

# The Zen Master of Video



Now hailed as the father of video art, Nam June Paik remains an irreverent and rigorously experimental artist.

by Bruce Kurtz

Like a child mesmerized by the flickering light, an eighteenth-century bronze Japanese Buddha sits cross-legged in front of a globe-shaped television set, meditating on its own "live" and continuously broadcast image. The piece, Nam June Paik's *T.V. Buddha*, is at once humorous and visionary. The seated figure contemplates television's omnipotent, invisible electronic impulses, making explicit the combina-

tion of Eastern mysticism and Western technology that is at the heart of Paik's pioneering video art.

Now fifty years old, Paik has devised musical compositions in which pianos are overturned or disemboweled, performances in which members of the audience are lathered in shampoo, videotapes that blend Korean drum music, American Indian chants, and Japanese television commercials, and sculptures made from television receivers. His iconoclastic work over the past

thirty years has helped to change the character of contemporary music and advanced visual art and to transform television from popular entertainment into avant-garde art.

Paik was born in Seoul, Korea in 1932 and was educated in Tokyo and Germany, where he went to study musical composition in the late 1950s. At the University of Munich and the Conservatory in Freiburg, he immersed himself in twentieth-century music, especially electronic composi-

tions. In 1958, he met American composer John Cage; the encounter, Paik says, was a turning point in his life.

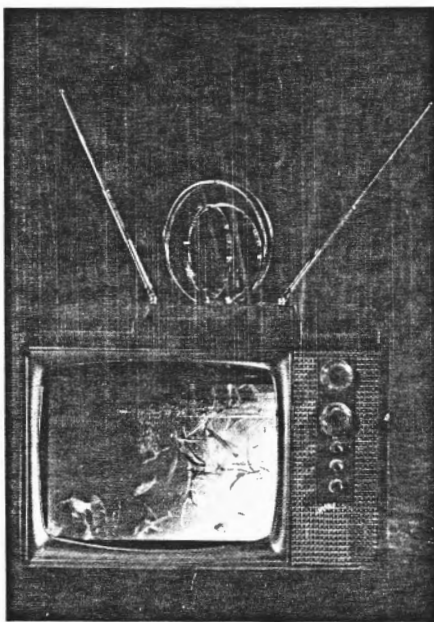
Both Paik and Cage had noticed that audiences at electronic-music concerts invariably lost interest; both sought to make their musical works more visually stimulating. The auditory, tactile, and visual possibilities of video, therefore, had a special appeal for Paik. At the same time, his training as a composer enabled him to manipulate video's time dimension; it was this aspect of the medium that baffled many beginning video artists, who had been trained in the static arts of painting and sculpture.

As soon as used television sets became available in Germany, around 1960, Paik began to experiment with them, altering their circuits to create images that video engineers would have considered "disturbances." In 1963, Paik showed thirteen of his altered televisions at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, in what was the first exhibition anywhere of television or video art.

From the beginning, Paik understood the difference between television and film. "Film is chemicals, T.V. is electronics," he explained. His altered television receivers manipulated electronics, not just images. "Someday," he said in a *New Yorker* profile by Calvin Tompkins in 1975, "artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins, and junk."

Paik developed his own often scientifically unorthodox techniques of controlling and interacting with the television image in Tokyo in 1963-64, when he worked with Hideo Uchida, president of Uchida Radio Research Institute, and the brilliant electronics engineer Shuya Abe. In 1965, having moved to New York, Paik bought the first portable videotape recorder available in the city. Most artists' video of the early 1960s was intended as an antidote to commercial television; often the tapes were unedited or abstract in form and content. Paik's work was different. He went directly to the electronic heart of the medium and explored in four directions: videotronic distortions of the received signal, synaesthetic videotapes, closed-circuit environments, and sculpture pieces.

The moment was right for Paik's experiments. When he arrived in New York, he was already involved with Fluxus. In the city he joined the most adventurous artists who were breaking down the boundaries between visual



*Opposite: Philosophy, wit, and technology blend in such works as T.V. Buddha, a closed-circuit video installation with which the artist was photographed in 1981. With its continuously transmitted image of an inanimate art object, the piece demonstrates the seriousness of Paik's exploration of the time dimensions of his medium. Above: Playing off everyday reality against television's reality, Paik's 1979 Fish T.V. turns a monitor into a bowl for real fish. Trained as a composer, Paik showed his first video piece in 1963.* PHOTOGRAPHS: ERIC KROLL

art, music, dance, and theater, manipulating duration and sequence and trying to stimulate active participation by spectators. Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, Allan Kaprow, Yvonne Rainer, and John Cage presented performances at Judson Hall in Greenwich Village, a focal point for New York City's avant-garde in the mid-1960s.

