

JOHN SANBORN: NOTES ON US

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American artist John Sanborn (1954, Huntington, New York, USA) is one of the key figures of the second wave of American video art.¹ His fateful encounter with the then-new and radical medium occurred during his stay in Paris where he attended the opening of the exhibition *Art Video Confrontation '74* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and came across the works of first-generation video artists. Among the artists featured in the exhibition was Nam June Paik (1932–2006) who became Sanborn's friend and mentor in the years that followed. Sanborn himself admits that Nam June Paik was a major influence on his work, as well as shaping his view of television, video, art, and institutions. What he admired most about him was "his complete denial of barriers or borders or barricades."²

Sanborn's early career years are associated with experimental video art of the 1970s and 1980s and with working in artist pairings, as in the case of his multi-year collaboration with Kit Fitzgerald (b. 1953). Their best-known video *Ear to the Ground* (1982) with drummer David van Tieghem materialised the energy of the time, set in the streets of New York. The video contained many of the hallmarks of Sanborn's work, including radical editing and effective rhythm, as well as working with associations and a great sense of music.

Sanborn's distinctiveness lies in his great technical facility, represented, above all, by his precise editing and elaborate post-production, which is combined with his lifelong passion for storytelling. His work also synthesises experiences from a number of diametrically opposed backgrounds, which is worth recalling when encountering his work from recent years. These are represented in the exhibition by the nine-channel video installation *V+M* (2015, Kunsthalle Praha) and a series of four video portraits under the collective title *Mythic Status* (2015–2016). Both works illustrate that the artist's characteristic blend of high art with our lived reality and pop elements stems from the very nature of American culture, which sees these areas as equal fields for communicating chosen themes. Regarding this mixing of various elements from many different fields and sources and reassembling them into an organic whole, Sanborn explains that he is like "a sponge, absorbing and notating bits and pieces of language, gesture, sound and image".³ In essence, we thus encounter the principle of cultural

1 Artists such as Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Dara Birnbaum, Tony Oursler, and Stein and Woody Vasulka can also be counted among the same generation.

2 SARRAZIN, Stephen. *The Dynamic Between Me and Not Me – Stephen Sarrazin in Conversation with John Sanborn*. In: SARRAZIN, Stephen a WEIBEL, Peter. *John Sanborn: Between Order and Entropy. Works 1976–2022*, Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2023, p. 227. ISBN: 978-3-7757-5651-8.

3 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

hybridisation, applying principles of appropriation and post-production familiar from other fields of art that allow him to recycle and reuse cultural heritage for his own interpretations and perspectives.⁴

In the 1980s, Sanborn worked extensively at the legendary avant-garde art space The Kitchen.⁵ He was also twice invited to participate in the Whitney Museum Biennial (1981, 1983) but also participated in performances at the Centre Pompidou (January 1984). However, his authorial approach was undoubtedly influenced by his transition from the gallery and museum environment to television during the 1980s, coupled with the presentation of his videos on MTV. Collaborations with Hollywood and software companies in Silicon Valley then brought about a complete shift from analogue to digital means, allowing him to collaborate on the creation of an innovative technological language and editing effects that he could then use to experiment in his art.⁶

Through his extraordinarily varied experiences, Sanborn has learned to navigate the territories of museums, television and software companies, game developers, the Internet, and virtual reality, which allows him to reflect on the physical transformations of the media used in video art over the past decades. This expansion of Sanborn's resonates with Peter Weibel's idea of the "mediatization of space", associated with the disappearance of environments that can only be experienced directly through our own senses.⁷ Sanborn himself justifies his shift towards television and later the internet by the specifics of video, which, in its early days, was not seen as a fully autonomous part of the art world but rather as a marginal experiment with a limited audience appeal because "it wasn't considered art, it was an interloper".⁸ He cites the major exhibition of his eight-channel soundtrack installation *Resound* at the Whitney Museum in 1981 as a prime example: "... they were thrilled that over 35,000 visitors had seen my work. But, I thought, when my work is broadcast, millions see it."⁹

Looking at Sanborn's way of thinking, one might remark on the extent of the influence of Nam June Paik, with whom Sanborn had many discussions about the potential

4 BOURRIAUD, Nicholas. Postprodukce: kultura jako scénář: jak umění nově programuje současný svět, Praha: tranzit, 2004.

5 They exhibited several of Sanborn's works but also allowed him to do screenings. He also curated a series of programmes there. See: *The Dynamic Between Me and Not Me – Stephen Sarrazin in Conversation with John Sanborn*. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 232.

