

ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

Stan VanDerBeek

THE BOX

805 Traction Avenue

September 13–October 25

Even now, the electronic mandalas and digital cross-stitch of Stan VanDerBeek's "Poemfields," 1966–71, projected onto the gallery's felicitously high walls, flow with hypnotic, immersive energy. It's difficult to imagine what early audiences, unaccustomed to computer graphics, must have made of them or, as VanDerBeek would have put it, how they *experienced* them. Digital patterns pulsate and scroll as words appear singly and in pairs; gnomic phrases materialize from the high-key geometric flux, then dissolve back into it, blurring distinctions between background and foreground, text and image.

VanDerBeek produced these bewitching short films—on view is *Poemfield No. 1–No. 3, No. 5,* and *No. 7*, the first of which has been restored in high-definition and exhibited here for the first time—with Bell Labs engineer Ken Knowlton using Beflix, a first-generation graphics programming language that worked by generating dense mosaics of keyboard symbols and type. The series marks a shift for VanDerBeek, a once-underground filmmaker, toward what he called an "expanded cinema" and the beginning of an intense period of collaborative experimentation conducted at the porous edge between high art and advanced telecommunications. VanDerBeek worked in emergent media with a revolutionary zeal, but he was also ambivalent, convinced that technology was dangerously outpacing humanity's understanding of its uses and consequences. It's worth remembering that VanDerBeek's artist residency at Bell Labs—the epicenter and incubator of the Information Age—amounted to an emergency intervention: In 1965, the artist called for urgent research into an "international picture-language" capable of connecting the world in a satellite-linked "culture-intercom." The "Poemfields" were meant as prototypes for this new computer-enabled medium of optical communication, one short "step away from mental movies," as VanDerBeek wrote of them, "samples of the art of the future."



View of "Stan VanDerBeek: Poemfield," 2014.

— Alexander Keefe

