about questions of life.
- CHILDREN'S VIEWS of adult themes ... Real children draw pictures of themes we suggest (from ordinary kids to special groups like Belfast children)—drawing and children's voices on tape.
- RUBE GOLDBERG Machine idea—movement which becomes colour which becomes sound which becomes picture ... a fluid mix of actions, images, sounds and words, which blurr and melt together in a seamless rush of "stuff". TO BE MORE INTENSIVELY WRITTEN.
- GAME OF MUSICAL CHAIRS—with the six ... movement response—interrupted when music stops—idiosyncratic movements for the six during the chairs' sequence ... as related to the "finding your way through life".
- EFFECTS FOR DANCE AND MUSIC CATEGORY
- THINGS that need more work like DINOSAURS, scientific studies of something banal like HAMBURGER INSTITUTE, and FAKE LANGUAGE JOKES, and something like these examples.
- SET OF FLASH CARDS for unusual education—notating a strange mixture of items.

Arabesque
Brain Tumor
Contracts
Dog Breath
Extendor
Flexible
Grandfather
Heliotropic
Itching Parts
Jurassic Period
Kind of a drag
Liquids
Moldy things in "frig"
Noodle
Order of (nuns and friars)
Points
Quake (earth)

Rabbit
Slime
Topography
Underwater
Velcro
Wrinkles
Xonophobia
You dig
Zilch

Videotapes

from which selections will be shown as part of John Sanborn's Screening.

"FRACTURED VARIATIONS" and "VISUAL SHUFFLE" 1986, 15:00. Created by Charles Moulton and John Sanborn, produced by Mary Perillo, co-produced by Robin O'Hara, choreography by Charles Moulton, directed by John Sanborn, co-directed by Mary Perillo.
"SISTER SUZIE CINEMA" 1985, 24:00, A Doo-Wopp Opera, written by Lee Breuer, music by Bob Telson. Produced by Mary Perillo, directed by John Sanborn.
"EAR-RESPONSIBILITY" 1985, 5:00; Produced in collaboration with David Van Tieghem and Mary Perillo.
"LUMINARE" 1985, 5:45; Produced in collaboration with Dean Winkler; music by Daniel Lentz. Commissioned by "EXPO '86", VANCOUVER, BC.
"RENAISSANCE" 1984, 5:30; Produced in collaboration with Dean Winkler; music by Jamaaladeen Tacuma.
"PERFECT LIVES" 1983; an Opera for Television. 7 Episodes, each 25:50. Written by Robert Ashley. Associate Producer/Associate Director, Mary Perillo; Produced for Channel Four, England. Directed by John Sanborn.
"ACT III" 1983, 6:00; Produced in collaboration with Dean Winkler. Music by Philip Glass.
"A GENTLEMAN'S HONOR" 1983, 5:10; music by Philip Glass.
"A TRIBUTE TO NAM JUNE PAIK" 1982, 30 minutes.
"BIG ELECTRIC CAT" 1982, 6:00; Produced in collaboration with Dean Winkler. Music by Adrian Belew.
"STILL LIFE" including "STATIC", "DON'T ASK"; 1981, 20 minutes.
"MUSIC WORD FIRE AND I WOULD DO IT AGAIN COO-COO (THE LESSONS)", 1981, 28:00.
"OLYMPIC FRAGMENTS" 1980, 12:00.
"INTERPOLATION", including "ENTROPY" and "ORDER", 1978, 30:00.

John G. Hanhardt

John Sanborn: Video/Television Artist

John Sanborn's career is one of the most highly acclaimed and visible in the recent history of video art. His collaborations with Kit Fitzgerald, Robert Ashley, Dean Winkler, and Mary Perillo have produced a complex and ambitious body of work. It is an artistic career that demonstrates extraordinary virtuosity in the handling of the medium and sophistication in the transformation of this technology into a distinctive and varied series of videotapes and installations. John Sanborn has elected to not only appropriate the technology and resources of broadcast television but, and this is the most controversial aspect of his career, has chosen to work for and within this commercial framework. It is an enormously ambitious goal but one that is fraught with the constant threat of creative compromise which can jeopardize the integrity, and true possibility, of original work.

John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald's early color videotape EXCHANGE IN THREE PARTS (1977, 30 minutes) consists of a series of scenarios which establish a dialectic between the image and the monitor on which it is being screened. EXCHANGE IN THREE PARTS presents a series of tableaux in which a monitor displaces and completes the scene in which it is placed (Illustration 1). For example, a couple are seated at a table opposite each other with a monitor situated between them. The monitor's screen shows a bowl of fruit. As the man extends his arm, he appears to reach inside the monitor and pick up a piece of fruit. Other scenes include a monitor in a landscape with its image completing, like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, those sections of the landscape which the monitor obscures. This early work focuses on the recording capacity of video, its ability to represent the illusion of reality. It does not suggest a refashioning of that reality so much as it addresses the medium itself in a reflexive mode which places the medium in a discourse with itself. Sanborn and Fitzgerald subtly suggest how the TV set has come to replace our direct perception of the world. Our view of events and ourselves is to varying degrees fashioned by the pervasive presence of commercial broadcast television. EXCHANGE IN THREE PARTS places that TV set within itself and plays with the myth of television as a recording medium representing the real world.

