



JOHN SANBORN

SOME BODY

Between



ORDER and ENTROPY

Works
1976–2022

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CANTZ

JOHN SANBORN

Between
ORDER and ENTROPY

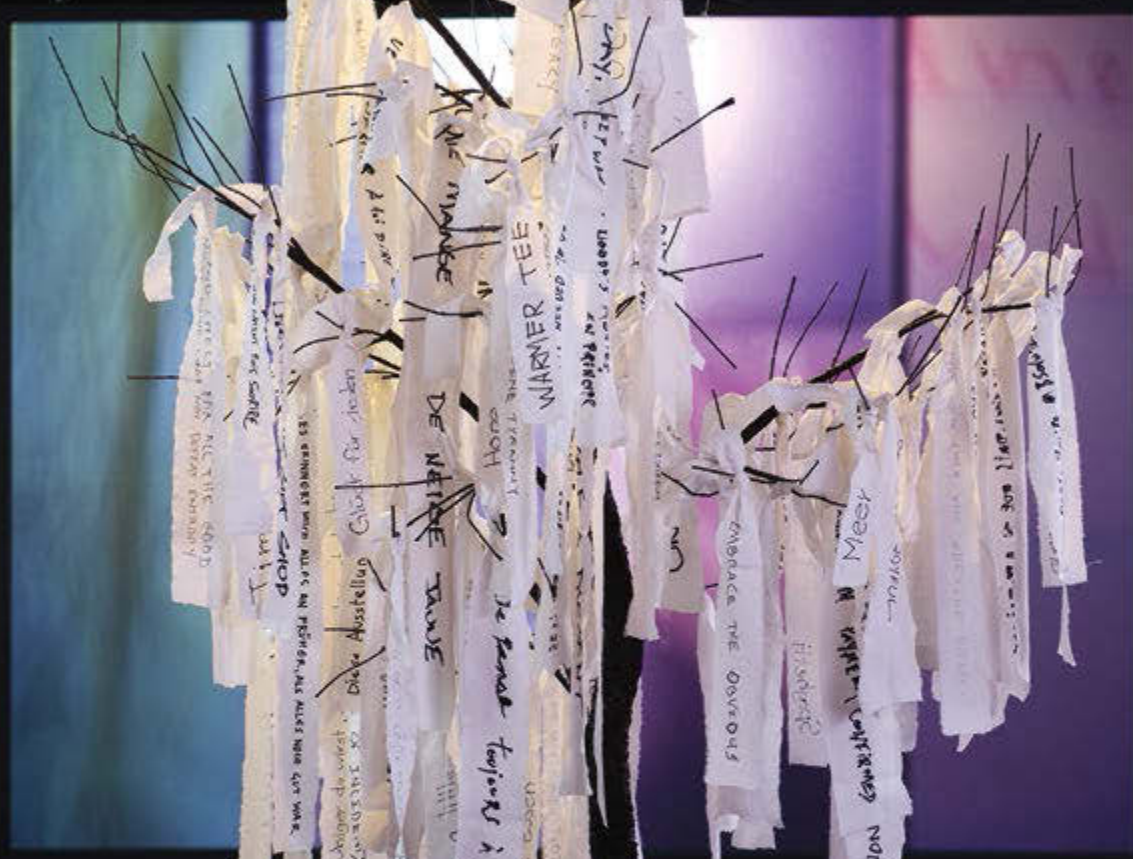
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Views into the exhibition

