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Leigh Landy (Ed.)

ARTS ET LITTÉRATURES AU XXE SIÈCLE

'I MAKE TECHNOLOGY RIDICULOUS' — THE UNUSUAL
DIALECTICS OF NAM JUNE PAIK

Leigh Landy, Antje von Graevenitz

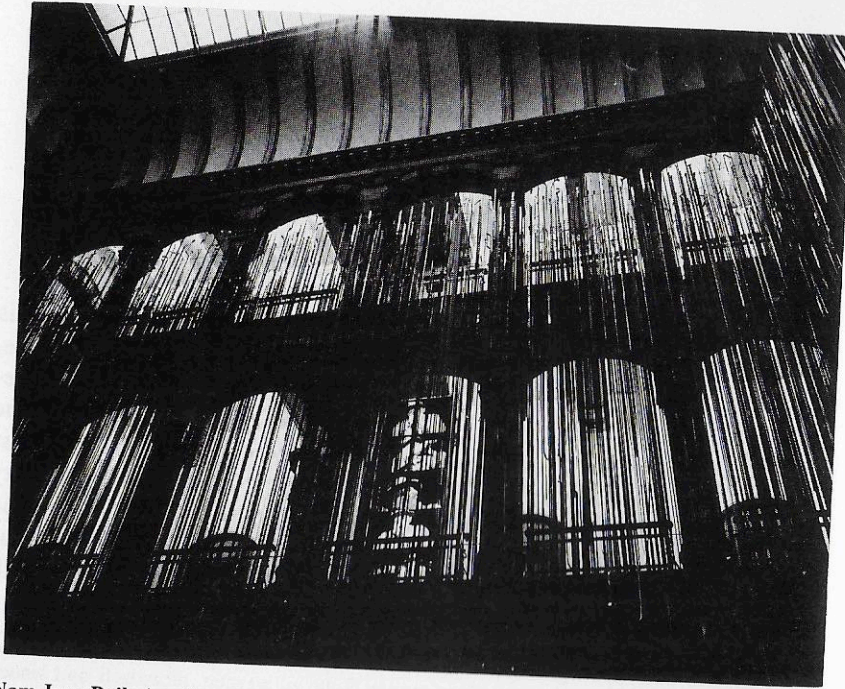
Introduction

In high school years one learns about the thesis/antithesis → synthesis theory; the first two are said to be extremes, diametric opposites, seemingly parametric enemies; the latter, historical inevitability. Somehow after studying the artistic production of and statements made by the video artist/composer Nam June Paik, one wonders whether he just never learned this theory and therefore is free in his total mockery thereof, or whether one of his artistic goals is the abolition of thesis and antithesis in his life's work. Our assumption in the current text is the latter. Wulf Herzogenrath, a well-known Paik enthusiast, has put it this way:

Paik will beides: Ying und Yang, Verbindungen herstellen, kommunizieren, Hell und Dunkel sein — ohne zu einer grauen Soße zu werden, akustisch und visuell, witzig und aufrüttelnd, lustvoll und intelligent, laut und leise, monoton und bunt, Musik und bildende Kunst, zeitlich und zeitlos (Herzogenrath 1983: 6).

In the following pages a number of Paikian dialectic pairs will be presented by the two authors (one specialized in music, the other in the visual arts who has written the biographical text and sections on Zen as well as East/West). The most important ones focus upon Paik's love-hate relationship with technology and his very personal application of ideas derived from Zen Buddhism which will be seen to be relevant to technological questions. Furthermore another important subject will be discussed repeatedly: this concerns treatment of his (technological) object — for example the television or a cello — as the omnipresent subject of his artistic provocation.

This was of course not always the case. To begin with, the young Korean, born in Seoul in 1932, only studied piano in his youth. Later he moved with his family to Tokyo (by way of Hong Kong) where his interests for combining visual with audio arts were first discovered. In 1956 he completed his studies with an essay on Arnold Schönberg; Paik had not only learned traditional European composition techniques, but had



Nam June Paik: 'media zain', Hoofdstpostkantoor Amsterdam in het kader van *Century '87*
(©Jannes Linders)

become acquainted with avant-garde composition as well. After one year of post-graduate study in Munich, he participated in the famed 'Internationalen Ferienkursen für neue Musik' in Darmstadt where he met young, well-known composers including Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono and learned about experimental composition techniques. Paik continued his studies in Freiburg with Wolfgang Fortner. He wrote his composition *The Bauhaus of Music* there as a homage to the German cultural tradition of applying interdisciplinary artistic ideas and media (première: Tokyo 1957). Paik commutes between New York and Düsseldorf in recent years.

Paik not only sought connections with Western culture, but was open to Eastern thought as well. It was John Cage who prompted him to not lose touch with his roots and had him renew contact with the world of Zen Buddhist thought, as it was being propagated in the West in the 40's and 50's through the texts and lectures of D.T. Suzuki. Paik began to read Suzuki: Eastern philosophy expressed in a Western way. From then



Nam June Paik: 'Zen for Head'. Exhibition *Fluxus*, Wuppertal 1963



Nam June Paik: 'Good Morning Mr Orwell'. 1.1.1984

on Zen was referred to in several titles of his works, e.g. *Zen for Head* (1961).

The strength of his commitment to Cage can be demonstrated by the number of works dedicated to him as well as by Paik's participation in performances by Cage's pupils and in Fluxus manifestations. His contribution often exists of a mixture of the use of technical media with the performance of daily actions, using concrete sounds, where construction and destruction as composition technique were overtly applied and seriousness was combined with banality. Shock, annoyance and amusement were common public reactions. This approach does not only call for instruments to produce music, Paik places them 'on trial' as well, attacking them in his personal way, changing them, idolizing them but also turning them into banal culturally accepted givens; in this way he offers his viewers an experience of 'worldly images'.

Paik wants to create a culture for all senses (*Piano for all senses*, 1962) in which technical media are constantly used: robots, television monitors as added-instrument of a cello concerto, synthesizers, computers ... It can therefore be seen to be a programmatic gesture when he dedicated a video work to the Canadian cultural philosopher, Marshall McLuhan who had praised the media as an extension to the potential of the human body and its actions (see remarks on *McLuhan Caged* below).

Paik's works are often completed on several levels/in different version: he creates new works in which something is composed or performed or in which visual art as a process evolves, for example through his video tapes; he later reuses these tapes as part of a plastic object (e.g. a robot) and projects them on one or more monitors. In this way, Paik not only presents us with something that might be called a visual art or musical work, but also with something which could be called Zen.

Paik's love/hate relationship with technology

'I use technology in order to hate it more properly.'

