

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Hitchhiker on an Electronic Road

Nam June Paik's Work at Asia Society

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“Golden Buddha,” one of the works in the “Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot” exhibition at the Asia Society Museum. The Composer John Cage, with his punctilious zaniness and absorption in Zen Buddhism, was a crucial liberating influence on Paik, also a Buddhist. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

If you want someone to praise or blame for the relentlessly wired, chatty, information-soaked 21st-century world we inhabit, the artist Nam June Paik is an apt candidate. Credited as the founder of video art in the 1960s, he turned television into an interactive vehicle for radical theater. He invented the phrase “electronic superhighway” and imagined beta versions of smartphones, Google Glass, distant learning, YouTube, Instagram and the Internet itself.

The effort to situate this artist, who died in 2006, as a pioneer of the digital present seems to be the main impetus behind “Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot” at Asia Society, a large and good-looking show — designed by Clayton Vogel, it fills all of the museum’s galleries — that otherwise doesn’t seem to have any particular reason for being.

A lot of what’s in it is textbook stuff, and a few less familiar late pieces — paint-slathered portable televisions — aren’t so hot. The catalog offers no new research. Its most substantial entries are a reprinted 2007 essay by the art historian David Joselit and reproductions of Paik manuscripts from an archive donated by his nephew Ken Hakuta to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, which did its own full-scale Paik survey in 2012-13.

Still, the show is worthy of notice, because Paik is, as is quite evident here, a prescient thinker as well as a born entertainer. And its very presence at Asia Society raises at least one relatively unexplored question: How American was he? Although he based the better part of his long

career in New York, he always seemed to be geographically unfixed and culturally unaligned, an existential floater who made some of his most interesting art from pixels and sound waves bounced off satellites circling in space.

Paik (pronounced pake) was born in Seoul, Korea, in 1932, the youngest son of a wealthy businessman. In advance of the Korean War, the family moved to Hong Kong in 1949 and Japan a year later. At Tokyo University, Paik studied art and music, writing an undergraduate thesis on Arnold Schoenberg. In 1956, he pursued further musical studies in Germany where, in a kind of conversion experience, he met the visiting composer John Cage.

Cage, with his punctilious zaniness and absorption in Zen Buddhism, was a crucial, liberating influence. Paik, also a Buddhist, ran with the influence and elaborated on it. In addition to composing music, he began experimenting with sculpture, performance and what were at the time still front-edge electronic media: television, personal videotape recorders, primitive home computers. And he combined them with a sensationalist flair pitched to a popular audience.

Returning to Japan in 1964, he funneled this geekish theatricality into creating his first life-size, remote-controlled robot in collaboration with an electronics engineer, Shuya Abe. Named Robot K-456 — the reference is to a Mozart piano concerto — and now on loan from a German collection, it's the first thing we see in the show, and it's quite a sight. A futuristic antique, its mechanics now look fragile in the extreme, but its oddness and wit are intact.

Originally fitted with female breasts and male genitalia (the penis was removed when the robot was shipped to a censorship-prone New York City the same year), K-456 was designed to be sociable, political and a little gross. Rolling down a city sidewalk, it waved, bowed, broadcast a tape of President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural speech, and periodically defecated white beans. Like much of Paik's work, it was both conceptually sophisticated and kid stuff, the way Ryan Trecartin's comic-apocalyptic YouTube productions are now.

It was also a prototype for more polished things to come. In the 1980s, Paik built a family of robots — father, mother, baby — from stacked-up vintage television monitors. Looking as monumental and boxy as armored samurai, the figures didn't move, but were internally animated by video montages playing on their many screens with images of war planes, Korean porcelains, African crowds and abstract shapes flashing by too fast to be taken in at a glance but constantly repeated, like online news.

Paik made a variety of such video sculptures. Some took a swipe at a knee-jerk celebration of technological "progress." The interactive 1968 "TV Chair" has no more elevated function than to video-surveil a given sitter's derriere. At the same time, Paik fully understood that technology was here to stay, commanding and inexorable, and he wanted to use art to soften its effects, reduce its might, tease it, tweak it, make it enlightenment friendly. One way he maintained this perspective was by working with like-minded human collaborators, mostly artists, with the most important being Charlotte Moorman.

Moorman was born in Little Rock, Ark., in 1933. She studied musical composition at Centenary College in Shreveport, La., but also trained as an instrumentalist and in 1957 moved to New York to study the cello at Juilliard. Although she played the standard repertoire and did a stint with Leopold Stokowski's American Symphony Orchestra, she was attracted to experimental music and gained a reputation for playing the unplayable, including some of Cage's more

intensely micromanaged scores. With her full figure, cascading dark hair and pale skin, she was a charismatic visual presence onstage. Paik met her in New York in 1964, and they bonded instantly.

Both thrived on controversy. Paik was eager to give vanguard music, so spiky and taxing, the sensuous aura he felt was necessary to attract a general audience. He looked to Moorman to provide that, and she did. For a piece called “Cello Sonata No. 1 for Adults Only” she played Bach while doing a striptease. She performed Paik’s composition “Opera Sextronique” in the nude, as called for by the score, and earned news headlines — far more valuable than reviews — when she was arrested on a charge of public indecency.

In part because she was a woman, and one who at least ostensibly exploited traditional models of femininity, her role in late-20th-century American vanguard culture has been undervalued, though not by Paik. After her death from breast cancer in 1991, he created a memorial tribute to her at the 1993 Venice Biennale, with articles of her clothing floating like spirits on high. That installation is replicated in the Asia Society show, organized by Michelle Yun, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art. And a new book, “Topless Cellist: The Improbable Life of Charlotte Moorman” by Joan Rothfuss, due in mid-October from the MIT Press, gives a full and evenhanded account of her accomplishments.

The book provides exactly the kind of fresh, re-evaluative information the catalog lacks, but even without it, the show lets us see Paik in a somewhat new light, not as an Asian artist, exactly, but not as a Western artist either, or even as an artist generically “global.” Specific references to Asia recur in his work: A robot brandishes a book of verse by the great Tang dynasty poet Li Po (A.D. 701-762); a statue of a meditating Buddha contemplates its own image on a video screen. The paint-smearing late televisions, mere souvenirs of a long career, suggest the brash, hand-altered, recycling spirit of technological culture in Beijing and Mumbai today.

And then there’s the installation “Three Camera Participation/Participation TV” (1969/2001) in a gallery of its own. Consisting of three cameras, a video monitor and a projector, the piece barely exists until someone enters and activates it. Only when you walk in front of the cameras does an image appear: your own, as three hazy colored silhouettes — red, green and blue — on the monitor and as a kind of barely embodied aura on the gallery wall. Step out of camera range, and the image is gone. In much of his art, Paik used technology, busy and brash, to create the equivalent of the wake-up slap of Zen master. Very occasionally, as here, he uses it to say something about nothing — about words, and information, and connectivity going away — and that takes mastery, too.