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Nam June Paik Predicted the Future by Melding Art and Technology

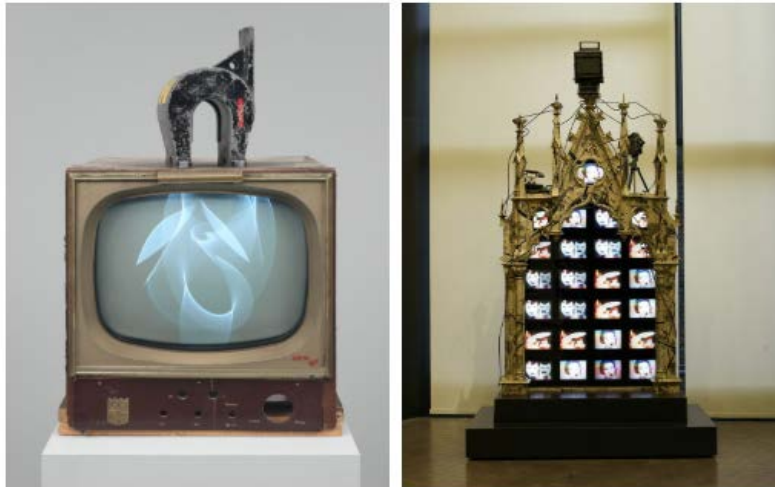
Samuel McIlhagga



Nam June Paik installing “The Exposition of Electronic Music – Electronic Television” at Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, West Germany, 1963. Courtesy of the Nam June Paik Estate.

Critics don’t always get it right. Especially when it comes to art and how it changes in response to technological developments—their predictions of the future are often merely guesses, at best.

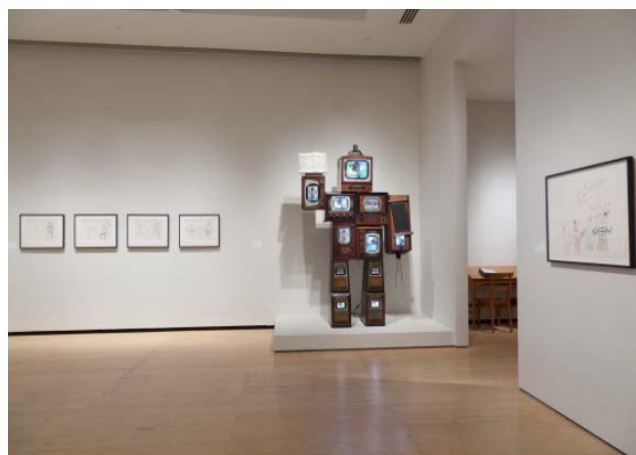
In Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” it was predicted that aura and tradition, which characterized the art of the 18th and 19th centuries, would disappear as society became increasingly mechanized and mass produced. “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,” Benjamin wrote. “One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.”



Nam June Paik, Magnet TV, 1965. © The Estate of Nam June Paik. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Nam June Paik, My Faust-Communication, 1989-1991. Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

Decades later, however, Nam June Paik, a Korean-born artist, would challenge this assumption. Instead of causing art to sacrifice aura and tradition, Paik’s work proved how machines could be a positive force for culture, able to retain the best aspects of the past while pushing art into an innovative future. Almost all of his pieces are composed out of technological processes, or linked to them, and yet they still emanate individuality, artistic intention, and positivity.

Best known for his monumental televisual sculptures, Paik’s pioneering oeuvre also spans musical composition, performance art, early electronic installations, video works, experiments with TV broadcasting, and reclamations of his Korean religious heritage. A major retrospective currently on view at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam assembles over 200 works from Paik’s 50-year career. Having opened just as COVID-19 began sweeping the globe, as lockdowns slowly begin to lift in Europe, those hoping to visit the Amsterdam iteration of this traveling exhibition may now do so for the first time.



Installation view of “Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot” at Asia Society Museum, New York, 2014-15. Photo by Eileen Costa. Courtesy of the Estate of Nam June Paik and Asia Society.