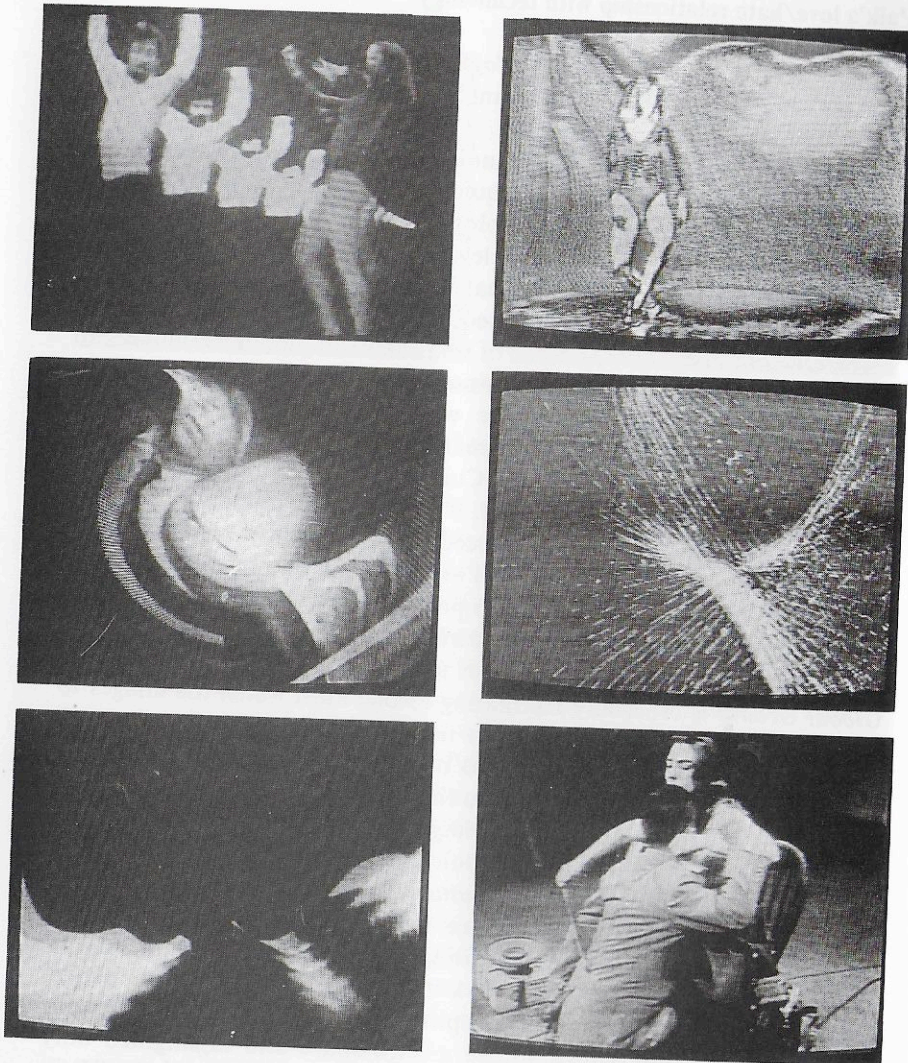
Nam June Paik (in Hanhardt: 104)

Video art is art of today's technology. Just think how young the medium in question is, and one can quickly conclude that video art is one of the most recent and most technology-based arts there is. Nam June Paik's video art uses and abuses television technology in almost equal portions making him a highly unusual figure in technological arts. Just a few examples of how he treats his medium can illustrate this.

His *Global Groove* (1973) is one of very few examples of a commission for a video art work made for television. The work is an homage to many of his artist colleagues and those who inspired him including the composer John Cage. It consists primarily of a rapidly moving collage of images, both realistic (e.g. Merce Cunningham dancing) and abstract (synthesized images). The structure, if there is one, is most difficult to follow. To the viewer the experienced random quality of the work is simultaneously a bow to the radical artists of the day as well as a blow under the belt to standard television programs. The work is therefore an anti-television TV program considering the fact that broadcasts are always programmatic in the sense of telling a story. On the other hand *Global Groove* is especially fascinating as one must *watch* the images to experience the extraordinary, be it unused potential of the television medium. 'Love-hate' here refers then both to the communications media (made for TV/anti-TV) as well as to the technology itself as for example can be seen in the many deranged images in this work.

If indeed the television is a technical object, what might Paik have intended with his *Rembrandt Automatic* (1963)? This work consists of an old television lying on the floor, 'face' (screen) down. Its technology (i.e. the TV) may be turned on to something; still there is no image to be seen on the screen. Just that naked box itself presents a monotone plastic image. Some viewers might be inspired to remember that Rembrandt often presented his figures within a dark space and highlighted only specific parts of their faces and bodies. With his own version hereof Paik seems to create a darkness from outside — of that (television) space — during which time the monitor is automatically producing its own images continuously, which no one is able to see.

It is exactly this negation of available images which lies at the base of Paik's statement: the images do not need to be seen to retain their meaning. Meaning is found in the rejection of the images. Something not seen belongs to what Suzuki calls 'true and permanent seeing'. Suzuki



Nam June Paik: 'Global Groove' 1973

tells of a dialogue between a monk and his master who says: 'We talk about illumination because the mirror is bright and its self-nature is illumination ...'. The monk asks: 'This being so, when is it attained?' and the answer is: 'Just see into nothingness'. The monk, wise as he was, objects: 'Even if it is nothingness, it is seeing something'. The final answer is: 'Seeing into nothingness — this is true seeing and eternal seeing' (Suzuki 1974: 30). The point here is that nature is to be seen and also in this case it is 'not able to be seen'. The 'emptying of images' has achieved a central place in Zen thought; this has been demonstrated in C.G. Jung's introduction to the Suzuki books (Suzuki 1977a: 19). One can see Paik's works simultaneously as a metaphor for such Zen anecdotes as well as something realized in our modern world.

McLuhan Caged (1967) is an example of Paik's use of 'video-feedback' where a magnet is placed in front of a video image causing odd if not downright unpleasant distortion¹. Is a new aesthetic being created in this

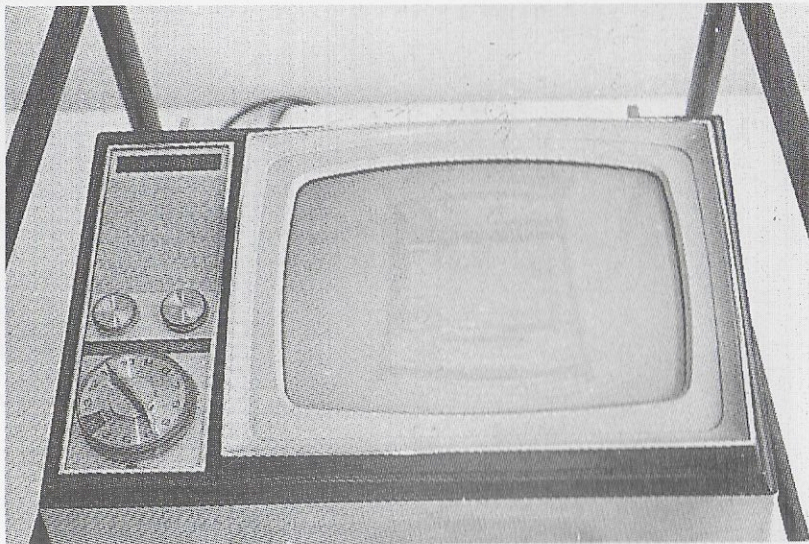


Nam June Paik: 'Rembrandt Automatic', 1963. Replica 1976

case or is consumer television figuratively being placed on its side? As was the case of the *Rembrandt Automatic*, Paik's technology is used and abused here in equal proportions.

Even in his sound works, this love/hate — use/misuse relationship can be found. For example in the *Random access* installation ('Exposition of Music' — 1963) tapes of all sorts of music were hung on the wall of the Gallerie Parnaß in Wuppertal. The viewers — that is, listeners — were allowed to create their own 'Do it yourself' compositions by passing tape heads along any parts of any tapes they chose. The work was indeterminate in the sense that no one knew what was on any given tape fragment. Paik's statement in this work concerning tape as media and tape recordings needs no further commentary².

Nam June Paik has been known to construct 'anti-machine machines'. He considers his television works to be so, but examples also include his well-known *Robot K-456* (1964)³, a comical robot made up of electronic components in various states of disrepair as well as his *TV-Chair* (1974). In the latter case the cushion has been removed from the chair. Just underneath where the cushion should have been a television has been placed facing upwards. Anyone who has ever been to an American bus or train station knows about their pay tv-chairs with a small television attached so that no quiz show or soap opera be missed while waiting for



Nam June Paik: 'TV Chair 1974'. Coll. Allan Kaprow and Rachel Vaughan, San Diego, California

departure. But Paik's chair is not to be sat upon. Is its television not to be watched? In both of these cases the omnipresence of technology is indeed made ridiculous — in the first case by creating an unaesthetic, most likely useless robot made of recycled parts from machines found in every home; in the latter case our dependence upon technology, specifically the television is thrown back at us in a most ironic manner.

