

Video Visionary

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In the early 1980s, when the music video explosion hit here in the U.S., John Sanborn thought that he would be a big part of it. After all, he had already established himself as something of a mainstay in the New York avantgarde music video/art world several years before, with his technically innovative video pieces being shown somewhat regularly in the underground hot spots around town.

The 30-year-old Sanborn explains: "When MTV first aired, I thought I would just bring my ideas of 'visual humming' and abstraction to the record companies and people would look at my work and first say 'huh?' and then 'wow!' but that hasn't happened." The "visual humming" concept is based on Sandborn's conviction that "the video should be as complete as the song it is involved with ... If you succeed and make the visual impact as elusive as the music, the viewer will walk away also 'humming' the visual."

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Sanborn, whose interest in video first emerged in the mid-70s while studying film and art in Paris, was last year called by the preeminent film publication, CAHIERS DU CINEMA, "the unparalleled master of the video medium ... perhaps the most outstanding artist working in video today."

This renown has come from such works as the seven-episode, three-and-a-half hour opera, "Perfect Lives" – described by Sanborn as "a kind of 'Dynasty' on acid" – done together with composer Robert Ashley for London's Channel Four.

Another of Sanborn's noteworthy works is "Act III", a six minute piece done in collaboration with engineer Dean Winkler and composer Philip Glass. Recently featured in the music video showcase at New York's Museum of Modern Art, "Act III" makes exceptionally articulate use of the ADO (Ampex Digital Optics). Winkler was working at the time at VCA Teletronics, where he and Sanborn logged some 300 hours together developing the startling video images that make up "Act III".

Though he has yet to be accepted in a big way by the popular music-video establishment, Sanborn has made record-company commissioned clips for such artists as Glass, Grace Jones, Adrian Belew and Jim Capaldi. And in Japan, at least, Sanborn has enjoyed such popularity that Pioneer Artists Laserdisc is offering a 60 minute compilation of his work this spring as their premiere product in a "Video Art Disc" series. Sanborn notes that the Japanese, besides being "obsessed" with the latest video hardware technology, greet accompanying software from all countries with equal enthusiasm. "It is that de-categorization that helps video sell well there. In Tokyo the question most asked of me is 'What is the new medium?'"

This past summer Sanborn directed a 23 minute television version of theater director Lee Breuer's "Sister Suzie Cinema", created for the PBS Series "Alive from Off Center". It is something of a doowop opera fantasy about the movies, starring New Jersey-based five-piece band Fourteen Karat Soul with original music by composer Bob Telson. Sanborn also created the computer-graphic opening titles for the same PBS series to music created by David Byrne.

A key player in all these projects has been Sanborn's producer and wife, Mary Perillo. The two met nearly three years ago when Sanborn hired her to work on "Perfect Lives". She has since produced all of his work and was creatively involved with the development of the opening sequence for "Alive from Off Center". Perillo says of her role in the partnership, "My largest task is to translate John's ideas into dollars and cents and then when that happens, to

accommodate those ideas to the dollars we get for the job". Lately, the two have also been doing some hefty commercials work. They just completed a 15 minute fashion video installation for a new Coca-Cola Clothes store on Manhattan's Columbus Avenue. The store has no actual clothes for sale on the sales floor, only huge video screens displaying Sanborn's work. Also just finished is a \$72,000, four minute, music-video style industrial video for MCI Communications.

Sanborn, who shoots almost exclusively in video, has become something of a philosophical visionary on its capabilities. (Evidence of his fervor for the medium can be seen in the TV-with-wings tattoo he has etched on his upper right arm.) He refers to "the suppleness of the electronic screen", and the "ephemeral, non-physical qualities of video". Comparing video to film, Sanborn says, "Film derived its form from literature and is by nature narrative ... video can be both self-referential and abstract because it isn't limited by its form strictly to narrative". He adds that even in video's "most cannibalistic form, like the bulk of what is seen on MTV, it is often still unique".

"VIDEO PROVIDES THE POTENTIAL TO WORK WITH THE IMAGES ON THE SCREEN AS THOUGH PAINTING."

But the average clip still has a long way to go, in Sanborn's mind. He feels today's clip-makers could learn a lot from a more traditional medium: "In an opera there is a specific reason for each song. The dramatic conflict cuts across the emotions and that's why we sing about it -to resolve the conflict ... That's what is missing now in music videos – that void, in the visuals, of an inherent conflict."

More and more of Sanborn's work is now being seen and appreciated not only in Japan, France and England, but increasingly beyond the New York art circles in his own country as well. Does he expect that his uncompromising artistic vision will actually find greater acceptance in the video mainstream? "The best thing I can do is endlessly pound the table hoping the ideas will change things."

Hal Strickland

Pure motion, considered abstractly and independent of form and mass as in kinematics, is a fundamental study of the moving picture. Video naturally inherits this study, and as the most immediate of the moving picture media, can more directly follow kinematic concerns, owing largely to the way the role of director is merged with that of cinematographer in the person of the video artist, allowing some singularity to emerge from divergent sensibilities.

