

Original Creator: Avant-Garde Filmmaker And Visual Artist Stan VanDerBeek
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Each week we pay homage to a select “Original Creator” – an iconic artist from days gone by whose work influences and informs today’s creators. These are artists who were innovative and revolutionary in their fields—bold visionaries and radicals, groundbreaking frontiersmen and women who inspired and informed culture as we know it today. This week: Stan VanDerBeek. Check out previous Original Creators [here](#).

Most of us are familiar with Terry Gilliam’s Monty Python animations, the surreal collages of cut-and-paste scenes that feature lots of feet stomping on things. But before Gilliam was around, Stan VanDerBeek was putting his experimental eye to the moving image to create lively, playful collage pieces that would go on to influence Gilliam and many others. In the 1950s and 60s VanDerBeek created, among others, the surreal collage fantasies *Breathdeath* and *Science Friction*, pieces that showed his flair for experimentation and passion for embracing new technology.

He attended the famed Black Mountain College, which counted John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and Josef Albers among its staff members. The influence of Cage, with his random cut-up techniques, and Fuller, who was famous for creating the geodesic dome, led him to develop the Movie-Drome in Stony Point, upstate New York. This immersive audiovisual environment featured multiple projectors so people could lie down and look up and watch a mosaic of images and sound that featured live-action, animation, and collages. It’s a precursor to today’s experimental concert visuals and VJ culture and is currently on view at the Ghosts in the Machine exhibition at New York City’s New Museum.

Following the dome, he went on to work with Ken Knowlton at Bell Labs, creating CG-films and holographic experiments way back in 1966, like their series of eight experimental animations called *Poem Fields*, which pioneered early computer-generated imagery. Besides working with computers to create visuals, VanDerBeek also anticipated—like Vertov before him—the importance of the moving image as a global form of communication. In many ways, he was one of the fore-bearers of what we now see as the cut-and-paste visual language of today’s online remix culture. He knew that the moving image would live on beyond the movie screen and TV set in what he called “expanded cinema,” which he explored in multi-image installations where he collaborated and mixed moving images with dancers and choreographers. Today’s new media installations mixing screens, live performance and other media owe much to VanDerBeek’s early experiments.

This expanded visual medium would be a “tool for world communication” and would “move art and life closer together” he claimed. He couldn’t have envisioned it turning into today’s throwaway meme culture, but it’s hard not to see him as prescient when he says in his “Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema, A Proposal and Manifesto” that: “It is imperative that we (the world’s artists) invent a new world language... that we invent a non-verbal international picture-language.”

In addition to being a pioneering filmmaker, VanDerBeek was also a visual artist who worked in all manner of different disciplines and media. After his CG-animations, he went on to create *Violence Sonata*, a live video work that was broadcast on two different channels—WGBH channels 2 and 44—where viewers were asked to place two TV sets side by side. The piece mixed live studio action with precorded work and featured a man smashing up a piano with a sledgehammer, among other things, to explore violence and racial tensions. Other pieces included his *Steam Screens* at the Whitney Museum, which used live steam for video projection and *Telephone Mural*, which used a fax machine to send images that were collaged together to create a large mural, and took place at several museums simultaneously. This piece was one of the first to use modern technology to show how people could collaborate across distance and time to create art works, something that’s commonly accepted and practiced today with the internet.

All his experiments—which included video, computing, and telecommunications—showed he was a pioneer of new media art while also being an early practitioner of today’s mixed media, cross-disciplinary, globally sourced approach to art.

***Breathdeath* (1963)**

Terry Gilliam cites this film, in particular, as being an influence on his *Python* work.

***Poem Fields* (1964 – 1967)**

Text-based computer animation on cathode-ray tubes, created using a programming language created by Knowlton known as BEFLIX.

Stan Vanderbeek: The Computer Generation

This is part one from a documentary on VanDerBeek, who calls himself a “technological fruit-picker,” where he talks about his computer animation experiments. Gems in this doc include VanDerBeek waxing poetic on how working with a computer turns the lone artist into a team member featuring you, the computer, and other people.