Applying his own particular interpretation of thesis and antithesis in his love/hate relationship with technology, Paik has separated himself from virtually everyone else involved in the technological arts of our time. He proposes no synthesis, but instead asks sharp critical questions by having us look at this technology through his own looking-glass and realize how much creative potential is not being sufficiently used as well as how much nonsense this technology provides us with as part of our daily diets.

Someday artists will work with capacitors, resistors & semi-conductors as they work today with brushes, violins & junk. (Nam June Paik in Decker: 145)

In this quotation one can see that the question of 'high vs. low technology' is yet another Paikian pair. Capacitors, resistors & semi-conductors can be used to make sophisticated instruments and — to put it quite frankly — junk. Paint brushes and violins represent old high-tech art; today high-tech can be found in most arts and genres thereof. It can even be discovered in some of Nam June Paik's works. Still Paik constantly makes a statement against perpetual renewal by recycling old televisions, radios and so on. This combination of the old and new, the expensive (television studio use) with the cheap (broken down televisions taken from garbage dumps) is a thesis/antithesis pair which has always been at the heart of his reputation.

Instruments: traditional and otherwise

Continuing along the above-mentioned line of use-abuse, it was noted in a recent discussion of contemporary variants of Dada-music (Landy 1988) that Paik's *Violin with String* ('Violin to be dragged on the street' 1961-1975) — where the composer takes his violin for a walk as if it were a dog — is one of the most dada-influenced works of recent decades. The sacredness of the instrument is really put to the test here, similarly perhaps to a television's facing the floor. It is clear that in such works the cultural values of the art genre and its objects/instruments are being placed on trial. In this sense it is again the technological object that is at the focus of many of Paik's works⁴.



Nam June Paik: 'Clavier intégral 1958-1963' (assemblage), Museum moderner Kunst, Wien.

Photo: Manfred Montwé, Düsseldorf

Turning now to the cello, a number of Paik/Charlotte Moorman collaborations further illustrate this tendency. In *Peace Sonata* (1966) Charlotte Moorman crawls along the ground with her cello on her back⁵. The interpretation of what is experienced is left up to the viewer/listener. Furthermore the various 'TV-bra's' — yes, the 'topless piece', 'TV-glasses', and 'TV-beds' for the Moorman cello performances have created equal amounts of controversy in musical as well as video circles. Charlotte Moorman has reminded us with some irony that the TV-cello is perhaps the first cello development since 1600 (in Herzogenrath 1983: 60). In one version, Moorman has been known to play wearing an empty old-fashioned radio on her shoulders (i.e. her head is inside the empty radio). As above the values associated with the cello, the woman and the radio are all turned on their sides in these works. Again questions are posed by Paik for which he offers nothing resembling an answer. These works of art are at the same time works of anti-art as well as strong statements of social criticism. His East/West pair (see below) allows him to pose much questions without offering 'enlightenment'. This is derived from an Eastern way of thinking. But this avoidance of proposing

solutions is also due to the fact that most of these social questions can and will never be answered.

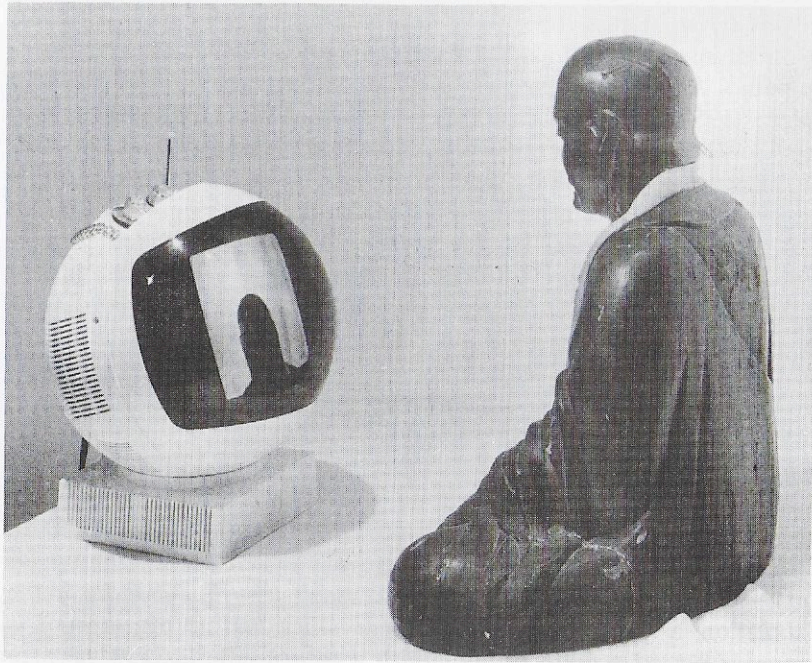
A third instrument which has played a significant role in Paik's work is the piano. Another well-known homage to John Cage is Paik's *Klavier intégral* (1958/63). In this case Paikian versions of Cage's prepared radio were constructed. Some of the Paik pianos looked like they were playfully treated with an ax. Others were 'decorated' with all sorts of objects ranging from dolls to metal buzzers and the like. Later in another piano work *Kamera Klavier* (1976), the keys are 'played' by a video camera. Perhaps this is Paik's most autobiographical work. His interest in Zen (see below) makes this silent performance a 'spiritual' one according to the composer. His ultimate piano performance is of course the one in which this instrument was burned. The sounds produced are said to be the interpretation of the score. Paik's dialectics of the piano need not be elaborated here.

In the above-mentioned 'Exposition of Music' 'objets sonores' including the following 'instruments' were hung from the ceiling: keys, tin cans, wooden sandals, etc., etc. Paik called the work involved *Zen for Wind* — inside the gallery there of course wasn't any. Furthermore, in the 'Exposition' a record player was present which had no tone-arm. The composer placed a dildo in his mouth with a needle hanging perpendicularly to be placed onto one of a number of records turning simultaneously approximately 12 cm. above each other; his teeth resonated the transferred sounds from the recordings. Again it is obvious that the (technical) object = the subject in such works. Here the artist poses the question of what an instrument is. As the cello is turned into an *objet d'art* in most unusual manners, a key or a tin can becomes an *objet de musique* and a dildo becomes an object of utility, other than the one originally intended. This is the Cageian vision *pur sang* that music is everywhere and can be made with any object (including a television monitor, of course). But, on the other hand, the Eastern enigmatic aspects cannot be ignored — didn't that video-piano work have no sound?

All these works demonstrate the same phenomenon — Paik's personal (mis)treatment of anything one takes for granted. In our technological age this means his ridiculing can involve almost everything we deal with (use, consume, read, etc.) in our daily lives.