John Sanborn. Between Order and Entropy

ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe
July 9–October 30, 2022



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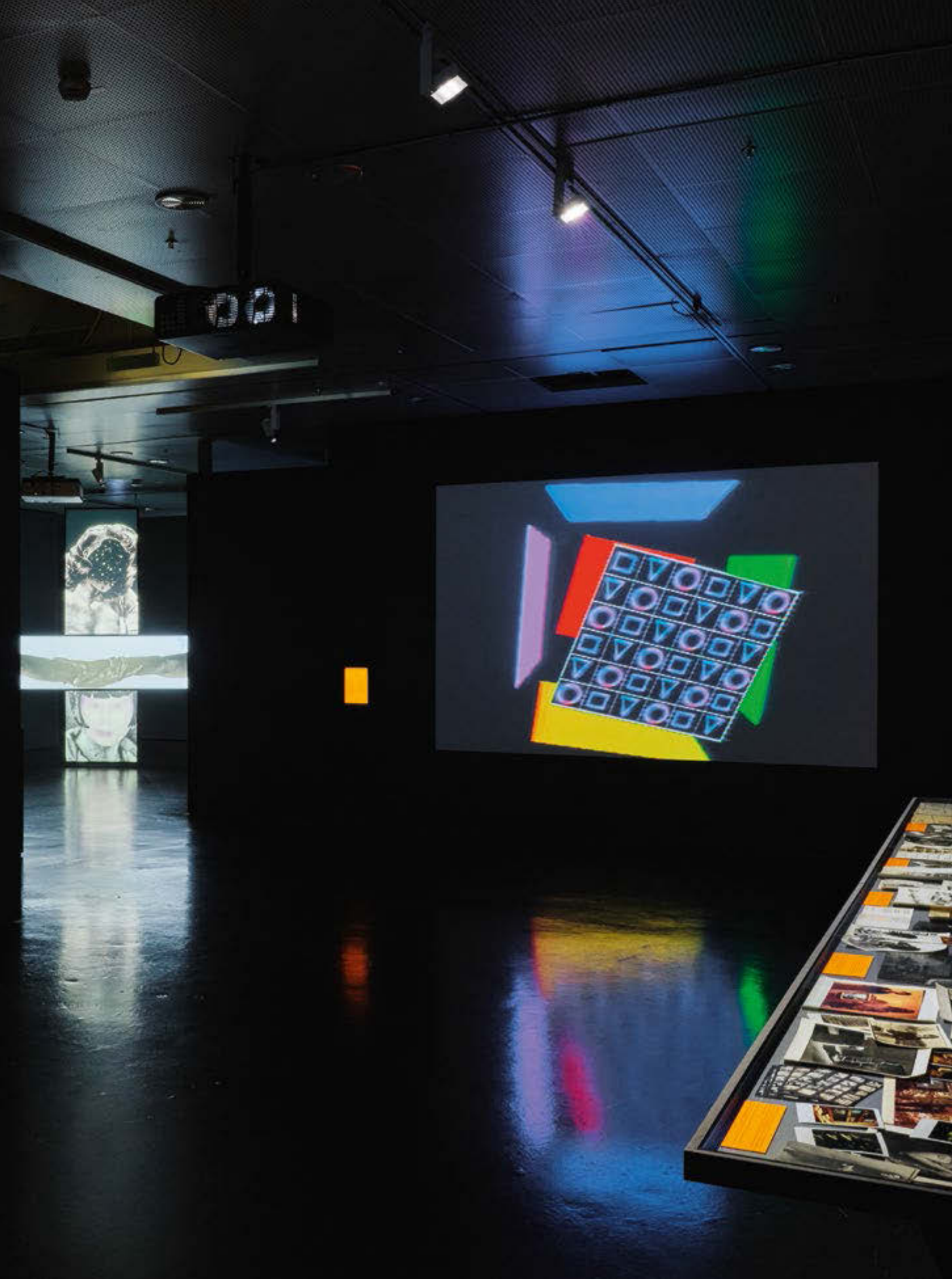
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are just a small part
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BETWEEN ORDER AND ENTROPY: The Media Art Work of John Sanborn

The roots we carry with us

The decision process to hold the exhibition *John Sanborn. Between Order and Entropy* at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe happened quickly. In 2018, John Sanborn and I were invited for a workshop; the welcome and reactions were such that when I raised the possibility to Peter Weibel of doing something *more*, he immediately agreed. Scheduled to take place from October 2019 to January 2020, the work came to a standstill with the arrival of the pandemic; the exhibition was postponed to 2021, by which time the second wave dashed further hopes for the year. Yet, because of Peter Weibel's commitment to John Sanborn's work, and his perseverance, *Between Order and Entropy* was able to open on July 9, 2022. By that time, the artist had enjoyed one-person shows in Tokyo, Paris, and San Francisco; a multimedia piece commissioned by the Jeu de Paume in Paris; an epic installation commissioned by the NMoQ (National Museum of Qatar), designed by Jean Nouvel; and *God in 3 Persons* by The Residents, a collaborative performance held at New York City's MoMA in January 2020.

