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ARTnews

Nam June Paik's Pioneering Vision: How the Artist Predicted an Age of Digital Technology

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Nam June Paik. RENE BLOCK

“I think the best technology, information, has to do with education—our thinking,” artist Nam June Paik wrote in his famed 1976 essay “Why is Television Dumb?” Anyone who knows Paik and his strange, perplexing, and positively revolutionary art knows that the essay’s title is ironic: his early adoption of video and transformation of the television sets into sculptures made anyone who saw it think and prefigured our relationship with digital technologies today. Without his pioneering use of TV, in all its manifold forms, it is possible that art today might be very different—and, by extension, we all might think in vastly different ways.

Because Paik’s art tended toward extravagance, both when it came to his materials and his ideas, his work was historically difficult to pin down, and until recently not wholly recognized for how it broke new ground. A new retrospective of his work, organized by Tate Modern and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and now on view at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, throws its indefinability into relief, showing how Paik’s own early education in the field of music and his interest in information technology, globalist politics, Buddhist philosophy, and chance helped spur on his more widely known televisual works. (*We Are in Open Circuits*, a book of Paik’s writings put out by the MIT Press last year and edited by John G. Hanhardt, Gregory

Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips, acts as good companion to the show.) Below, a look back at some of Paik's most famous works, many of which are included in the show traveling the world right now.



Nam June Paik, Hand and Face, 1961. COURTESY ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), NEW YORK AND THE ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK/©THE ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK

Early Performances

Paik is best known for his playful video art, but before he got interested in television, he was an integral figure in postwar Europe's experimental music scene. The musical pieces he made involved virtually unplayable pianos and objects that barely even seemed like instruments. Before he worked in such an outré mode, he got a traditional education in classical music. Growing up in Korea, he practiced piano, and he later studied music, first at Japan's University of Tokyo and then at various Munich institutions. Working under the sign of John Cage, whose experimental compositions could often be dictated by random constraints, Paik began staging bizarre actions—one 1959 work, dedicated to Cage, involved cutting piano strings using a kitchen knife, as well as performing alongside a German news broadcast, a toy train, an egg, and other assorted objects. "The applause was never-ending," one critic wrote of that performance.

Paik's affinity for Cagean strategies put him at the center of various art scenes, with some of the most cutting-edge Japanese, German, and U.S. artists converging around him. Yet as some of these artists—many of whom were affiliated with neo-avant-garde movements like Hi-Red Center and Fluxus—continued working primarily in performance, sculpture, and conceptual veins, Paik began slowly drifting toward something entirely different: video. "The impact of Paik's presence within the avant-garde scene of Europe and New York began with danger: the cutting of clothes, the smashing of a violin," musician David Toop has written. "Within a few years these actions moved beyond even the most expansive concept of music, evolving into a far more comprehensive vision embracing object-making, new technologies, global media, and all the senses."



Nam June Paik, Magnet TV, 1965. ©THE ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK/WHITNEY MUSEUM

“Prepared Televisions” and Video Sculptures

Paik, like many of his Fluxus colleagues, relied on ready-made materials in his art. For a trailblazing series of sculptures, he made use of TV sets, to which he applied elements that created abstract imagery inside their screens. He called these works “prepared televisions” (à la Cage’s prepared pianos, which had various objects stuffed inside them to distort their sounds), and some figured in his landmark first show in New York. With *Magnet TV* (1965), for example, he affixed a U-shaped magnet to the side of a TV, causing its screen to display a mysterious warping pattern. Paik’s innovation was twofold: on the one hand, he opened up a television to chance—but in actuality was in no way random—subjecting it to the forces of science; on the other, he made abstraction through purely technological means, in a way so vastly dissimilar from that of the Abstract Expressionists and their obsession with the human hand.

Paik’s ongoing experiments with televisual material and moving images have come to take on a semi-mythological level of importance for artists of his generation and those who came after. Working alongside artists Wolf Vostell, Shigeo Kubota (Paik’s wife), and others of note, Paik pioneered the nascent medium of video art when he bought a Sony Portapak—a relatively light camera meant for consumer use—in 1965. He began filming his own imagery and incorporating it into his strange sculptures, some of which took on human characteristics. There were works in which he arranged TV sets into shapes resembling men, women, and children, and there were others in which he made monitors part of his performances. In some of the most famous ones,

the experimental cellist Charlotte Moorman, a frequent collaborator of Paik's, played while her instrument—and her nude body, in some cases—were festooned with little monitors.



Nam June Paik, TV Buddha, 1974. STEDELIJK MUSEUM

Screens and Spirituality

By the 1970s, TV had come to seem a dangerous force within the United States—even Paik himself was forced to admit that it had “contributed to much of the stupidity and evil of our decade” in a report on mass media prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation. But Paik was a believer in TV, and he often claimed it could have an even spiritual dimension, writing in 1970, “Participation TV (the one-ness of creator, audience, and critic)” is surely “a way of achieving art that approaches a transcendent state,” and “it is not a small virtue... Not at all...”

None can ignore the spirituality of a work like *TV Buddha* (1974), in which a sculpture of the Buddha is placed before a monitor playing a video loop of the statue's image. While the loop is never closed—a camera is left filming infinitely, displaying the Buddha's image live—the footage never changes much unless its surroundings are altered in some way. This, for Paik, drew on Buddhist precepts that he experienced growing up—and that made him unlike many of his Western colleagues, who came to love Zen Buddhism, but mainly through writings by D. T. Suzuki, a Japanese writer who helped make the line of thought accessible to a public in the United States, albeit with distortions that pushed nationalist ideas and oversimplifications in the process.



Nam June Paik, Global Groove, 1973. COURTESY ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), NEW YORK AND THE ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK/©THE ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK

Globalism, Crisscrossing Identities, and “Electronic Superhighway”

From the mid-1970s until his death in 2006, Paik continued pushing his work in new, odd, and maximalist directions, creating video installations that were reflective of a world culture in which everything and everyone was in flux. For his 1973 *Global Groove*, made with John Godfrey, he offered up a *mélange* of unlike images—heavily edited footage of Moorman playing cello, Richard Nixon’s face warping, clips of Navajo and Korean musicians, and much more—to show just how technology had created a new world. “This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book,” the video’s narrator says at one point. In Paik’s hands, this is all a little scary—but also very exciting. He called this constant stream of information, images, identities, and ideologies the “electronic superhighway”—a term used widely in relation to technology today.

Yet Paik was also interested in the way that art had been permanently altered by television and other technologies as well. Whereas artists once created portraits using paint and canvas, Paik often made them through stacked TVs. And for one work, he even created his own play on an art-historical masterpiece: *Sistine Chapel* (1993) involves the use of 40 projectors that throw images around an empty gallery space, creating an effect vaguely reminiscent of Michelangelo’s famed ceiling painting. But in place of Michelangelo’s biblical scenes, there appear dizzying abstract patterns, footage of Janis Joplin and David Bowie, and other images belonging only to the work’s moment