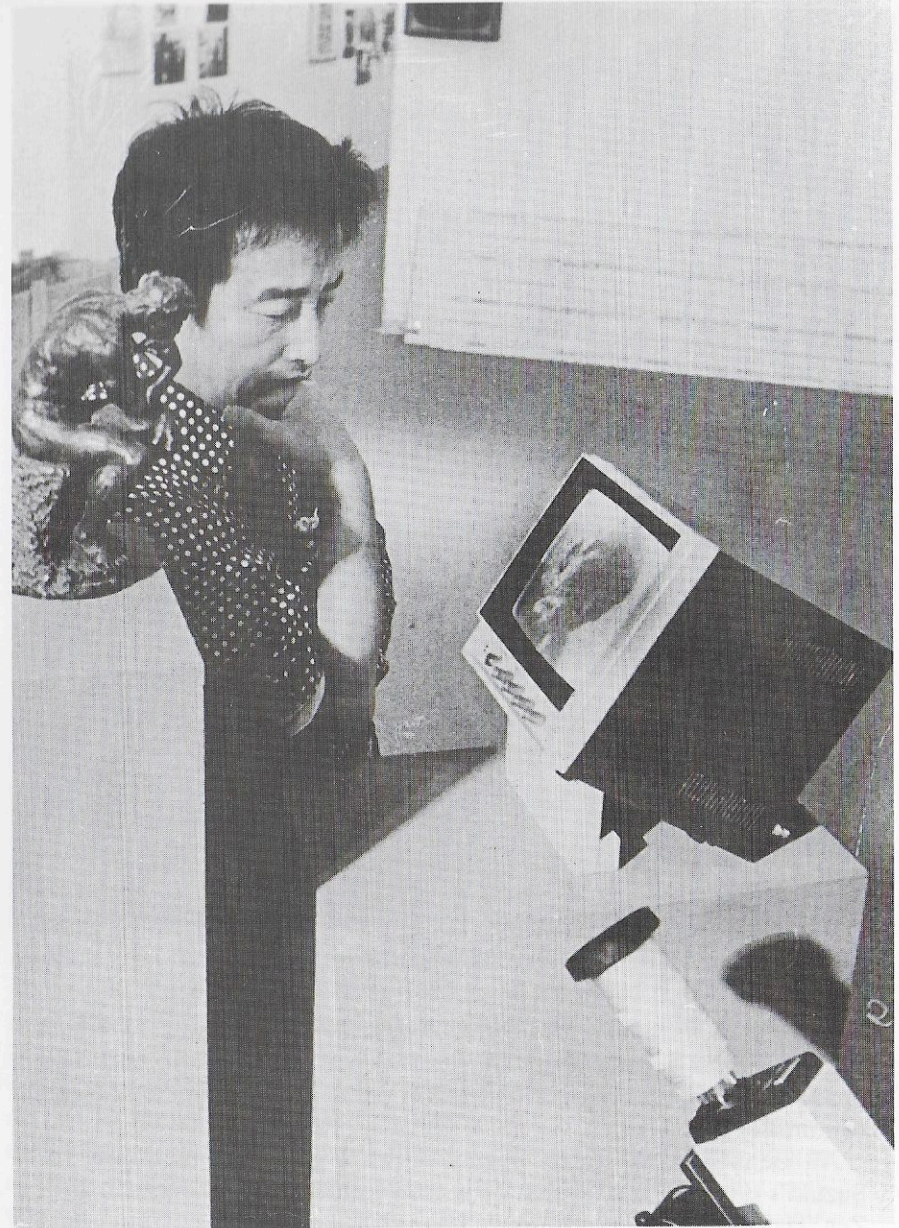
Zen

But all these works also demonstrate Paik's interest in Zen as well. 'Zen

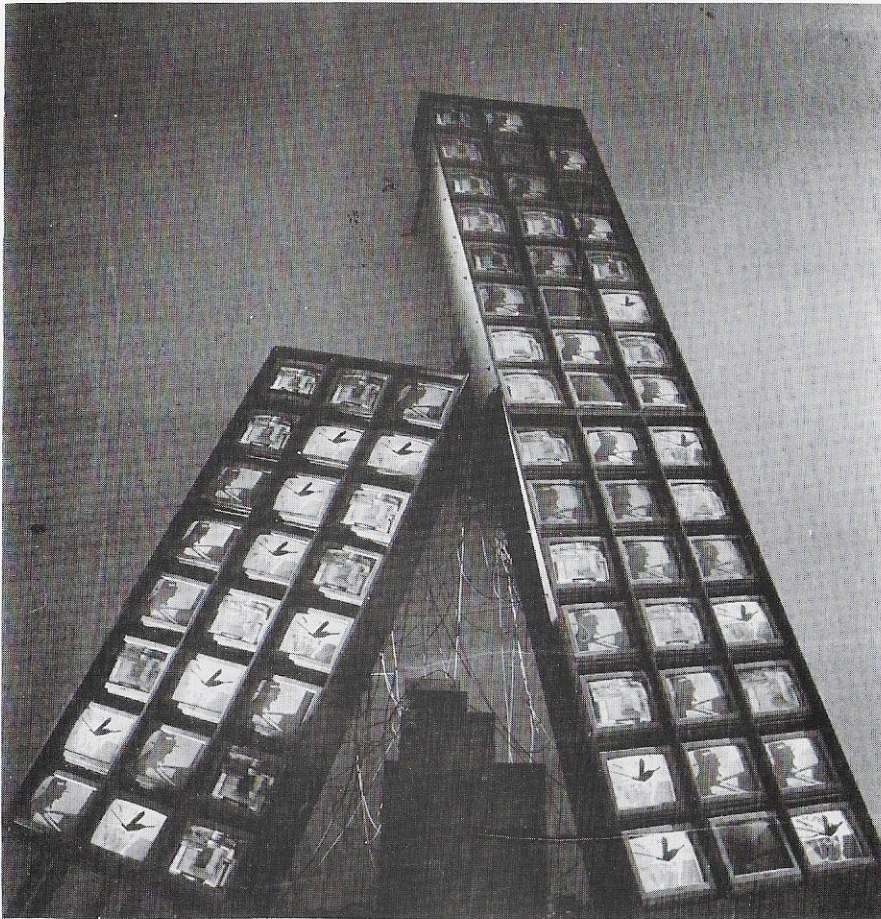


Nam June Paik: 'TV-Buddha 1974'

never explains, but indicates', Suzuki wrote (1975: 20). Using abstract notions, one can not approach a description of the experience of the simultaneity of being and consciousness. Zen provides the potential of experiencing something and the ability to ponder about it at the same time. Pure meditation does not suffice; one has to be directly involved in whatever is being considered. In this way Paik's *TV-Buddha* (1974; collection of the Stedelijk Museum) is not only an intuitive example of what Zen might be; the Buddha is a representation, a model of thought; in contrast his image in the monitor is 'alive': it is continually being 'generated' through the camera. The work represents the flow of life. In another case Paik replaced the Buddha statue with Rodin's 'Thinker' (and posed, himself, alongside this work as another 'thinker' for photographers as well). Again the act of thinking is not the decisive factor in this case, but instead the image of the thinker in the monitor, which continually must be fed and therefore is 'alive' and 'is'. In these two works a circuit is 'closed' containing two entities, the (dead) image and (living) copy of the image. In another work these two entities come



Nam June Paik: 'Portrait of the artist'. Exhibition: Werke 1946-1976, Musik — Fluxus — Video. Kölnischer Kunstverein 1977



Nam June Paik: 'Man 1990'.
Photo: Studio Azzurro

together in the form of a white line (*Zen for TV* — 1963 and 1975) which really achieves a congruence between silence and life: the television produces no moving images and still there is a white middle line-axis continually generated.

Although Paik has rarely openly shown a great deal of respect for Suzuki's essays, it is clear that he is quite influenced by the teachings of Zen. He confessed:



Nam June Paik: 'Zen for Nose', 1963. Fluxus/ Wuppertal, März 1963

Jedenfalls, Zen besteht aus zwei Negationen.

Die erste Negation:

Das Absolute IST das Relative.

Die zweite Negation:

Das Relative IST das Absolute. (Herzogenrath 1977: 91)

This congruence of paradoxes is a Zen reflection on existence. It is also relevant to the viewers of Paik's video tapes: full of color and totally unstable, in constant construction and deconstruction (where does the one begin, the other take over?). Nothing is preserved in one's perception; it is finally this continual movement of television images, without beginning, climax or end — ad infinitum — that one perceives. The viewer is offered a chance to interpret such a contradictory experience as an ode to existence. It is therefore untrue that, when a viewer is unable mentally to follow the flow of images, Paik refused to want him to actively perceive them. Zen teachings tell us that one can not conveniently carry home a perception, a meaning, as a permanent souvenir. Suzuki claims: 'The discipline of Zen consists in opening the mental eye in order to look into the very reason of existence' (1977a: 40). When Paik

pursues this same goal with the help of his creations, his art enters the realm of Zen.

A programmatic example here is a work of his which was presented in 1990 at the latest largescale Fluxus exhibition in the Venice Biennial entitled *Ubi Fluxus — ibi Motus 1990-1962*: instead of a robot or even a robot family, he built a man out of televisions (see illustration in *Cat. Ubi Fluxus — ibi Motus*: 249). Of course it was not a typical human figure with two legs and two arms that Paik built, but instead the symbol for a man in a Chinese/Japanese character, the long slanting stroke, which leans on a smaller one and thus looks like a walking person as seen from the side. Paik's person is built from TV-images, which the viewer cannot grab during the rapid passing of their continual multiplicity.