The work of John Sanborn embodies this study, investigating the ties between the visual, aural and temporal components of perception, and does so as a form of play. Sanborn studies, proposes, counterposes, plays; the video tool in his hand a buoyant remote eye, blowing-up, inverting, looking closer. His manner with images is unbridled, at times fantastical, but outwardly and inwardly anxious throughout. This driven quality gives Sanborn's video grammar a distanced, peripatetic direction, which travels independent and outside of the humanistic/literary elements, a quality complemented by his many collaborations (with Kit Fitzgerald, Robert Ashley, Dean Winkler and others), and so describing the essence of these collaborations as a flux of thematic, rational and sensual thought forms. His poetic energy is channeled, and theirs is born-out or intensified by the force of his image-movement. Robert Ashley has described Sanborn as having "the visual equivalent of perfect pitch".

Sanborn rejects conversational realism in favor of a poetic/compositional representation of his subject. "You can follow media through their successive steps from being completely true to life to being abstract", he has said.

"Think about the need to be abstract ... when you are lovesick, you cannot put it into words, you should not be ABLE to put it into words. I know I can show you something, build

something electronically that speaks louder than a sentence or voiceover or a line of dialogue could." His works are built not on a particular narrative, but a complex montage of guided stimuli, a resonance of heterogeneous sounds and images working toward an essential reflexive whole. Sanborn claims the achievement of this resonance as his primary investigation, and refers to it as "visual humming".

INTERPOLATION and OLYMPIC FRAGMENTS are the earliest works in the exhibition, and were made with former partner Kit Fitzgerald. Both pieces introduce a plastic treatment of time by distorting it, thereby dissecting the syntax of image, movement and sound. The product is a structuralistic yet lyrical video. INTERPOLATION entitles its segments with scientific terms for natural processes, (entropy, aphasia, etc.), but examines the concepts in the form of human behavior, in the way sound is ordered into speech, movement into gesture, and gesture into ritual. OLYMPIC FRAGMENTS focus on a moment of athletic movement and gives heightened attention to it by reducing the event to its physical constituents of time, motion and sound, revealing the elemental and elegant composition of organic movement through its fracture, and as well a compelling framing of the elements themselves. The later works STATIC EPISODE and DON'T ASK similarly dissect a moment in personal interchange, and break the piqued situation down to a concert of expressions, gestures and speech, in effect showing the way an interchange can become a succession of automatic gestures and counter-gestures and responses to triggered memory rather than the communications of conscious minds.

The TWYLA THARP SCRAPBOOK, produced by Tharp, Sanborn and Fitzgerald, brings out the common threads of dance and video. "Television can come closer to a concept than nature in movement and motion", Tharp says. The SCRAPBOOK is a comprehensive look at her career as a dancer, yet has none of the staged, embarrassed feel of retrospective, instead a closeness between the medium watched and the one watching. The potential for television dance is shown conclusively in the last segment, BAD SMELLS, which Sanborn re-mastered from Super-8 footage into a vertiginous, hallucinogenic minuet of dissolving limbs, with dissonant musical accompaniment by Glen Branca.

Sanborn calls music promos "the logical extension of musical comedy", while loudly pronouncing the limitations of MTV. For him, video shorts should be "rhythmic things without a complex plot, with no recognizable story line, but with visual logic". His neo-psychedelic ACT III for Philip Glass and BIG ELECTRIC CAT for Adrian Belew illustrate not only state-of-the-art video animation, but the sensory propulsion of music by images. SIBERIA, with Peter Gordon's Love of Live Orchestra is a resolution of visual overtones, resembling painting more than television, and EAR TO THE GROUND with David Van Tieghem is a performance of reflexive cadence, both musically and visually. SIBERIA and EAR TO THE GROUND are part of the "Antarctica" series, produced together with an album of the same name, "dedicated to the proposition that video and music are created equal".

Sanborn has never disputed image-making rivalries – camera images vs. electronically produced images vs. hybrid images – but rather designs a synthesis of types with an eye toward pluralistic harmony of images. The video opera, PERFECT LIVES, directed for Robert Ashley, is a consolidation of this inclusive approach, both from the standpoint of the source of image and its integration with literary and performance aspects of collaboration. The opera, in all, is seven half-hour segments telling an abstracted story of two travelling musicians in the midwest who alter the lives of those around them. Ashley's storytelling moves through clarity and confusion in the form of a complex poetic outpouring, becoming a tale and mingling with the abstract elements of the visual framework. The dynamic of the structuring of images comes from its ambiguous design; Sanborn devising visual stories which compress, elongate and counterpoint Ashley's wandering fiction. Electronic effects pervade throughout, becoming an inherent element of the process of visual cognition, as

technology is at once aware of itself and in service of a poetic means.

PERFECT LIVES is an example of temporal art, and more specifically video, put together with an interest for the entirety of visual, aural and literary experience. The operatic elements transform themselves constantly: inner dialogue becomes moving text, orphic image becomes literalized, then abstracted and altered in association with a parity of sounds. Language as speech moves like changing image, and image transforms with almost literary grammar. The elements conduct themselves with a symphonic/cacophonic equilibrium of such power as to define the first classic synthesis of the video medium, distinguishing Sanborn as its virtuoso.

T. M. and P. P.