

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



The Late Style *Nam June Paik*

Jennifer Field



NAM JUNE PAIK, Standing Buddha with Outstretched Hand, 2005, single-channel video (color, silent), televisions, closed-circuit video (color) and wood Buddha with permanent oil marker additions, dimensions variable. Copyright Nam June Paik Estate. Photo by Benjamin Blackwell. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, Hong Kong.

The title of the Nam June Paik exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Hong Kong, “Nam June Paik: The Late Style,” is misleading. This is largely a pleasant surprise. The exhibition includes works from the 2000s, but it also features a thoughtful selection of drawings, paintings, sculptures and multimedia installations representing each preceding decade of Paik’s career, reaching back to the 1960s. Paik is known as the pioneer of video art. Gagosian recently began representing Paik’s estate, and this exhibition showcases a body of work that encompasses some of the artist’s essential, longstanding concerns: the social impact of telecommunication, the merger of art and life, and notions of infinite and lateral time. It is also the first exhibition of Paik’s work to be held in Hong Kong. The gallery was aided in the installation by Paik’s former studio assistant, Jon Huffman, who is now curator of the Nam June Paik Estate.

In 1996 Paik suffered a debilitating stroke that left him in a wheelchair until his death in 2006. The exhibition catalogue, which features an excellent essay by Paik scholar John G. Hanhardt, makes much of the artist’s persistent engagement with ongoing themes, as well as ambitious new projects, during that later period of his life. Such works included *Modulation in Synch*, an installation that filled the soaring rotunda of New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2000. However, of the 13 late works in the Gagosian exhibition, 11 are from 2005, the year

before Paik died; only *Bakelite Robot* (2002) and *Candle TV* (1991–2003) represent other years of Paik's last decade. Greater temporal variety from this period would have offered a fuller summary of Paik's "late style" and softened certain eulogistic qualities of the exhibition.

Fortunately, any sense of somberness is offset by the animated character of many of Paik's works, and a leapfrogging pattern of ideas resulting from clever curatorial strategies. Visitors are greeted in the gallery's lobby by a small, vintage television set (*Untitled*, 2005) decorated in Crayola colors with a bright green smile and Paik's name in Chinese characters. The main exhibition unfolds through four consecutive rooms nearby. Occupying center stage in the first gallery, *TV Chair* (1968), the earliest piece in the exhibition, is especially important in representing Paik's first use of closed-circuit video, which would become a crucial element in his subsequent practice. Its construction is deceptively simple: a television, facing upward, is mounted beneath the Plexiglas seat of a rod chair. Overhead, a downward-facing video camera transmits the television's picture back to itself so that the image recedes into infinity on the monitor. If one were to sit on the chair, the transmitted image would be at once contingent upon, yet invisible to, the sitter. Opposite *TV Chair*, the decidedly low-tech *Candle TV* consists of a hollowed-out television that houses a single lit candle. Whereas *TV Chair* points to the future of technology, *Candle TV* presents an evolutionary inversion in which actual fire, the most primitive light-producing element, has replaced electronic light.

Seated adjacent to these works, a Southeast Asian Buddha (*Golden Buddha*, 2005) faces a television and a camera that, similar to *TV Chair*, broadcasts the Buddha's own image onto the monitor. Its perpetual self-reflectivity feels particularly resonant considering the current popularity of sharing selfies and status updates on social media. In *Standing Buddha with Outstretched Hand* (2005), seen two galleries later, a standing Buddha faces a camera and a set of shelves containing four stacked televisions. The two middle monitors display the Buddha's image, and the top and bottom monitors feature videos of abstracted, flickering flames that recall *Candle TV*. A simple artistic gesture complicates the reading of this work: the bottom two images are right-side up, while the top two images are upside-down. Unlike the Buddha's body (i.e., the human figure), which is structured on bilateral symmetry, the pictures on the screens are organized on a horizontal axis, with the resulting spatial geometry between the Buddha and the TV unit becoming that of a cross. The hermetic symmetry, together with the serene visage of the Buddha and the eternal flames, convey a palpable feeling of centeredness.

Paik's vision was humanistic, not dystopian; yet at times the exhibition feels oddly static due to the gallery's use of large white columns and plinths, even as the space is closely monitored by guards. They separate Paik's works from the active, physical space of the viewer, diminishing our visceral and empathetic connections with them in a way that seems inconsistent with Paik's playful approach to art-making and his overarching interests in communication and the fusion of life and art. One instance concerns the four-foot-tall *Bakelite Robot*. For this sculpture, Paik assembled 11 radios made of colorful Bakelite, a plastic popularly used during the early 20th century, into a standing figure with open arms. Paik fitted LCD monitors into the empty cavities that once housed radio dials, at the figure's mouth, hands, feet, elbows and hip-joint areas, thereby substituting moving video for actual movement. These details, and the near-human scale of the robot, beckon the viewer, but a broad pedestal impedes engagement with the work. In contrast to *Bakelite Robot*, the machines in *Robot Drawings* (1987), a series of childlike pencil and pastel works on paper, are performers. They are seen waving, emoting and interacting in an atmosphere dotted with music notes, pianos, planets, the moon, a dog—things that imply

movement and sound. Many of them contain small seated Buddhas in their cores, sometimes connected by telephone cords.

