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NAM JUNE PAIK

Portrait of the Electronic Artist

by Victor Ancona

"The cathode-ray tube will replace canvas as the artist's medium," softly proclaimed Nam June Paik, Korean video artist, composer/musician, inventor and philosopher.

Born in Seoul in 1932, Paik graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1956. His dream was to go to Paris, but his strict, well-to-do family would have none of that. His father preferred Germany, because it was "more disciplined." The youngest of five children, Paik was allowed more freedom than his siblings. "All my family is interested in is money, money. They hate art," he told me.

In Germany, young Paik studied music, art history and philosophy at the Universities of Munich, Freiburg and Cologne, and then did experimental work at the Studio for Electronic Music of Radio Cologne. He was an artist-in-residence at WGBH, Boston, and then at WNET,

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Above: Paik preparing a show (photo by Peter Moore). Below: images of hands created on the Paik-Abe synthesizer.



New York. His first exhibition of "Electronic TV" was in 1963 at the Parnass Gallery, Wuppertal, Germany.

In 1968, with the aid of Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, he developed the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer, an electronic device that produces swirling, abstract color forms that distort the "reality" of the standard television image—an instrument that video artists delight in using. Paik has had exhibits in many galleries and museums here and abroad. Syracuse's Everson Museum of Art gave him a retrospective show called "Videa 'n' Videology 1959-1973."

Sitting Buddha-like in his cavernous, littered studio, Paik remains undisturbed about the rather slow acceptance of the young art of video. In a matter of fact way, he calmly states that video is a powerful medium that will soon conquer.

Talking of his early days, he said: "My talent was more to music. My math and physics were so poor that I had to conquer them. I wasn't forced, I just had to get rid of them. Math was important, to the study of electronic music.

"Philosophy allows for more fantasy. In math, you must take 99 logical steps before you reach the final fantasy step of 100. In art you can have fantasy from the first step. I'm not really a patient fellow. I'd much rather play piano than do math," he added.

Paik considers techniques to be critical in video art, and looks to the day when the collaboration of video artist and video engineer will progress into the unification of artist and engineer into one person.

"The piano has only 88 keys; color television has 12 million dots per second, which I have to control for my work. It is like composing a concerto using a piano equipped with 12 million keys. How can you deal with that vast quantity of possibility without the painstaking study of your materials and instruments?"

Paik is unhappy that students today are impatient with the technical aspects of video. In one of his summer college classes, he began with ten students, then nine, then eight, and so forth, until he ended by talking trivia in order to keep his remaining students happy! Paik had very strict training in musical theory, and he feels that the same attention to discipline is vital to the practice of any art.

Paik's Minetta Lane. Like many of Paik's works, it was created with financial support from WNET/13's TV Lab.



When I asked him whether video art is a personal or a group accomplishment, he replied: "Some types of video art can be created by individuals. In other approaches a group effort is crucial; like the playing of a string quartet, where no one is the boss—the first violin, the second violin, the cello, and the viola all play in unison. In 'Global Groove,' for example, I got credit, but actually I

got help from John Godfrey, Charlotte Moreman and other talents. Everybody did their best and I think I can claim authorship with a clear conscience.



Actress Pamela Souza as seen through Paik's art. Lines in the image are from clapboard house on Greenwich Village's Grove Street.

"In Buddhism it's very important to kill the ego. I think this helps me to get along with people. Many artists are egomaniacs, and this hasn't helped them in certain kinds of video art. Take for example, Chartres Cathedral—no one knows who built it; people suppressed their egos and created a brilliant masterpiece. Of course, Wagner was different, but we need all kinds of approaches to art," Paik said with some animation.

Paik feels the viewer sees little differential between videotape and film. "The important thing to the maker," he said, "is the time structure, as in music. Video is small, film is big, and that makes a difference, but it's not essential. The difference became apparent to me when I was working with the synthesizer—strong, pure video light came through, certain visual sensations, that I couldn't even videotape."

For economy, Paik works in super 8 film and half-inch videotape, keeping costs down so that he can have more time for post-production work. "One must have the freedom to make mistakes, it's very important," he added.

Paik doesn't seem to mind that video artists don't have control over the environment in which their works are shown, even though the atmosphere surrounding a work of art has an effect on the viewer. "As a young man I was an absolute perfectionist in my music. I played in a small room and insisted on controlling my environment, but as I got older, I got easier. Being tolerant of each other became very important in this world. I became looser and yet I felt that I could express myself through my work.

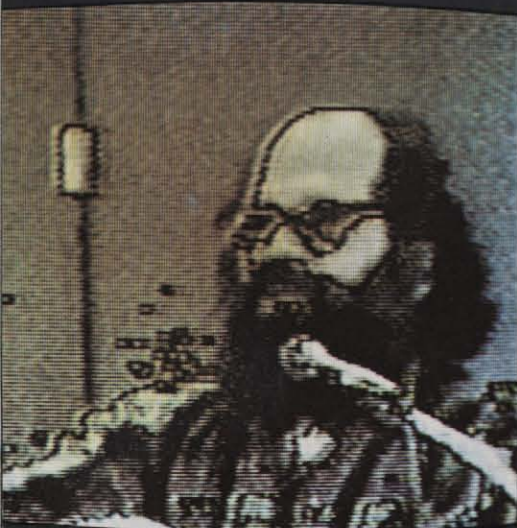
"Of course in broadcasting, while the program is being broadcast, someone may be actually watching,

another might be also eating, someone may be in the bathroom, another fighting with his wife, and another couple may be making love, but that's what makes the world so interesting—everybody is different."