Sanborn and Fitzgerald turned in INTERPOLATION (1978; 30 minutes) to the perception of video images through editing and narrative structures. INTERPOLATION consists of a series of ten short pieces characterized by the rapid editing and deconstruction of images. In ENTROPY (2 minutes, 5 seconds) the preparation of breakfast is reduced to a montage of actions. MOTIVE (2 minutes, 10 seconds) takes apart the action of a running figure as it moves through time and space. ORDER (1 minute, 33 seconds) in which a series of gestures (hands clapping, glass breaking) are rapidly alternated with different sounds juxtaposed to the images. Here, as in other parts of INTERPOLATION, the new technology of electronic editing, so evident on commercial television in advertising and sports, is turned to the medium itself as Sanborn and Fitzgerald reflect on and explore our perception of the electronic images on the TV screen.

RESOUND (1979; 20 elements scored for 8 color video channels in stereo sound) expands on the montage of ORDER as it places the linear sequence of images into a spatial design of monitors and audio speakers (Illustration 2), which create an environment of sounds and images. Much as in EXCHANGE IN THREE PARTS, where the monitor seen on the TV screen displaced the space it occupied, the 8 channels of RESOUND displace the gallery space, creating a sensory environment through which the viewer can move. The viewer thus becomes actively engaged in this aural and visual composition as he/she walks through the gallery. From the displacement of reality in EXCHANGE IN THREE PARTS to the composition of a visual field in RESOUND, Sanborn and Fitzgerald explore in their early work the medium and have created an aesthetic response to its potential.

This response was to be developed further in 1980 when as artists in residence at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, Sanborn and Fitzgerald created perhaps their strongest videotape, OLYMPIC FRAGMENTS (1980). In this work they employed a technique familiar to viewers of sports on television, slow motion and instant replay, to explore movement. The movement of athletes, whether bob sledders, ski jumpers, or ice skaters, becomes on the two-dimensional video screen an entirely different sensory (spatial) experience (Illustration 3). Sanborn and Fitzgerald seized on that difference to create dense and yet lyrical transformations of sport by treating its color, gesture, and action through GOMposition and the reconstruction of movement. What appears on Commercial TV as pieces of information becomes in Sanborn and Fitzgerald's art a poetic and mysterious art. The unique capacities of the video medium are explored in these short pieces originally produced to be "fillers" during broadcast time. These individual episodes are joined together in OLYMPIC FRAGMENTS to form a series of haikus, visual and aural experiences that astonish and delight the eye as they reveal the power and physical beauty of sports.

In 1985 John Sanborn completed Robert Ashley's epic video/electronic opera *PERFECT LIVES* (*THE PARK, THE SUPERMARKET, THE BANK, THE BAR, THE LIVING ROOM, THE CHURCH, THE BACKYARD*; 198 minutes). This collaboration saw Ashley's vision of a narrative of a small town, the incidental episodes of daily life, that would become the stuff of a mythic opera. Here Sanborn weaves the multi-layers of the narrative (music and voice) through the illusionistic opera of his video effects. Sanborn literally constructs through representational and abstract imagery a landscape of the American dream as a space-age fantasy made up of the reality of everyday existence "on the farm and in the small town" (Illustration 4). The result is the most ambitious project ever created for broadcast television. This multi-part epic challenges the traditional concepts of television programming and opera as it seeks to redefine both as a visual medium. Its density and heroic proportions are a challenge to the concepts of television as a simple carrier of standardized programming.

In one of John Sanborn's recent works *LUMINARE* (1986) (Illustration 5) the images become entirely artificial as he creates a computer generated imaginary museum and history of painting. Being the most successful of Sanborn's recent videotapes, it constructs geometric and constantly evolving shapes and solids that rotate and revolve through the illusionistic video space of the TV screen. However formally engaging it also represents a seductive aspect of Sanborn's work and the possibility that the popular and familiar image processing styles of the commercial music video industry/market will dull the creative edge of his art.

John Sanborn has always realized the potential of TV and considered himself a video artist creating work for television. Like his collaboration with Danceteria, the New York club which was one of the first to introduce artists' videotapes into the club's music program, Sanborn saw the potential for new ways to distribute and promote video art. Today such clubs as the Palladium (Illustration 6) have expanded the concept of media in clubs to a spectacular scale, through regularly presenting both artists' and commercial music tapes, to a large public. The "Palladium effect", a circus of amusements that mixed art and commerce has become a central metaphor of today's art market. Young artists look to the marketplace of art and fashion to be "stars" much like the pop music figures playing on the music videotapes. The selling of art as commerce becomes increasingly easy to promote. The challenge that faces John Sanborn is how to not be co-opted into the mainstream of mass marketing. Will he become the video artist who joins Pete Max and Keith Haring and others who sell, rather than explore and question, a way of life that celebrates the consumer as the hero of our time? The question, the tough goals, set by John Sanborn in his best work must be sustained if he is not to be swallowed up by the conditions of late 1980's cynicism. His career and his art offer challenges to us all.

John G. Hanhardt, Curator, Film and Video, Whitney Museum of American Art
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