6 SARRAZIN, Stephen. An Attempt to Reconstruct Peter Weibel's Ideas. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 41.

7 SARRAZIN, Stephen. An Attempt to Reconstruct Peter Weibel's Ideas. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 37.

8 *The Dynamic Between Me and Not Me – Stephen Sarrazin in Conversation with John Sanborn*. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 227.

9 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

of mass media for video art: "... like a composer who wants his work performed and recorded, a video artist would want their work on TV. It just made sense to him, and to me."¹⁰ Paik himself was aware of television's potential for this autonomous art field, and through some of his works sought to transform the institutional context of television and video: his experimental collages, such as *Global Groove*, were therefore deliberately based on a mixture of television genres, especially commercials.¹¹ Paik also played an important role in the context of Sanborn's foray into television, introducing him to David Loxton, director of the TV Lab, which led to Sanborn's artist residency at WNET/13's The Television Laboratory in the 1970s.¹² Later, Paik also assisted him in his further expansion into the television realm, such as creating videos for the Olympics intended for the television screen.¹³

From the early days, Sanborn's work has also been accompanied by an ongoing commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration with other artists, composers¹⁴ or performers, involving people from different communities, including behind the camera, for which he has been known since his artistic beginnings in New York. He's never been explicitly activist but all of his videos from his first creative decade were made in collaboration with women, and they all celebrated what could be described as otherness at the time.¹⁵ His videos also always featured friends and performers from the LGBTQ community because they were the creative people he wanted to work with. All of these types of diverse collaborations should be viewed in the context of his passion for storytelling and reflecting on current issues in American society, such as the issue of multiculturalism¹⁶ or the AIDS wave,¹⁷ which were making their way into his creative work before long. However, as Sanborn himself admitted,

10 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

11 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

12 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

13 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

Note: specifically *Olympic Fragments* (1980), which was a collaboration with Kit Fitzgerald.

14 Back in the 1980s and 1990s, he worked with composers and musicians such as Philip Glass, David Van Tieghem, King Crimson, John Zorn and The Residents. Viz: SARRAZIN, Stephen. An Attempt to Reconstruct Peter Weibel's Ideas. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 34.

15 SARRAZIN, Stephen. From Murmur to Ascension, Between Order and Entropy: The Arc of John Sanborn's Work. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 54.

16 In 1986, he created a video adaptation of Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's 1985 opera *Sister Suzie Cinema*. It was the story of five Black teenagers where Sanborn decided to cast African Americans.

17 In 1989, he directed *Untitled*, a dance solo by dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones, based on the dream diaries of his work and life partner Arnie Zane who died of AIDS in 1988. See: SARRAZIN, Stephen. From Murmur to Ascension, Between Order and Entropy: The Arc of John Sanborn's Work. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 53.

this attitude was not inherent for him from the beginning, given his family background: “Since I was brought up by racist parents, and taught how to hate and cast aside ‘others’, I started my own philosophical life in a hole.”¹⁸ His attitudes and views were profoundly influenced by the various people he met and befriended and, as a result, he began to realise how his family environment had initially instilled in him a reluctance towards difference, and how crucial personal human experience was in forming his own perspective: “Once I got into the real world, met and spent time with people who were black or gay, and as they became my friends, I understood just how WRONG my upbringing was. I was NOT listening to people of colour or queer people as people, [...] ignoring the individuality of their being. Not that we were not different – of course we were, but it was EXACTLY that difference that I needed to understand and exist with.”¹⁹

Crucial to Sanborn’s change of perspective, then, were the years he spent in New York, which helped him learn, grow, and step out of his comfort zone. During that time, he lived in and interacted with different communities, which taught him an understanding and empathy for why different communities talk about different things and what underlies these. In his early “stories”, he was, therefore, somewhat ahead of his time and helped shape the image of an inclusive America, represented by California where he has lived permanently since 1990, and which he refers to as “the future he envisions for all”.²⁰