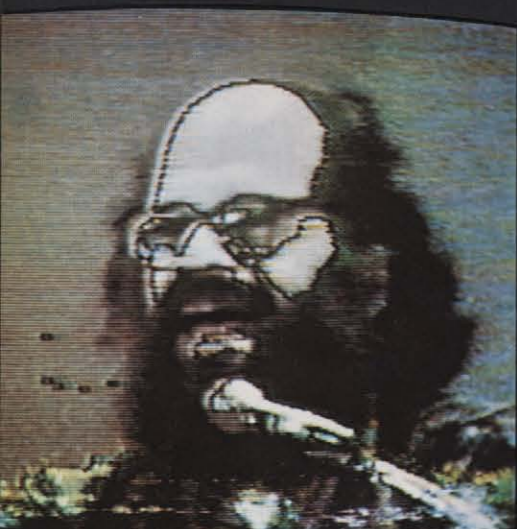
Paik is tolerant of broadcast television. While he claims it is getting more rudimentary, more simple, and more "idiot" in a way, he still feels that people are getting some education out of it. Recalling his days in Germany, he said: "I lived with a family that could add but not multiply, refugees from Poland. They didn't read any books or newspapers, however they watched television and followed world news, which amazed them. They thought Korea was next to Poland because they never knew anything existed beyond Poland. When they asked me what I believed

Images created on the Paik-Abe synthesizer aided by a Grass Valley Switcher.





TV images of Allan Ginsberg from Paik's *Global Groove*. The artist produced the effects by combining his own synthesizer with a Grass Valley Switcher. All color photos in this article are courtesy of the Bonino Gallery in New York.



in, I told them that I didn't believe in anything, but by birth I am a Buddhist. They replied that they never heard of this sect, thinking that there was no other religion but Christianity. For this kind of people, and they are the majority in the world, for them, even the Carol Burnett show is a big education." So as a whole, Paik doesn't feel that TV is doing badly. "Whether people watch a small or a large screen, some message will get through," he said.

Nam June Paik spent a great deal of time studying ancient Chinese calligraphy. "When first people were trying to express 'this is moon' or 'this is sun', it was very rudimentary, very hard, but it was also very beautiful. In our way, we're trying to express ourselves with electronics through multi-peoples language. Perhaps painting and music have reached such sophistication and maturity that they are on the way out—perhaps not." Paik always seems to touch both sides of a question, seeing the Yin and Yang in everything.

In 1956 Paik was detained in Egypt for about a month, and he took advantage of his stay there by studying Islamic art. "After about 12 centuries, Islamic art has degenerated into bathroom art," he asserted, "but their 7th and 9th century art was magnificent. Everything with a starting point is interesting and vital."

When I told Paik that I thought he has a mind similar to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, which others dispute, he agreed, adding: "Yes, I'm curious, too. Moholy-Nagy was a great experimenter and I think he is still underrated. While Picasso and Kandinsky were great painters, Moholy-Nagy didn't produce things to sell. It's too bad, but artists today produce only what they could sell."

Paik has great praise for David Loxton, director of the Television Laboratory at WNET/13, New York, and feels that Loxton is doing a fantastic job. "He's very vital, enthusiastic, and has a good sense and judgement regarding art," Paik added.

Encouraged by the growing demand for videotapes from museums, galleries, and universities, Paik said that approximately 300 tapes were borrowed last year from Electronic Arts Intermix alone. When the video disc reaches the public, video will come into its own, claims Paik. He feels the disc will eventually replace tape because of the low cost of pressing. Advertising, promotion and catalog costs are what will keep the price up, but eventually the disc will not cost more than the price of a book, Paik believes.

Some industry people believe that the video disc will not sell as well as the audio disc since you can listen to



music while occupied with reading, talking, eating, or washing the dishes. People may not want to watch a movie more than once. Paik, however, feels otherwise.

In one of his TV chair projects which he sold to the Swedish Crown, Paik included a collage of Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe movie sequences. While preparing the tapes, he had to watch the films at least 50 times in order to pick the sequences he wanted to use. By watching the films over and over again, he began to realize that great acting could be seen often. "Each time you see it, you see more, and it becomes more interesting," said Paik. "People will select their favorite visual arias," he added. "People don't have to watch all of Casablanca; four or five scenes will be sufficient."

"Marketing and advertising people should realize the selected portions of great films would sell very well. I could watch Judy Garland singing Over the Rainbow many, many times and not get tired of it. Everytime I see the sequence I notice something new and different." Repeated viewing, like repeated listening, is salutary to the senses, feels Paik.