Between 2015 and 2019, I had curated a number of his one-person shows in France, Germany, Japan, and Thailand, where his largest exhibition at the time took place at the BACC (Bangkok Art and Culture Centre), drawing an audience of more than thirty-five thousand visitors. The original concept for the show focused on works made after 2014, when Sanborn returned to a studio-based practice, creating single-channel works and installations. Sanborn's work, as with many American artists during that period, turned to the trauma that the United States was experiencing during the Trump years. New works celebrated diversity and inclusivity, gave voice to communi-

ties operating within the brackets of subcultures, and embraced even further what has exemplified his practice over four decades—the act of collaboration, here as an overt means of resistance, of pointing to defiant individuals. During those forty years, John Sanborn rarely worked alone, and while he did periodically create a number of media self-portraits, they were always in the company of others.

The pandemic allowed us to add to this initial project, to include a historical part made up of single-channel works, those that catapulted him into the video art world of the 1980s, and of collaborations with television networks, including PBS and MTV, in which he would invent ceaselessly, expanding the language of postproduction, creating composite staging for choreographers and a formal grammar for cutting and editing to music that continues to be used to this day. The collaborations ranged from Philip Glass, Robert Ashley, Bill T. Jones, and Mikhail Baryshnikov to the Rolling Stones, King Crimson, Sammy Hagar, and Rick James. And then there are The Residents, the San Francisco-based music and performance art ensemble with whom he continues to work to this day.

This first part of the exhibition also introduces a significant shift in the path of the artist, who by the early 1990s had moved to California and begun a series of consultations for companies such as Apple and Adobe; creating digital content for the nascent Microsoft Network; conceiving, cowriting, and directing an interactive game for Electronic Arts and PlayStation; all the while embarking on a series of pitches for Hollywood that would lead to an executive position at the Comedy Central network, and a return to New York City, in 2001.

Tellingly, the historical part closes with two portraits of figures who protected Sanborn, who kept him rooted in the necessity to challenge: an homage to his mentor Nam June Paik, made in collaboration with Kit Fitzgerald, and a history of his friends The Residents.

The events of 9/11 produced two new independent works, the award-winning feature-length *MMI* (2002) and the installation *365 degrees* (2004), the latter included in the exhibition. Both introduced a more overt preoccupation with mortality, the artist's and inevitably that of a set of ideas that had defined and later abandoned the idea of what America signified. Barely a year into Sanborn and his family's stay in New York City, they returned to California; what followed was a deep dive into Silicon Valley for more than a decade. This first part of the exhibition allows the audience not only to follow this media journey, moving from analog to digital media, from works financed with public grants to corporate commissions, but also to witness a rewriting of video and media history that turned away from moving-image artists who set foot into other worlds.^[1] Those who were keen to write a history of video art in the 1980s and 1990s left behind them a trail of exclusions. Peter Weibel did not forget those names unmentioned. This accompanying volume to the exhibition is a signpost.

The second part of the show jumps more than a decade in time and expands on the initial concept. The installations *V+M* (2015) and *Alterszorn* (2017) announced Sanborn's return to an art world that had considerably transformed itself, raising the question as to whether it would let an artist back in. These two works displayed an ongoing mastery of the form and the tools, along with a new maturity in the *dispositifs* he designed, all of which would serve a new generation of performers, who all inhabit the installations that make up this section, including works commissioned by the ZKM | Karlsruhe: *The Friend* (2021), *The Friend VR* (2022), and *a dog dreams (of god)* (2022). Not unlike George Harrison's song "All Things Must Pass" (1970), *Between Order and Entropy* attests to all the ideas that were eager and ready to encounter a new world, a post-video art history environment.

The first part managed a curatorial use of urban-informed space that delivered an experience of

the power of John Sanborn's videos in the 1980s. The second part, more organic, succeeded in letting his own media world come into existence. The entire exhibition functions as media ecology, as a succession of media territories explored by Sanborn throughout his career. ZKM, a site of harvests, is the keeper of this new history.

Stephen Sarrazin
co-curator

[1] And yet, other visual art practices are filled with such occurrences, whether with fashion behemoths, banking groups, or car and alcohol companies, while filmmakers such as Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, and David Lynch welcomed opportunities to shoot advertisements. Car and electronic titans in South Korea support cultural institutions, including the Nam June Paik Center.