'Zen, however, makes or gives no judgments', Suzuki wrote, 'It takes things as they are' (Suzuki 1977b: 14). At another point he adds: 'Zen wishes to storm this citadel of topsy-turvydom and to show that we live psychologically or biologically and not logically' (1977a: 64).

Characteristic for Paik is also the language of the Zen masters, who attempt to avoid abstract notions and general phrases of principle but instead explain through example, e.g. that there exists a Zen for the nose (1977b: 153). Paik dedicated a work to this thought in 1963: *Zen for Nose* (Herzogenrath 1983: 37). 'Der Abspieler ist der Hörer' where 'der Tonabnehmer geht direkt auf den menschlichen Organismus über', as soon as a nose touches a hanging object. What is hidden behind the comic title can be penetrated by a good Zen student. For him humor becomes something to be taken seriously. But then again it is also true that those knowledgeable of Zen will also be drawn closer to the work through its humor.

(Humor) hat überall Zutritt und untergräbt die Grenzen von innen heraus. Er jagt nicht einer unerreichbaren Freiheit nach, aber er ist eine wirkliche Freiheitsbewegung. Humor verspricht uns keine Befreiung, im Gegenteil: er warnt uns vor der Unerreichbarkeit einer globalen Befreiung, denn er erinnert uns an die Gegenwart eines Gesetzes, dem zu gehorchen wir eigentlich keinen Grund haben. Auf diese Weise unterminiert er das Gesetz ...

These words from Umberto Eco were not aimed at Paik, but do seem to fit him well (Eco, 1984: 8). Humor is therefore a strategy permitting one to directly experience the existence of this congruence of paradoxes.

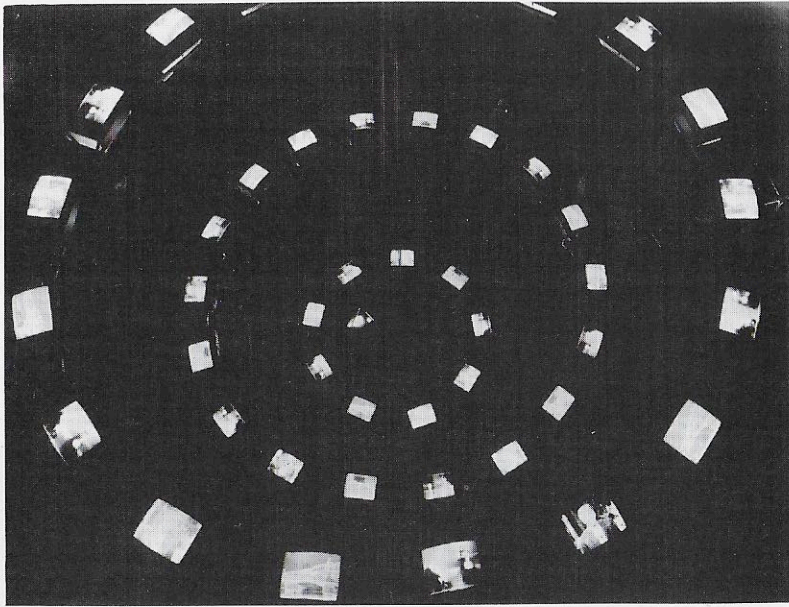
(Im)materiality

An artist who is able to create works which last twice one second (e.g. his *A painting which lasts only 2 x 1 seconds in a hour* — film: 1965) or brief

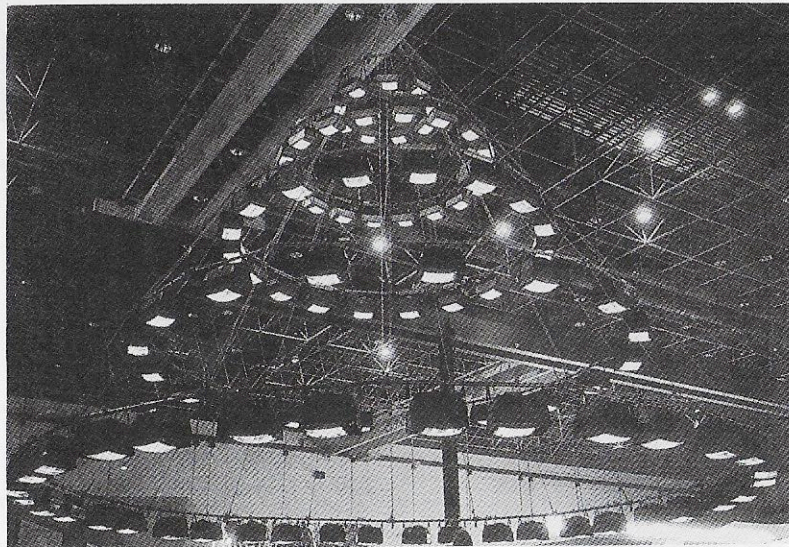


George Maciunas performing Paik's *One for Violin Solo* at a "Fluxus Concert," New York, April-11, 1964, before Paik's arrival in the United States in June. Photos by Peter Moore.

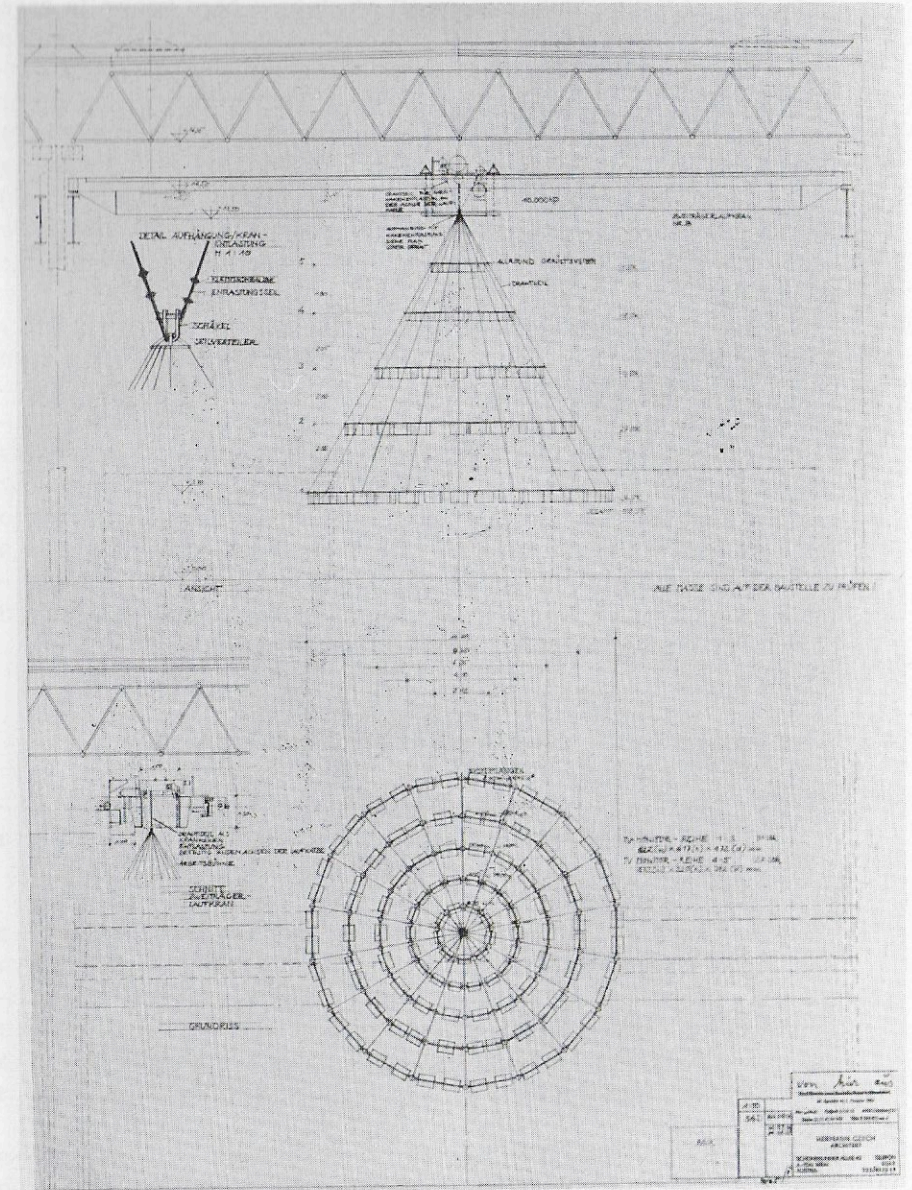
Nam June Paik: 'One for Violin Solo'. Performed by George Maciunas, New York 11.4.1964