Paik refuses to define art, simply stating that "Art is not art and art is not not art, and art is not not not art. Art is only escape, concepts, eternal negation." He feels that when art becomes Art, it's no longer art, and we must redefine it. "When Chagall gets to be sold in drug stores as a commodity . . ." Paik sighed.

We turned to the subject of photography. "When photography was invented, it was a small business, smaller than painting," said Paik, "but photography became a much bigger business than painting, even though less prestigious than painting, even now. However, photography is big and important because people can express themselves with it. In photography, there are no consumers—everybody is a creator, an artist."

"In television, the people are consumers, and few are creators. However, with the invention of the Portapak and the Picturephone, we will have two-way communications, which is the democratic way. One-way communications is a dictate." According to Paik, it will take approximately another 30 years for video to be as accessible to the people as photography is today.

"Video will be a strong influence on photography, with people making moving images, then choosing the one image for display. Also, photo image will soon be possible direct from the cathode-ray tube," said Paik.

Paik wanted the readers of *Videography* to know that he is

bullish on video. "The more people watch it, the more people will use it, the more people will be buying discs in the future." Phillips-MCA and RCA please take note.

Viewers of Paik's videotapes claim that they are never bored by them. "To say the utmost—as much as possible in the shortest time, because time is limited—that's important. Perhaps because I'm a musician, I deal with time better than painters do," he asserted.

Regarding future videographers, Paik is unhappy over the cost of educating young people, decrying some institutions for offering only lecture courses on the subject. "I would like to set up studio courses at Harvard or MIT. If Harvard does it, others will follow. New York is synonymous with entertainment, but Boston is more intellectual, but it's difficult to make intellect not boring," Paik said impishly.

Shigeko Kubota, Paik's wife, an author and a video artist in her own right, with many one-woman shows to her credit, is his severest critic. "She's very harsh on me," he said. He modestly claims that she is his teacher. Ms. Kubota is video curator of Anthology Film Archives in New York, preparing a weekly showcase of the best in videotapes for public viewing. Her latest show, "Duchampiana," was recently held at the René Block Gallery in New York. Paik's own video offerings were shown at the Bonino Gallery in Manhattan's SoHo district, with "Fish flies on the Sky," and "Moon is the oldest TV Set" at the nearby René Block.

To top the dual show, Paik performed, along with Charlotte Moorman, his now celebrated "TV Bra in Living Sculpture" sequence in synchronization with the broadcast of his works on WNET/13, specially edited for TV. It was a tour de force, a happening within a happening, which pleased exhibitionist Paik to no end.

Paik's Eastern influence was felt at the Bonino Gallery, in which viewers, entering the darkened gallery, were asked to lie down on mats on the floor to better contemplate the video images of fish "swimming in the sky" on 20 small monitors suspended from the ceiling, face down.

At the René Block, Paik's Eastern influence and temperament took hold. There, one was face to face with a train of monitors, each showing a phase of a sphere, presumably the moon. Adding to the quiet reverent outerworld darkness, a lone candle silently glowed inside an old TV set disemboweled of its electronic gear. The two presentations aptly portrayed the Yin-Yang personality, mind and heart of Nam June Paik.

Paik has learned to understand the American character, and is playing up to it. At the same time, his Eastern heritage comes into play in everything he does and says. His East-West colors blend in such perfect harmony that white is often the result. Perhaps he is living up to his name, PAIK, which means WHITE in Korean.

It seems incredible that only 13 years ago, in Germany, Paik's was the first video art show. Since then, he has made video art history through his determination to undo and redo, in his own fashion, the electronic circuitry that manipulate the signals of the cathode-ray tube.

Being in the presence of Nam June Paik is both rewarding and disturbing, like being with a philosopher who has arrived at his inward thought and leaves you dangling in your own see-saw approach to life. It's both an exhilarating and an unsettling experience. Paik, seems to think faster than he can talk, half his sentences trailing off in an almost inaudible sound full of intensity. It's as if all the world's thoughts are compressed in his being as he nonchalantly, and yet with much economy, utters a condensed truth that you don't want to miss, but which nevertheless eludes you no matter how hard you try to comprehend what he is saying.

Toward the end of the interview, I questioned Paik regarding his outlook on life. After being alone with him for some time, I realized that he was a very serious human being, yet his public image is one of studied carelessness and fun. "Perhaps I am a serious man," he said, "but I don't take the world that seriously. I try not to be funny, but it's funny because people are funny. I guess that I got a certain amount of enlightenment during the bombing of Seoul. I began to look upon life as you would a baseball game. One side wins, but it doesn't matter very much. I got a certain cynical attitude, just to survive. Of course, as a young man, I took tests in school very seriously. Perhaps one cannot show himself completely. Life has a double meaning, and one has to grasp the nuances, the symbols." Paik's theatricality and reserve, his tragicomic stance vis-a-vis his outer world, is to me, a natural phenomenon of his native culture.

There is something very logical about the way Paik thinks, talks, and works, although it is disturbing to some, especially to the "money-making establishment" (which includes his family). To others, who consider him a visionary, he is exhilarating, with or without a suppressed ego. Like Moholy-Nagy, his experimental contributions will influence artists for generations to come.