BETWEEN ORDER AND ENTROPY: Introduction

For Peter Weibel – longtime director of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, media theorist and artist, curator, and friend of John Sanborn, initiator of the 2022 exhibition *John Sanborn: Between Order and Entropy. Works 1978–2022* at ZKM, and who was the driving force behind this publication until his death in March 2023 – there were two different types of artists in media art. The first type, according to Weibel, focuses on creating exciting narrative films and beautiful images using the tools and resources of the industry—photo, film, and video cameras, as well as the common computer-based programs for image processing.^[1] The second type of media artist works disruptively: against the industrial apparatuses, against the illusionism of commercial films à la Hollywood, against the way the apparatuses and the computer programs work. This type of artist does not make beautiful pictures, as could be derived from the historical traditions of painting, but creates images that can be produced only with a particular machine. By demonstrating in such artworks how the apparatuses, machines, and applications function and how these construct images, this type of artist employs apparatuses, machines, and media epistemologically and epistemically. Ultimately, this artist shows how both image worlds and also worldviews are constructed with them.

The type of media artists Peter Weibel gave priority to is not difficult to guess, given whom he was interested in since the beginning of his work as an artist and a curator. John Sanborn, the virtuoso of image processing, was for Weibel a prototypical representative of the second type of media artist. Born in Huntington, New York, in 1954, Sanborn, with his unconventional use of graphics programs such as Quantel Paintbox, created images in meticulous frame-by-frame processing, exhausting the technical possibilities of the time. With his superabundant imagination and creativity, he was one of the most prominent protagon-

nists of the American video art scene in the late 1970s and 1980s. At a time when the capabilities of digital image processing were still in their infancy, his works were door openers to a world full of new sounds, images, and fantasies. His early pictorial and linguistic voyages of exploration, characterized by high tech computer editing and elaborate postproduction, led the way at a time when the new medium of video was flourishing and, as Weibel so inimitably put it in the opening text of the exhibition, “the wild flowers of media anarchy carried the fragrance of boldness and freedom [...] into the market and into the mainstream.” To this day, according to Weibel, Sanborn’s works are informed by a momentum that is anti-establishment and an unmistakable idiom of individuality.

Sanborn’s work, in which he frequently collaborates closely with musicians, composers, dancers, choreographers, and other video artists, mixes media and experiments with different presentation formats, ranges from the early days of experimental video art to MTV music video clips, video games, interactive art, and digital media art. As a consultant to Apple and Adobe, he contributed significantly to the development of revolutionary tools for image processing and, after moving from New York to California in the early 1990s, was instrumental in driving the digital image revolution there. In his more recent, complex media installations, Sanborn addresses existential questions related to the distortion of human life, cultural identity and memory, mythology, gender roles, diversity, and the urge to tell stories.

Co-curated with Stephen Sarrazin, the retrospective *John Sanborn: Between Order and Entropy. Works 1978–2022* at the ZKM is the largest exhibition to date devoted to the work of this artist, who was promoted by the founder of video art Nam June Paik and composer Robert Ashley. Together with the latter, he created the groundbreaking TV

opera *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)* in 1983, which was presented in the exhibition as a HD projection laboriously restored by Dean Winkler, a New York-based film and television technician and kindred spirit with whom John Sanborn worked on video postproduction in the 1980s. The show at ZKM included over sixty works spanning more than four decades in which the artist concentrated on exploring sound, music, dance, interactive media, and video. After several years spent in Hollywood and Silicon Valley, Sanborn has created since 2015 several new media installations that extend the temporal dimension of his work both extensively and immersively into real and virtual space, among which the multimedia installation *The Friend*, 2021, its translation into the VR installation *The Friend VR* (2022), and the video and sound installation *a dog dreams (of god)*, (2022), were coproduced by ZKM and commissioned for the exhibition.

The extraordinarily successful exhibition at the ZKM, part of a series that pays tribute to the work of a pioneering generation of important media artists^[2], is accompanied by this publication edited by the Tokyo-based French film critic and media art curator Stephen Sarrazin and Peter Weibel. With the in-depth essays by Stephen Sarrazin, Mark Alizart, and Jean-Paul Fargier, it places the artist's work in the context of contemporary, art, and media history and documents Sanborn's artistic development through interviews as well as through the voices of companions collected in the Recollections section, people with whom John Sanborn worked closely for many years and in some cases still does. These include media artists Lynn Hershman Leeson and Dara Birnbaum, writer/performer/musician Lynn Breedlove, Homer Flynn, spokesperson for the band The Residents, video artist Robert Cahen, Dean Winkler, with whom Sanborn worked for eight years on a wide variety of artistic and commercial projects, including the 1983 video *Act III* to music by composer