Early on, one of Sanborn’s main interests was the question of interpersonal relations, which permeates his narrative layouts. In the technically intriguing video *Spectator* (1980/2022)²¹, he filmed a real couple on camera and had them talk openly about their relationship in an impromptu interview.²² The specific connection to the person of the spectator in relation to the technologies used brought a possible ironic commentary on the new surveillance technologies, voyeurism, and endless TV series into the interpretation of the work. His recent works also echo these concerns and intertwine them with his reception of current events in American society. What has changed radically over time is Sanborn’s approach to the scale and format of his videos, which, thanks to advances in digital technology, have been transformed into monumental spatial installations, at times reminiscent of cinematic productions. The mastery of form, however, is always just a means of bringing the viewer closer to his stories. The monumental nine-channel video installation *V+M* (2015) and a series of four digital portraits collectively titled *Mythic Status* (2015–2016) are united by themes of love, self-love, and fluid gender identity, which Sanborn wraps in the poetic garb of ancient mythological stories.

18 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

19 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

20 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

21 The work was first screened at the avant-garde space The Kitchen in New York in 1980.

22 Collaborative work with Kit Fitzgerald.

Sanborn took the iconic story of Venus and Mars as the inspiration for *V+M* (2015). Their tale of forbidden love and unconquerable sensual desire overcoming social conventions and each other's differences has fascinated artists, poets, and philosophers for centuries.²³ Sanborn reveals that, in his search for a story of a love couple that offers the possibility of erasing gender roles and representing a universal love story, he came upon the myth of Venus and Mars whose characters can be viewed only as personality attributes without a specific gender designation due to the myth's background.²⁴ Sanborn deliberately transcended heteronormative coding by engaging male-male and female-female versions of the ancient story in order to access the source material necessary for a balance of power in relationships that escape the need for a clear reading of sexual identity. Thus, the actors of the visually, physically and sonically epic fresco are three equally represented pairs of dancers (woman and woman, woman and man, man and man), with all performers belonging to different gender communities also in their civilian lives.

A sensually rich variation of dynamic and emotional images unfolds throughout the gallery space.²⁵ The work is based on a combination of dance, music, reminiscences of familiar historical imagery and scenes from the story of Venus and Mars. The musical component by composer Theresa Wong, illustrating the plot and the movement of the characters, is based on the mysterious tones of the cello but also mixes street electronic music and contemporary trending sounds. The sentences on the screens and the speeches of the performers, which are associated with different perceptions of love, are a mix of street slang and poetry so when you encounter them, you often feel that you have already seen them somewhere.

In each section, we loosely follow selected scenes from the couple's story – the powerful sensual desire overcoming social conventions, but also the moments of shame when their affair is exposed and the fear of being excluded from Olympus, which creates a rift between them and threatens their relationship. The fluctuating emotions but also the revelation of “human” weaknesses and concessions to social conventions bring their story closer to the issues and experiences of each of us.²⁶ In the final scene, their opposing essences are imaginarily united. This symbolises the traditional philosophical view of their love relationship as a harmonious fusion of two opposing energies – beauty and brutality, masculine and feminine elements, chaos

23 LEFKOWITZ, Mary. *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from Myths*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 6.

24 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.

25 The nature of the installation corresponds to that of the first showcase in the historic 17th-century chapel, Chapelle de l'ancien hôpital général, where the work was presented at the Videoformes festival in Clermont-Ferrand, France, in 2015.

26 On the specificity of Graeco-Roman deities compared to modern monotheistic religions, see: LEFKOWITZ, Mary. *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn from Myths*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

and eros, grace and strength²⁷ – which is also associated with the goddess Harmony,²⁸ one of their love's fruits. Besides, it is Venus who is traditionally considered the stronger element in this relationship, calming and suppressing Mars' quick-tempered nature.²⁹

Sanborn here also alludes quite freely to the philosophical context viewing the duality of Aphrodite's (Venus') nature.³⁰ Already in Plato's writings, she is associated with the personification of sensual carnal love, with all its nuances and positive and negative aspects. On the other hand, she is also a representative of a higher, celestial form that evokes sublime love, opening up a deeper spiritual level of love's existence.³¹ These two forms of her and, consequently, the twofold form of love – in its heavenly and earthly aspects – are inseparable, mutually condition each other and are important for the growth of a person and their soul.³² And it is in the higher spheres of the spiritual realm that we encounter the absence of a gendered bodily identity that makes any distinction between individuals. We can feel the unconscious resonance of this view in the passage of Sanborn's text reflecting on this very encounter of souls: "I see me when I see you."