“Already in the early ’70s, Paik proposed the building of a new ‘Electronic SuperHighway,’ a network which would connect people all over the world through satellites, cables, and fiber optics,” said Stedelijk curator Leontine Coelewijn, outlining Paik’s prophetic embrace of

technology. “He said that conferences between people in different locations via colour video telephones will become commercially feasible. So he predicted the internet, Skype, FaceTime, and Zoom!”

Paik was conscious of the fact that any good contemporary artist would have to embrace the forefront of innovation while understanding the limits of their material world and the past. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, satellite broadcasting was rapidly replacing cable TV. Paik embraced this new technological zeitgeist by producing numerous “televisual” artworks using satellites and live broadcasting, bouncing his signals off these newfangled dishes. “Just as Mozart mastered the newly invented clarinet,” he once mused, “the satellite artist must compose his art from the beginning suitable to physical conditions and grammar.” Paik’s understanding of past changes in technology made him presciently aware of potential futures and demonstrated how artists might be its best predictors.



Installation view of “Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot” at Asia Society Museum, New York, 2014-15. Photo by Eileen Costa. Courtesy of the Estate of Nam June Paik and Asia Society.

While speaking about satellite art in 1984, Paik was launching his televisual work *Good Morning Mr Orwell*, which was to be broadcast via space satellite. The project was planned to coincide with the year George Orwell predicted the world would be dominated by global technocratic totalitarianism in his classic dystopian novel *1984*. In Paik’s hour-long video, the artist rejects the author’s fears and instead celebrates the “positive and interactive uses of electronic media which Mr. Orwell, the first media prophet, never predicted.” The project was broadcast simultaneously in English and French across New York, San Francisco, and Paris, and featured performances by the Thompson Twins, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allen Ginsberg.

These “positive and interactive uses of electronic media” allowed Paik to move from the avant-garde fringe to the cosmopolitan establishment over the course of his career. One of the earliest leaders of the Fluxus movement, along with artists like Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, John Cale, and George Brecht, Paik prioritized process over product, subverting the increasing commercialization of the art industry.



Nam June Paik, TV Garden, 1974-1977, reconstructed 2002. Photo by Peter Tjihuis. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

His first solo show at Galerie Parnass, “Exposition of Music — Electronic Television,” in 1963, took place in the suburban home-turned-gallery space run by German architect Rolf Jährling. Featuring a severed ox head and multiple modified pianos and TVs, the exhibition established Paik’s lifelong synthesis of traditional Korean shamanistic practices and Zen Buddhism with Western technology, embracing the immaterial, spiritual aspects of these seemingly disparate worlds.

During the 1960s, Paik’s interest in Zen led him to collaborate on a series of works with American composer (and fellow Zen practitioner) John Cage. It was during this time that Paik produced *Zen for Head* (1962), *Zen for Wind* (1963), and *Zen for TV* (1963). The last of these, created using a broken cathode to produce a static line across a television screen, seems to herald the contemporary growth of Zen meditation apps on our phones and computers.

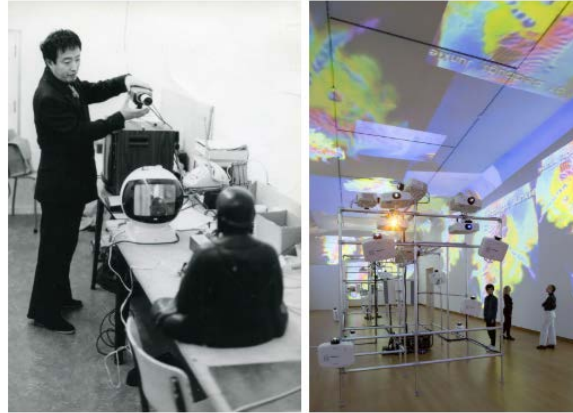


Nam June Paik, performance view of A Pas de Loup at Gallery Hyundai, 1990. Courtesy of the Estate of Nam June Paik and Gallery Hyundai.