Philip Glass, and Sanborn's first creative partner Kit Fitzgerald, with whom he created a number of groundbreaking video works in the early years, such as the series *Still Life* (1981) and *Antarctica* (1982), *Ear to the Ground* (1982), and installations such as *Spectator* (1980), reconstructed at the ZKM, or *Resound* (1981). Texts about and large-format images of Sanborn's works in the exhibition at ZKM, as well as a biographical section, round off the book. It is the first extensive monograph on this artist, whose rich, complex, and many-layered oeuvre, which meanders between order and entropy, is still little known today.

Philipp Ziegler
co-curator

[1] See Sabine B. Vogel, "Die Verwissenschaftlichung der Kunst. Peter Weibel über Medienkunst. Ein Gespräch von Sabine B. Vogel," in *Leonardo im Labor. Kunst & Wissenschaft im 21. Jahrhundert*, special issue, ed. Sabine B. Vogel, *Kunstforum International* 277 (2021): 84–91.

[2] The series includes the ZKM exhibitions *Lynn Hershman Leeson: Civic Radar* (2013-14), *Aldo Tambellini. Black Matters* (2017), *respektive, Peter Weibel* (2019-20), *Soun-Gui Kim. Lazy Clouds* (2022-23), *Walter Giers. Electronic Art* (2022-23), *Analivia Cordeiro. From Body to Code* (2023), and *Ulrike Rosenbach. today is tomorrow. Works since 1969* (2023-24).

BETWEEN ORDER AND ENTROPY: Acknowledgments

On behalf of ZKM, I would like to express our deepest gratitude to the artist John Sanborn, with whom we worked on this project during the darkest hours of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a self-described “hot mess” and armed with a huge mug of coffee in front of his computer and camera in our countless Zoom conferences—which were always very early for him because of the time difference between Germany and California—he never failed to inspire us with his incredible energy and positive charisma. Sanborn’s fascinating work—on the one hand colorful pop, on the other, very profound—energized us. I also want to say a big thankyou to Stephen Sarrazin, the co-curator of the show and co-editor of this volume. As a long-time expert on John’s work, Stephen always kept in mind the historical importance and relevance of John’s outstanding oeuvre. Further, our heartfelt thanks go to the wonderful Hanna Jurisch, who took on the curatorial assistance, to Jule Klenert for her support in realizing the exhibition, and to Felix Pausch, who was the technical project manager at ZKM and enabler of many of John’s ideas for the exhibition. I would also like to thank the construction team and the entire team of the museum and exhibition technical services, especially Werner Hutzenlaub, the conservators, the museum communication team, and the video studio of the ZKM for their, as always, exceptional work. I also want to express our gratitude to Manuel Bürger for providing the exhibition’s exceptional graphic identity and the extraordinary layout of the book.

We are also grateful to the publications department of the ZKM, especially to Miriam Stürner and Jens Lutz, who with their publishing and editing expertise supervised and completed the production of this catalog. Many thanks go to the volume’s contributors: Mark Alizard, Dara Birnbaum, Lynn Breedlove, Robert Cahen, Jean-Paul Fargier, Kit Fitzgerald, Homer Flynn, Lynn Hershman

Leeson, Bill T. Jones, Dean Winkler, and of course, to Stephen Sarrazin, as well as to copyeditor Melanie Mallon for her conscientious work. Our thanks also extend to Hatje Cantz publishers for including this volume in their impressive program of publications.

And last but not least, sincerely and from the bottom of our hearts, our greatest thanks go to Peter Weibel, without whom neither the exhibition nor the book would have been possible.

