

Orbits

Eternal Experimenter

by Amos Vogel

A fierce, gentle seeker has gone into the long night. Stan Vanderbeek, our friend and comrade, left us in late September. No history of the great pioneers of the film avant-garde can be written without him. This magical and complex visionary is a prototype of the "eternal experimenter." His achievements lie less in individual works than in the staggering totality of his entire endeavor: a restless, passionate search for new techniques, new media, new concatenations. De-bunker, premature "de-constructionist," and smiling, deadly-serious anarchist, he moved from flip books to cut-outs to live animation, from collage, holograms, and polaroid constructions to computer graphics and video, mixed media, and multiple screens.

His over-all obsession was the fusion of art and technology; only the most advanced communications technology could be used to shape an art of our time. The artist, therefore, had to master and be able to utilize it.

He first walked into our Cinema 16 office in the mid-Fifties, large, handsome, young, with a mane of blond hair, and there was no mistaking his intensity and commitment, nor his gift of irony and sarcasm. Cinema 16 premiered all his early films—*What Who How*, *Mankinda*, *A La Mode*, *Science Friction*, *Skullduggery*. His sense of filmic rhythm, his black humor, his strong ideological tinge (as a pioneer of the counter-culture movement) endeared him to me and to our audiences.

In the early Sixties, Stan—as always

poetic, visionary, casual, helped bring the message of an alternative cinema to Europe at the Cinema 16-organized convocation of American film avant-garde leaders in West Berlin. In the ultra-modern Sportspalast, eight thousand young Germans responded enthusiastically to Bruce Conner, Carmen D'Avino, Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, Stan Brakhage, and Vanderbeek.

Later, he moved increasingly toward mixed media, environments and his self-built Movie-Drome at his Stony Point home. There, during my New York Film Festival days, filmmakers and critics joined us to lie prone on Stan's floor, peering up at a planetarium-type projection system which covered all surfaces with multiple projections. Stan's dream called for hundreds of such movie dromes fed by satellites to transform the nations of the earth into one extended family.

What made me love Stan most was his stubborn, life-long refusal to turn commercial. Instead, he relied on grants, income from his films and his teaching which always combined theory, practice, and subversion.

Stan was a seer and a scientist; he saw no contradiction between them: both were of the cosmos. In his provocative writings—fervent manifestoes of a new consciousness—Stan revealed his unease with simplistic notions of reality. One world was not enough for him. Through his experiments he sought to make contact with others, realities equally valid as ours. In death, Stan, no longer restless now, embraces the cosmos more intimately than ever before.

—AMOS VOGEL

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