Nam June Paik: 'TV-Trichter' 1984. Project for the exhibition 'Von hier aus'. Messehalle, Düsseldorf 1984



Nam June Paik: 'TV-Trichter' 1984. Project for the exhibition 'Von hier aus'. Messehalle, Düsseldorf 1984



Nam June Paik: 'TV-Trichter' 1984. Project for the exhibition 'Von hier aus'. Messehalle, Düsseldorf 1984

mini-actions lasting 'only a moment' which have been known to have been placed almost anonymously at one or two moments during a piece of a greater length of another artist (e.g. during evening-long performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*), is one — within our consumer society — who is not particularly obsessed with materialist problems. Much of Paik's art is highly ephemeral. In fact in criticizing John Cage, Paik has been known to say that it is amazing that he (Cage) has ever produced tapes at all and furthermore that Cage should throw away anything and everything dealing with his work before his death (see Hanhardt: 73).

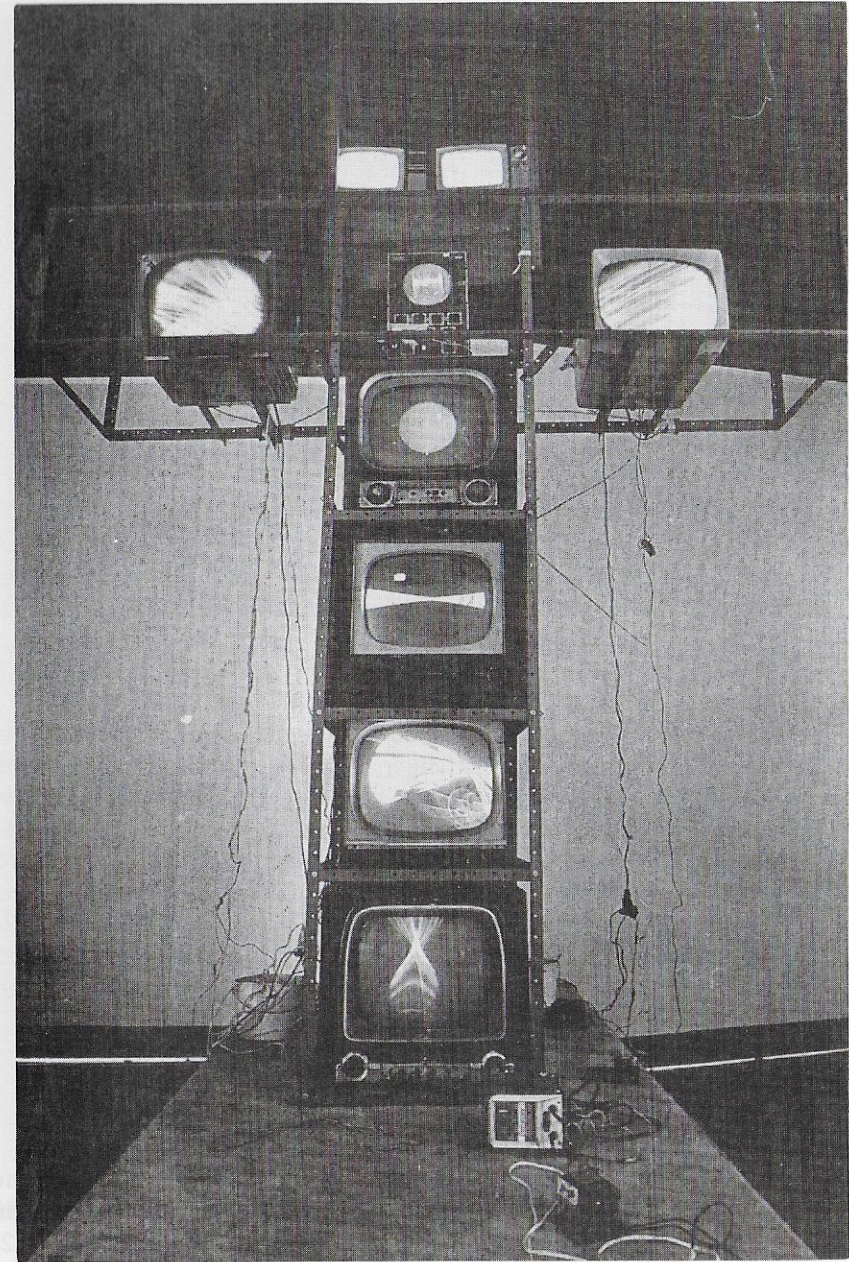
It can therefore easily be concluded that Paik's sense of (im)materiality is at the same time a sort of negation of consumerism — no one goes to the movies to see twice one second placed within an hour of emptiness — as well as an accentuation on immateriality implying an anti-technological stance. Yet video is, as stated, a very expensive art. Therefore its high-tech basis as well as video art's elite/marginal position within our culture are both *en question*. Paik suggests here a Zen-like approach to enlightenment by performing extremely ephemeral actions which in a sense negate the arts they belong to. But is this truly negation? Or is it — as is likely the case — a Paikian manner of questioning our cultural habits concerning both materialism and technology?

Our consumer society and our media's lack of criticism

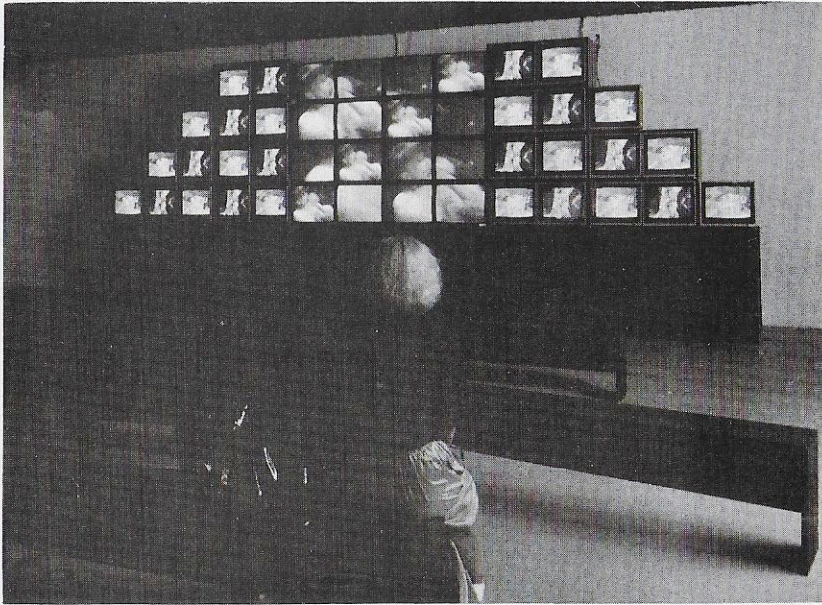
Das Fernsehen hat uns ein leben lang attacktiert – jetzt schlagen wir zurück. (Nam June Paik in Herzogenrath 1983: 79)

Returning to our Western society for the moment, many aspects of a number of Paik's works seem to hover between what in German is known as E-Kunst and U-Kunst (serious 'Ernst' art and entertainment 'Unterhaltung' or popular art). Paik believes today's modern music and video art to be too marginal. Picasso and Dali reached the masses and he can as well. Therefore the combination of the popular with the experimental is an obvious one.