V+M thus challenges our ideas of love, presenting and examining its various views and perspectives. However, even from this mixture of inspiration, sourced from popular culture as well as philosophical and religious teachings, Sanborn's message that "the ultimate power is the ability to love" carries, as love is the most powerful energy in the universe with the potential to unite what is otherwise incompatible.

Ancient mythology also inspired the series of four video portraits called *Mythic Status* (2015–2016), in which selected performers with queer and gender-fluid identities style themselves as gods and goddesses from ancient mythology. In doing so, Sanborn has loosely built on some of his previous collaborations with eccentric figures from his early works.³³ In *Mythic Status*, the personalities of the performers intersect and assimilate with the typological characters of the ancient deities into one individual identity where we are no longer able to discern who is who. The famous huntress

27 FICINO, Marsilio. *O lásce*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2022, p.145.

28 Harmony itself is also often associated with Aphrodite Pandemos, the love that unites humanity into one harmonious whole, see: HRUBANOVÁ, V., R. MARTIN a J. PERGLOVÁ. *Slovník řecko-římské mytologie a kultury*. Praha: EWA Edition, 1993, pp. 104–105.

29 FICINO, Marsilio. *O lásce*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2022, p.145.

30 FICINO, Marsilio. *O lásce*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2022, p. 140.

31 FICINO, Marsilio. *O lásce*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2022, p. 141.

32 FRIEDLÄNDER, Paul. *Plato: An Introduction*. Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 56. Also: MOORE, Thomas. *Planety v nás: Astrologická psychologie Marsilia Ficina*. Praha: Malvern 2011, p. 173.

33 FARGIER, Jean-Paul. Sanborn, Collector of Mugs. In: [SARRAZIN a WEIBEL, 2023], p. 67.

Atalanta (2015), who rejects love and partnership, is performed by artist Adi Lockheart (she/her). *NYX*, the personification of the night, is embodied by club DJ Jasmin McKay (she/her). *Hercules* is performed by Ramses Rodstein (he/him), an information technology expert, speaking about the liberation from fear that allowed him to become who he is. The character of *Apollo*, the god of music and sensual love, is portrayed by Jiz Lee (they/them), a queer porn star and fierce activist.

Through their metamorphosis into divine allegorical figures, the performers create new versions of themselves. It is their identification with divine personas that gives them the self-confidence often denied by mainstream society or that they are unable to find in the real world. Through verbal monologue and non-verbal communication, their characters express their relationship to love and their own sexuality. Overall, it is the broad overlap of sexuality – with spirituality and mysticism, politics, and our authentic intimate relationships with ourselves – that points to its essential role and creative potential in our lives and society. It is the awareness of its importance that can help us all to work with it openly and let our individuality and specificity shine through in all its beauty. In embracing it also lies the finding of a loving relationship with ourselves that has the power to affect our whole identity in a fundamental and positive way.

While *V+M* points to the positive transformative power of love to unite and reconcile despite differences and conflicts, *Mythic Status* reflects Sanborn's notion of the equality of human identity and the recognition of all its forms. Both works are about opening up to otherness and particularity but also about discovering who we are, what we are like, and how our own nature resonates in our relationships. Sanborn offers us a space for openness and dialogue. He is aware of the limited reach but still believes that changing individual perspectives is also very meaningful: "I would like people who see my work to listen, consider, explore, adapt and embrace change – all for the sake of humanity; with humanity represented by each soul, each heart and each mind... We each have the will, the means and the opportunities to transform our part of the world. It starts with me, and I pass that request on to you. Let's do that."³⁴

34 From correspondence with John Sanborn, November 2023 – January 2024.