Philipp Ziegler
co-curator and Head of Curatorial Department
of ZKM | Karlsruhe



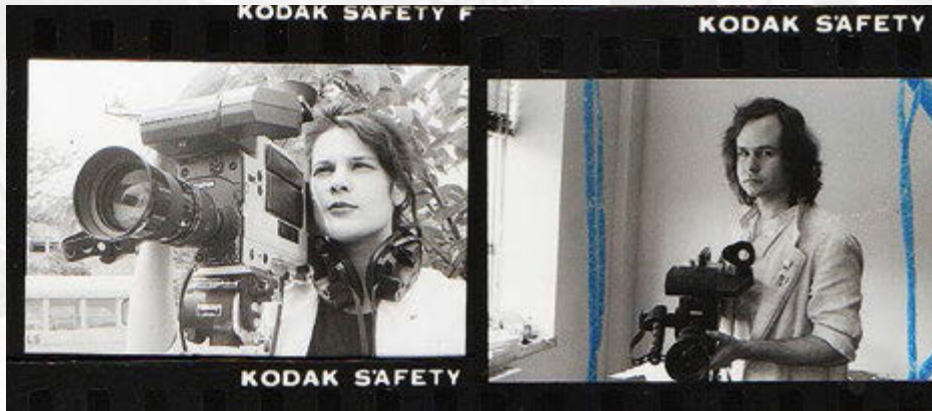
View into the exhibition *John Sanborn. Between Order and Entropy*,
ZKM | Karlsruhe, 2022.

d Recollections Kit



John Sanborn, *Exchange in Three Parts*, 1977, 1-channel video. Video still.

Fitzgerald Recoll



John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald, 1981. Contact prints.

John and I met shooting *Three Evenings on a Revolving Stage*, Jean Dupuy's collective performance, at Judson Church in January 1976. I had just arrived in New York. Rents were cheap, and artists lived in close proximity. The Kitchen, Franklin Furnace, and Artists Space were important centers. John and I became regulars and developed friendships and collaborations with other downtown artists and musicians.

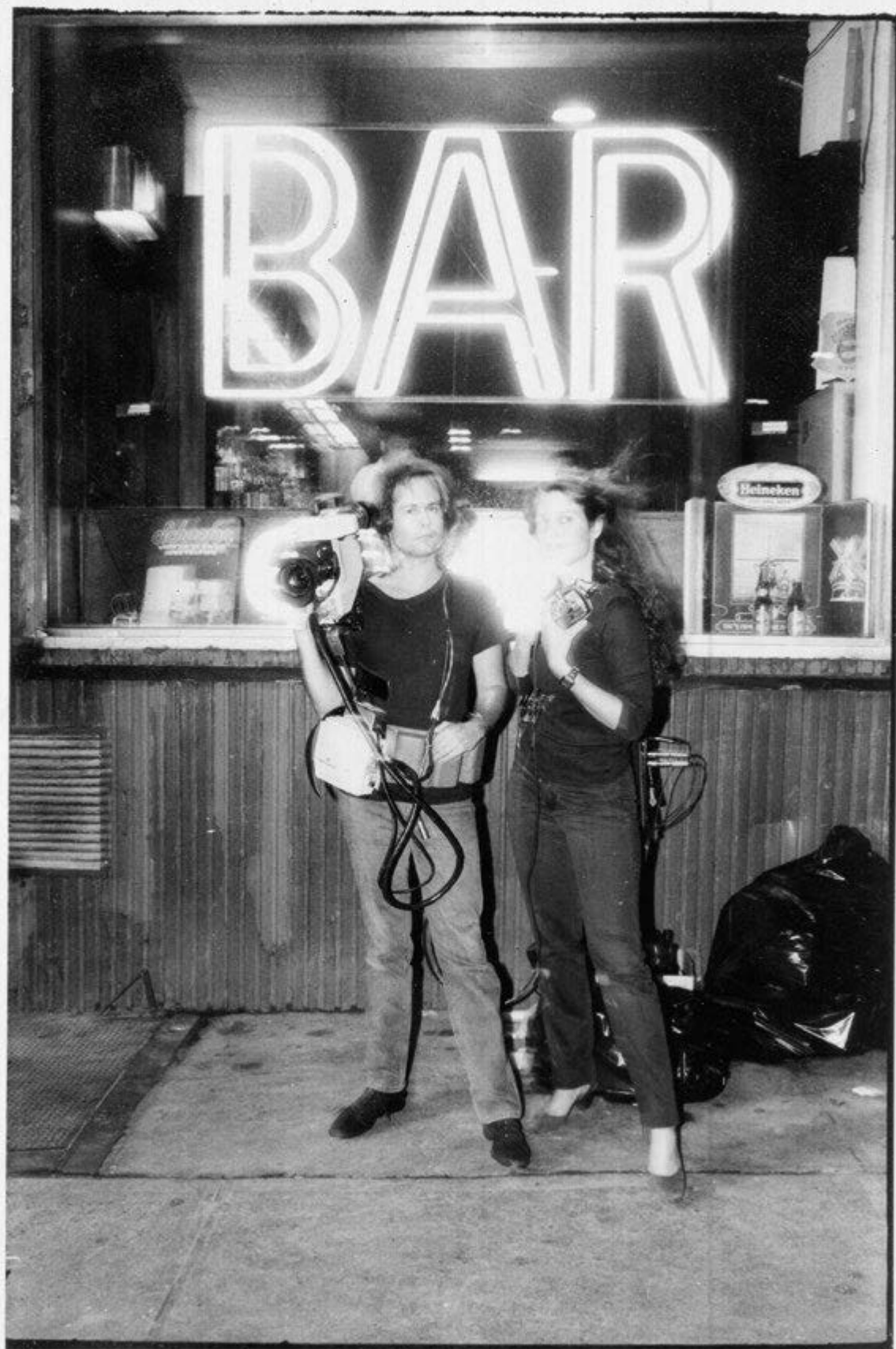
From 1976 to 1982, we made a great volume of work—*Exchange in Three Parts*, *Interpolation*, *Resolution of the Eye*, *Antarctica* series (an early music-video label that we formed with Peter Gordon), *Paris a la Carte*, *Still Life*, *Olympic Fragments*, *A Tribute to Nam June Paik*, *Wild Thing*, *Heartbeat* (for King Crimson). We curated the Video Lounge at Danceteria and created video installations at The Kitchen, the American Center in Paris, and the Whitney Museum.