Meanwhile, his 1990 performance *A Pas de Loup* in front of Seoul’s Gallery Hyundai used an ancient shamanistic ritual to commemorate his close friend and Fluxus collaborator, Joseph Beuys, who passed away in 1986. Yookyung Hwang of Gallery Hyundai explained how this performance was intimately linked to Paik’s past. “Recalling his childhood, Nam June Paik said that his mother invited a shaman to their home regularly, and he remembers the whole process of *gut*,” she said. Gut, or *ogu-gut*, is a type of Korean shamanistic ritual used to guide dead spirits to

heaven. Employed alongside his signature TVs, Paik was able to seamlessly marry tradition with avant-garde technology to memorialise Beuys.

By embracing both Eastern and Western traditions and cultures, Paik's work was able to resonate internationally from the get-go. Paik received his first major retrospective in 1976 at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne, Germany, which was soon followed by surveys at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1978, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1982, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1989, and the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul in 1992.



Nam June Paik installing TV-Buddha, 1974, in the Stedelijk Museum. Photo by Rene Block. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Nam Jun Paik, Sistine Chapel, 1993. Photo by Peter Tjihuis. Courtesy of the Estate of Nam June Paik.

At the 1993 Venice Biennale, he exhibited a major late work, *Sistine Chapel* (1993): a video installation that comprised dozens of projectors suspended on scaffolding. The piece maintains the ethos of his earliest works, connecting itself explicitly to tradition by referencing Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel while also playing with the possibilities of innovation.

There are some critics, however, who felt these later biennale-driven pieces by Paik were trite compared to his early experiments. Reviewing the artist's most recent retrospective at Tate Modern in 2019, critic Matthew Collings said he was "prepared to resent it having been totally unmoved by the sight of his TV sets in biennales for the past 40 years....I think he really did get a bit routine from the '80s on, seeming to be simply part of a new international art landscape of easy spectacular production."



Nam June Paik, *TV-Buddha*, 1974. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

For Collings, Paik’s earlier work was “genuinely imaginative and had a particular quality of a poetic approach allied to a ruthless logic of making.” Citing *TV Buddha* (1974), an installation that combines a traditional 18th-century Buddhist sculpture with closed-circuit cameras, as representative of Paik’s “original and humane” ideas about TV and mass media, Collings believes that Paik’s best work collapses the distinction between traditional cultural expressions and technology. Ultimately, however, despite his initial misgivings, Collings found the Tate show to be “beautiful.”

What Collings so admires in Paik’s work is the lightness with which he is able to approach technology. “We are made by TV and it’s impossible to tell where our real selves begin and TV’s gibberish ends,” he observed. “[It is] a sort of unknowable force that could never be defeated, except it was actually quite an easy and lighthearted matter for Paik.” The surveillance state “telescreens” of Orwell’s *1984* become endearing little creatures huddled in nature in Paik’s *TV Garden* (1974). In *TV Chair* (1968/1976), they are transmuted into a prolonged joke about the artist’s bum. The power of mass media and its rapid development is made instantly comedic when Paik turns the camera on subjects, be they the moon in *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965), the eggs in *Three Eggs* (1975–82), or the gallery audience in *Participation TV* (1969/2001).



Nam June Paik, still from *Global Groove*, 1973. © The Estate of Nam June Paik. Courtesy of Electronic Arts InterMix (EAI), New York, the Estate of Nam June Paik, and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

Since Paik passed away in 2006, the self-facing camera has become a staple of contemporary popular culture—the selfie a de facto aspect of modern life. The amusing subjectivity found in the selfie, for instance, has gifted artistic capacity and visual self-reflection—previously reserved for portraitists and professional photographers—to the masses.

Mass media, mass artworks, and mass audience access is something Michelle Yun, curator of Paik's 2014 retrospective "Becoming Robot" at New York's Asia Society, thinks is key to understanding the artist. "Paik's sophisticated philosophy towards technology and its ability to allow broad and interactive access to art and culture was prophetic in its approach," she explained. "His forward-thinking ideas exemplified across the artist's prolific writings and boundary-pushing multimedia artworks have become ingrained into contemporary society through the inextricable relationship between technology, fine art, and popular culture." When it came to developing new art forms through technology, Paik was not content to let Walter Benjamin's "aura" disappear into the void of impersonal mechanical production. Instead, he turned to the intersections of tradition, art, and technology and produced illuminating, humane, and prescient artworks that refused to Other the machine.