But there is a snag. The 'popular' parts of Paik's pieces are always taken out of context. Popular music fragments in his video works are no more or less important than abstract images or homages to experimental artists. It simply boils down to available materials. In this sense we come to a point we've reached on several occasions in this text, namely that it is the medium that is being treated more than that a given work consists of



Nam June Paik: 'TV Cross 1966-76'. Exhibition Galleria Bonino, New York 1968
Photo: Peter Moore, New York

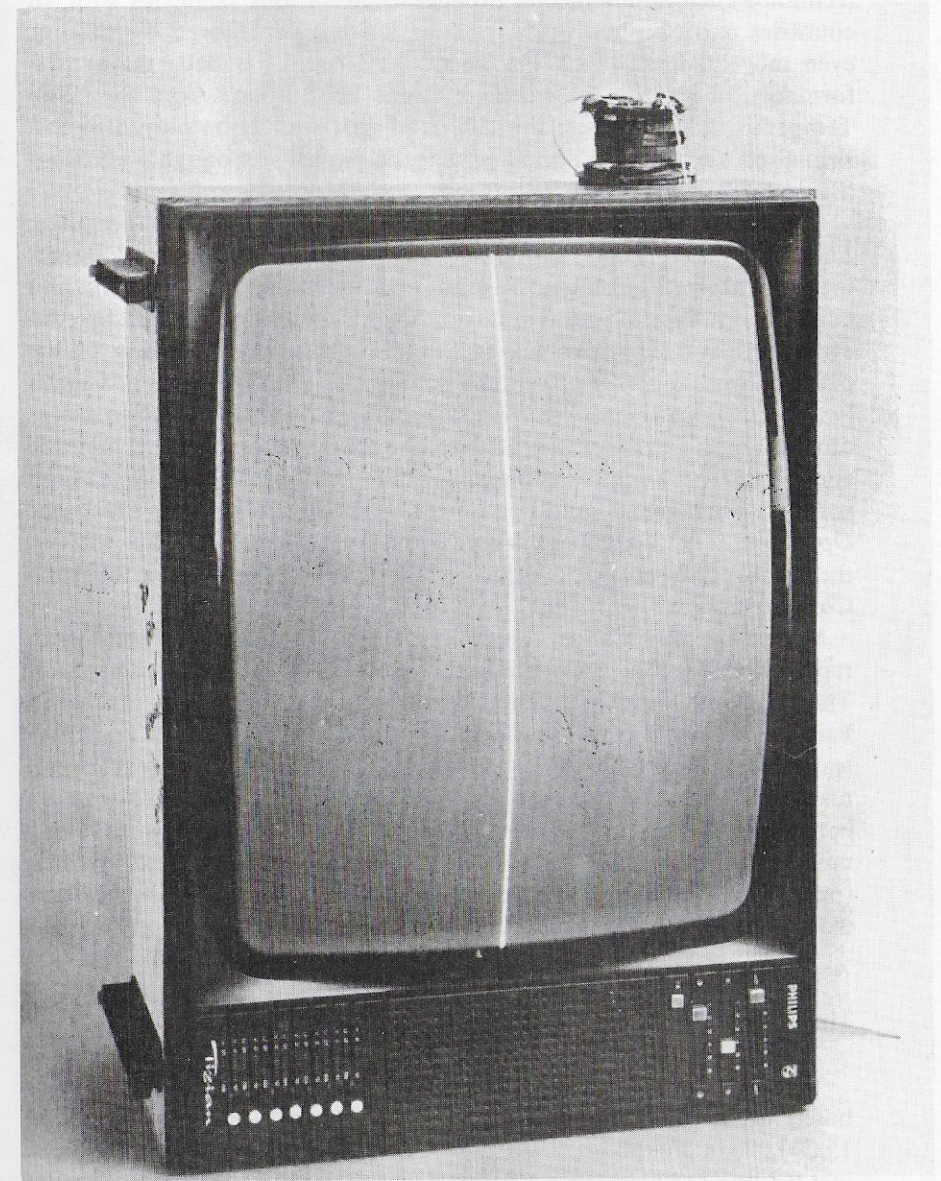


Nam June Paik: 'Beuys/ Voice' 1987

any narrative or programmatic foundation. Paik's story is no story. His Zen-influenced work is neither to be found good nor bad. In Zen there is no criticism, there is experience and discovery. In Western society there is too little criticism, there is just passive acceptance and general consumption as far as Paik is concerned. His reaction to the consumer society is to create anti-consumer art-works (e.g. the abused pop number in his video clips *avant la lettre* and the *TV-Chair* mentioned above). That Paik is constantly criticizing his media can best be recognized by those who are willing and able to 'read' his works between the television's horizontal lines.

Movement (space) and the concept of danger

Other than the video tapes for television and his museum works, the locals of Nam June Paik's performances has often been most unusual. He has written a *Sinfonie for 20 Rooms* (1961), a *Moving Theater No. 1* (1962) to be performed, unannounced on the street. As a reaction to the propagandists of the global village, Paik has been known to use satellite



Nam June Paik: 'Zen for TV' 1963/1975. Coll. Wolfgang Hahn, Köln

technology for simultaneous broadcasts in various countries with all countries participating live (e.g. *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* — 1984) or even more radically Paik has written a piece for a deux mains performance of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C Major from the 'Well Tempered Clavier' where the left hand part was to be played in San Francisco and the right hand part to be played in Shanghai (1963 — 'Kalender Pop, Do it yourself-answers to LaMonte Young').

Danger entered Paik's work around the time of his performance piece, *Etude für Piano (Forte)* (1960). During its première at Mary Bauermeister's atelier in Cologne, Paik entered the audience at one point and cut-off John Cage's tie and a part of his shirt with a pair of scissors. An even more radical experience is the above-mentioned burning of the piano as well as his *One for Violin (solo)* (1962) during which a violin is (very) slowly lowered by its 'performer' and finally battered to pieces during a brief final moment. Silence, the total lack of spatial experience and the final — it works but one single time — shock of the work takes all sorts of givens out of traditional art and instruments. In his *Electronic Opera Nr. 2* (1970) another burning piano is shown on video tape without the appropriate sound. Instead ironically Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto is heard.

Movement and danger obviously form an odd pair. They both represent departures from standard concert/video performance practice. The point is that the unexpected can happen anywhere at any time when Paik is choreographing an event. The fact that he has been known to leave events unannounced implies that some (most?) spectators do not really know what is happening and why and furthermore many who are conditioned to piles of invitations are most likely to feel awful having missed something. In this pair technology plays but an indirect role (perhaps Zen is more important here); the exclusion of the pair however would have made this list incomplete.

Time

Time has been called the 'fourth dimension' for years. Paik is a time-based artist. When he notes that '15 seconds of electronic time = 15,000,000,000 nanoseconds' (1969), he's not saying anything new, but just tickling our awareness. Similarly, concerning his installation *Hydra-buddha* (1985) he refers to small images coming from its two monitors as consisting of 7,500,000,000 bits/second — a smashing underlining of computer technology (and waste!).

Paik speaks of applying input/output time (neither being clock time) in



Nam June Paik: 'TV-Chair' 1974 in collaboration with Ray Johnson

his works. He manipulates them in both his (un)structured music and video tape works (including aleatoric ones) through excess repetitions, nonsense collages or complete subjective segmentation (which in turn seems to offer no structural hold to the viewer/listener).

It has been said that Paik is able to make time visible. And indeed he is correct in doing so, for yet something else we take for granted in life is the time dimension and the perception thereof. We speak gladly of timeless events, but what are they? We speak of events taking too long. A Buddhist reply might be: No, they were much too short. Through turning time on its side like his televisions, Paik treats this dimension in a similar critical fashion as the objects, themselves.

