

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

Nam June Paik, the Korean-born artist long considered the elder statesman of video art, has exhibited, performed, and broadcast his work around the globe -- from Adelaide to New York's Carnegie Hall, from the Samoan Islands to Wuppertal, West Germany. As important as his formal studies in both philosophy and music was his early association with the German Fluxus artists, who in the late fifties were combining elements of music, dance, theater, poetry, painting, and sculpture in their Performance events. In 1958 Paik met composer John Cage and dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham, with whom he found he shared a deep fascination with the role of chance and time in the shaping of a work of art.

Paik began his involvement with video in the early 1960s, when there was enthusiastic support for technological exploration in the arts. He started by manipulating television sets to produce simple imagery caused by technical distortions. Interviewed by Calvin Tomkins for a recent New Yorker "Profile," Paik stated: "You have to 'meet the time,' as they say in Chinese history. I start in 1960, first time television sets become cheap, become secondhand, like junk. I buy thirteen secondhand sets in 1962. I didn't have any preconceived idea. Nobody had put two frequencies into one place, so I just do that, horizontal and vertical, and this absolutely new thing comes out. I make mistake after mistake, and it comes out positive. That is story of my whole life." Two re-creations shown in the present exhibition, Zen for TV and TV with Magnet, were originally made during this period.

In New York several years later, Paik started to create musical compositions for the cellist Charlotte Moorman, who performed them while wearing such items as Paik's specially designed TV Bra. Meanwhile he began experimenting with reassembling commercial television images to produce arresting juxtapositions. In Boston in 1970, with Shuya Abe, Paik invented a video synthesizer, which gave him greater flexibility in developing his type of TV collage. Over the last seven years, as artist in residence at two Public Broadcasting Stations -- first WGBH (Boston) and then WNET (New York)-- he has been able to produce and broadcast a substantial amount of his work.

Paik's fascination with communication processes and mass culture reaches across both geographic and philosophic frontiers. On view here is his TV Buddha (1974), a closed-circuit video work consisting of camera, an eighteenth-century Buddha sculpture, and a television set, in which the Buddha contemplates his televised image. It is as if the Buddha's existence were verified on TV, in the same way that, for millions of viewers, individually experienced events are checked against the global standards of broadcast TV.

Also on exhibition is Merce and Marcel, a recent videotape by Nam June Paik done in collaboration with Shigeo Kubota that was made as a tribute to their longtime friend, Merce Cunningham. It is part of a longer program, Merce by Merce by Paik, which will

be aired by WNET later this year. Merce and Marcel is a video collage containing carefully selected elements. In it Paik compares formal dance with popular dance and with natural or nondance movements -- a concern with their interrelations is central to Cunningham's own work. In this piece Paik has also intuitively combined and rearranged his own and other artists' taped sequences, including those of Bill Gwin, Nancy Graves, and Steina and Woody Vasulka. Lastly, taking an early taped interview with Marcel Duchamp by Russell Connor, done in 1964 for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, he has contrasted it with a Paik-directed reenactment of that interview by Connor -- but this time with Cunningham. Blending the provocative sequences together in his fluid, sensual style, Paik has produced a sensitive, loving portrait of these twentieth-century innovators who challenged tradition, aesthetics, and taste.

Himself a catalyst, Nam June Paik is always opening up new lines of communication and incorporating new elements into his own art. Fascinated by the pervasive influence of technology upon contemporary life, he continues to explore the ways in which the most influential mass medium of the twentieth century nurtures similarities among popular cultures. His never-ending curiosity, delight in the unexpected, and compelling enthusiasm for the medium have made him the eminent video ambassador of the television world.

Barbara London

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