In the second gallery, three small televisions (*Untitled, Third Eye Television* and *Untitled*, respectively) display video montages from performances held earlier in Paik's career. The first features a mesmerizing choreography from the 1980s, between dancer Louise Lecavalier and David Bowie, alternating with 1970s footage of cellist Charlotte Moorman playing Paik's famous "TV cello" and segments of his 1984 international satellite project, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*. Another television displays psychedelic video graphics of spinning bottles, orbs and planar grids. In the middle work, *Third Eye Television*, Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg chants a Buddhist mantra and arrhythmically taps finger cymbals in an endless loop that is at first amusing, but becomes increasingly annoying—metaphorically and literally like a television that has been left on too long. The sound carries into the last room where Ginsberg intermittently reappears in *Chinese Memory* (2005), this time on silent, as if he is mouthing the words of his own voice.

All three televisions are close in size and have gracefully sculpted wooden casings. Organized in a measured row on tall pedestals, they suggest sarcophagi or coffins. The funereal ambience of this room is carried onto the opposite wall, where a bulky, vintage cabinet television (*Untitled*, 1974) hangs high with its doors swung open—as the altarpiece in a Catholic church would be installed. In the place of an altarpiece's central panel, where the crucifixion of Christ is normally depicted, a TV monitor displays a glowing blue video with a vague figure, whose undulating movements create the illusion of ascension. On its surface, Paik loosely painted a white cross ringed by hatched brushstrokes. On the floor, in the periphery, an expressionless, plastic toy robot is turned away, frozen in mid-shuffle. In consideration of the Hong Kong venue, such allusions to mortality are underscored by repetitions of the number four, which in Chinese superstition connotes death. On a long wall next to this work, for example, a suite of four paintings of televisions (all *Untitled*, 2005) precede forty-four drawings from *Notebook* (1984) hung in a neat grid.

Allusions to eternity and rebirth reappear in *Chinese Memory*, in the last gallery. This work includes a black cabinet television painted with grinning, bearded faces and abstracted television sets. The video footage seen here features a montage of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour, vignettes of old Chinese stereotypes such as hordes of bicyclists and troupes of daring acrobats, and American hippies and Ginsberg. Flanking the TV is a Maoist poster that reads, "Spring is eternal in our motherland," and a Chinese scroll that features a vase of spring blossoms. A stack of Chinese history books rests on the floor. In his meditations on technology and global politics, Paik held a particular fascination with China. In 2005, the rapid growth of China's economy dominated international news. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the subject of China would appear in Paik's work from that year. With its overt geographical references, *Chinese Memory* also reads as a deliberate nod to the show's Hong Kong audience.

Against the last wall of the gallery is *359 Canal Street* (1991), which caps the exhibition as its grand finale. The installation includes a large wooden desk with open drawers containing objects and documentation from Paik's history with the Fluxus art movement, as well as large cathode ray tubes from disassembled televisions spreading up the wall, across the floor and into the viewers' space, like giant, searching eyes. The title derives from the New York City address established as the seat of Fluxus by its founding member and artist George Maciunas in the early 1960s. The title is painted in large letters on top of the desk, along with the names of Paik and his

Fluxus collaborator Dick Higgins, beneath scattered wooden blocks from a Maciunas demolition. That *359 Canal Street* was made 13 years after Maciunas's death, which effectively ended Fluxus, is indicative of the elliptical and retrospective quality of time that frequently appears across Paik's work.

The decision to close the exhibition with this work was a shrewd curatorial maneuver. *359 Canal Street* is the most directly autobiographical of Paik's pieces in the show, and it returns visitors to the core ideological tenets of the artist's practice that developed during the 1960s—the decade that yielded *TV Chair*. In *359 Canal Street*, pasted to the interior of its desk's open door, a newspaper clipping from 1962 describes a so-called "Fluxfest," or happening, in Wiesbaden, Germany, where Paik "covered himself with shaving foam, scattered rice and pebbles on the floor and into the audience and lamented over a roll of cheap paper." The desk's open drawers contain an envelope from artist Ray Johnson, a note from Yoko Ono and a poem titled "Time Piece, for George." In poetic sparseness, this last artifact intimately and playfully speaks to Paik's spirit by simultaneously embracing literalness and metaphor, and containing a last word that suitably ends the exhibition with a double entendre:

watch
this frog

plot
gravity jump

squat
rock to soggy

leafbed
and croak