These works document television's evolving technology and our own changing tools. We began with black and white cameras on half-inch reel-to-reel recorders, moved to portable single-tube color cameras on U-matic, and then to professional three-tube cameras. Deck-to-deck editing was superseded by computerized time-code editing, supported with outboard Quantel Paintbox and digital video effects boxes. We drove hours upstate to edit on computerized systems, mastering on two-inch tape. As artists-in-residence at the Television Laboratory at WNET/13 from 1978 to 1982, we had access to broadcast facilities,

editing suites, and master engineer John Godfrey, who helped bring our small-format videos up to FCC broadcast standards.

The early works were environmental explorations with televisions, a preoccupation with the glowing box (*Exchange in Three Parts*). When the CMX editing system allowed frame-by-frame editing, the work became more kinetic and musical—*Entropy and Order (Interpolation)* and *Still Life*. With Antarctica, “where music and video are created equal,” we produced music videos *Siberia*, *Secretary*, and *And Now This* (which I shot in Saskatchewan), as well as the now iconic *Ear to the Ground*, with David Van Tieghem playing the streets of Manhattan. Our whirlwind travelogue, *Paris a la Carte*, aired on Public Television’s VISA series. As commissioned artists for the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympics, we made *Olympic Fragments*, short interstitial pieces with Olympic skaters, lugers, and bobsledders. Our documentary on sound art, *re: Soundings*, featured interviews with John Cage, Max Neuhaus, Meredith Monk, David Tudor, and others.

MTV debuted in 1980, and soon, record labels and cable programs sought us out for commercial music videos—*Heartbeat*, *Big Electric Cat*, and *Wild Thing* (shot at Danceteria). A collaboration with Twyla Tharp was produced for A&E; for WNET/13 we made documentaries about film—*Kenneth Anger’s Magick*, *The Super 8 Show: Beyond Home Movies*, and *The Uncommon Eye: A Decade of Avant-Garde Film*. Our producers at the WNET/13 TV laboratory, David Loxton and Carol Brandenburg, passionately supported our work. We continued collaborating with Jean Dupuy (as Production Defess) making *Artists Propaganda 1*, *Artists Propaganda 2*, and *Artists Shorts*, with performances by Charlemagne Palestine, Stuart Sherman, Olga Adorno, and many more. One of our last works, *A Tribute to Nam June Paik* (inspired by Nam June’s own *A Tribute to John Cage*), was an energetic homage to our guiding spirit, with appearances by Paik, Charlotte Moorman, and Cage. By late 1982, our collaboration came to an end. I began working with artists such as Ryuichi Sakamoto, Max Roach, Trisha Brown, the Wooster Group, and Peter Gordon, and explored further expressions of the medium—with live video performances, video opera, and video painting. Looking back on my early work with John, exploring new tools and creating a new language for television still feels fresh, funny, and beautiful.



John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald. Photo.