On my recent trip to Tokyo I bought dozens of books about time by oriental and occidental thinkers. On my return to New York, I found that I have no time to read them. (Nam June Paik 1975: in Herzogenrath 1983: 13)

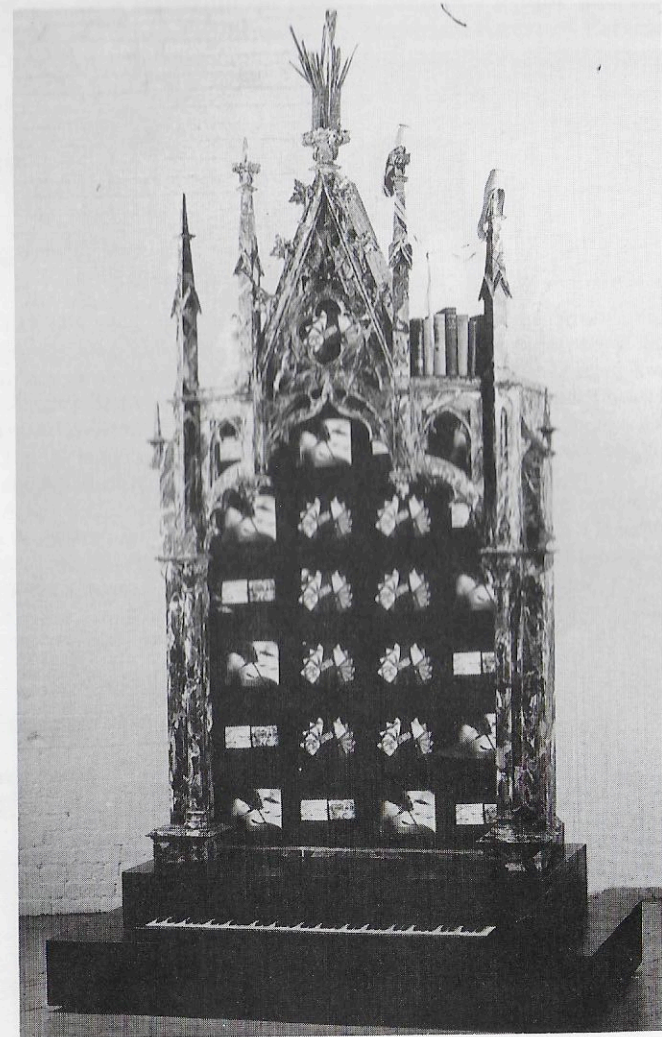
East meets west?

As Zen is not a discipline which knows a geographical limitation, it can be just as vital to Western life. Why should we see a contradiction between Christian religions and Zen? Paik has offered his viewers several examples which seem to acknowledge their combination. In 1966 he built a *TV Cross* for three video tapes which he played on the six screens. The relative and the absolute of existence was presented in two different ways here: through the symbol of the cross as well as in the flow of images.

Paik employed a Christian symbol again for the large exhibition 'Von hier aus' (1985) in the Düsseldorf Messehalle. In the middle of the hall a large chandelier was hung, around which monitors were fixed in concentric circles, sending their quickly moving images downward. In a cathedral such a chandelier would suggest Jerusalem in heaven, which illustrates the relativity of life and announces the light of the heavenly paradise. Paik seems to have united the absolute with the relative in this symbol of Jerusalem in heaven.

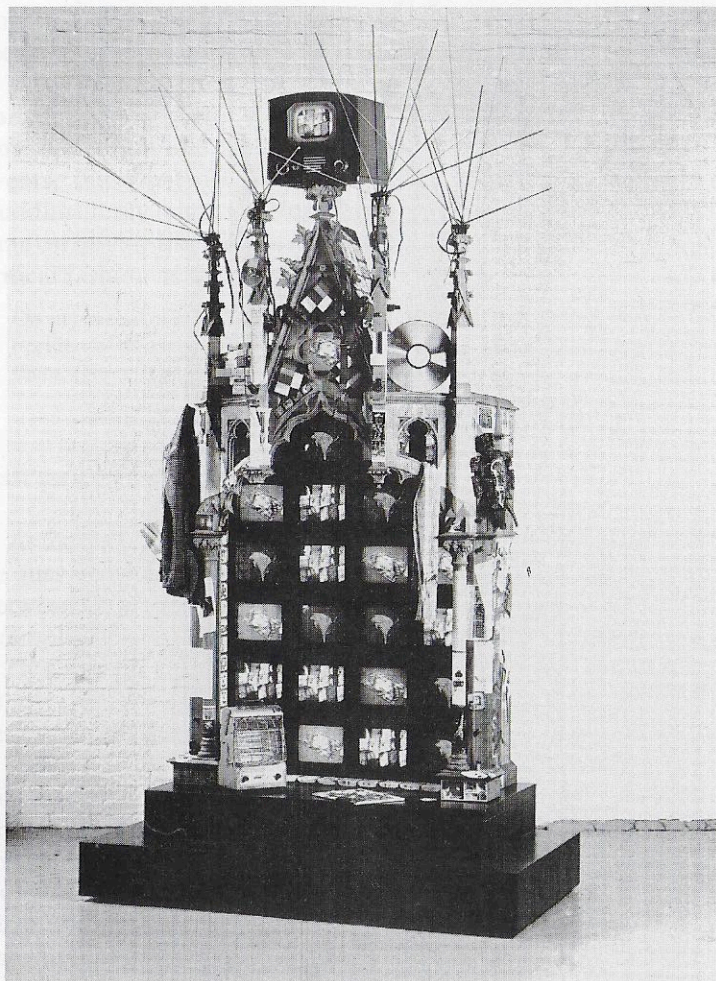
The name *Capella* (1990) for an automobile tire which is surrounded by a wreath of little (portable) Portopack-monitors, suggests a Christian symbolism. The plastic structure resembles the ground plan of a church with a chapel wreath, where not the usual paintings of God's works are shown, but instead images of the congruence of the absolute with the relative as experienced through viewing Paik's video tapes (as seen at the Cologne Kunstmarkt 1990).

Finally he is planning a 13-part video-sculpture with the title *My Faust*



Nam June Paik: "My-Faust" 1989-91 ("Autobiography")

(1989-1991), which will be first seen in the Kunsthau in Zurich in the late summer of 1991. Each part will be built out of a pile of monitors resembling gothic altar frames. Each 'altar' is dedicated to a separate theme: ecology, economy, health, etc. Faust wanted to 'consume' (understand) worldly wisdom. Yet — after the flow of images — the final



Nam June Paik: "My-Faust" 1989-91 ("Communications")

judgment may be taken from Goethe's Faust: 'zu wissen daß wir nichts wissen können'.

But who is Faust here? Is Paik a video-Faust, or does he perhaps want the viewer to play this role? Zen turns technology into its own paradox.

Might this be a reflection on greater questions people generally tend to avoid? We've wandered through an empirical forest of Paikian dialectic pairs in which technology and Zen-mindedness are quite present. And yet we have only been able to look at a few of the forest's many trees. As Nam June Paik has practiced for years, we leave the final synthesis to the reader.

Notes

1. This is a work with images of, among others, Richard Nixon's face distorted. Perhaps this technique has been derived from sound amplification feedback in a similar way as his video synthesizer was derived from electronic music's variety.

2. Similarly in the 1969 New York Avant Garde Festival, Paik's work consisted of his silently unwinding a (previously recorded?) computer tape.

3. The 'K' signifies, by the way, Köchel Verzeichnis Number referring to the Mozart opus classification system.

4. A second, more recent example along these lines is Paik's *Symphonie No. 6* for string orchestra and one bow to be passed among the players (1981) written at a time in which one thought that Paik had totally given up music. The object = the subject is again most apropos.

5. This is also known as *Military Piece*; in *Guadalcanal Requiem*, a video tape 1977/79, this piece and the violin one are combined.

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