It was at Judson Hall that Paik's *Variations on a Theme by Saint-Saëns*, a characteristic early performance piece,

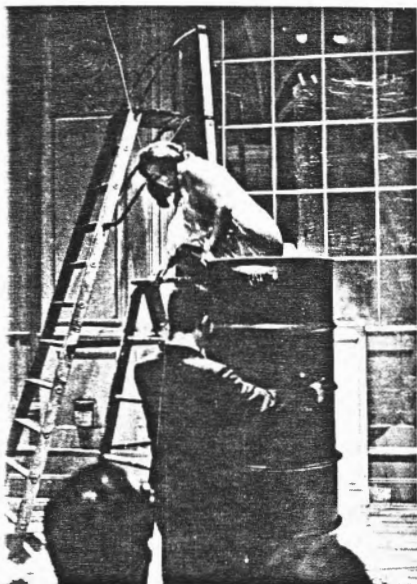
premiered as part of the third Avant-garde Festival in 1965. Charlotte Moorman, founder of the festival and then a cellist with the American Symphony Orchestra, played the first half of Saint-Saëns's *The Swan* on her cello, then submerged herself in an oil drum filled with water. Dripping wet, she continued the recital, playing the second half of the piece better—or so Paik says—because she is a Scorpio, a water sign. (Moorman has also performed this composition clad either in an evening gown or in a clear plastic sheet.)

Outrageous though it was—and is—Paik's *Variations* is a serious work. Sounds, particularly the sounds of American popular music in the 1960s, bathe the listener in sonic waves, sometimes even making his body vibrate. There is no single "point of hearing." Thus, Paik's *Variations* is a metaphor for auditory experience. And it is both sexy ("Sex has been a main theme in art and literature," says Paik. "Why not in music?") and funny.

The use of irreverent humor to embody complex meaning is like a Zen master's challenge and is typical of Paik's art in all its forms. For instance, in *T.V. Bra for Living Sculpture*, first performed in 1969, Moorman plays her cello while wearing two tiny plastic-encased television sets as a bra; each of the receivers shows live images of her performance, modulated by the changing sounds of the cello. A play on the cliché "boob tube," *T.V. Bra* also calls to mind the intimacy and tactility of America's nourishing font and electronic baby-sitter, the television.

Meanwhile, Paik was pioneering on another front. By 1970, he and Abe had built a videosynthesizer, an electronic device for manipulating color television's millions of phosphor dots even without a camera or a prerecorded image. The resulting images are purely electronic, originating within the circuitry rather than in the artist's imagination. This harnessing of random images was an important step in Paik's continuing and conscious attempt to remove his ego from his art.

The Paik-Abe videosynthesizer was not necessarily the first or only such device, but it was the first used on broadcast television. In the summer of 1970, Boston's WGBH broadcast *Video*



**Top:** Charlotte Moorman, Paik's stalwart collaborator, climbs into a vat of water as part of a performance of *Variations on a Theme by Saint-Saëns* after having played half of Saint-Saëns's *The Swan* on her cello. The piece was initially staged at Judson Hall in 1965, shortly after Paik had moved to New York. **Center:** Paik's famous T.V. Bra for *Living Sculpture*, which Moorman first performed in 1969, is a sly metaphor for the "boob tube," America's electronic nursemaid. **Bottom:** In a 1971 presentation of *Concerto for T.V. Cello*, Moorman—wearing electronically altered sunglasses—plays an instrument composed of television sets, changing the images on the screens through the action of her bow. PHOTOGRAPHS: PETER MOORE



*Commune*, a four-hour live program of images from the Paik-Abe synthesizer (manipulated by Paik, director David Atwood, studio workers, and strangers invited in off the street) accompanied by the entire musical output of the Beatles.

The following year, the Boston Symphony commissioned Paik to produce a videotape to accompany a WGBH symphonic broadcast. He chose to illustrate Beethoven's tumultuous *Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major* with close-ups of a small plaster bust of Beethoven being battered by a large hand, intercut with shots of a flaming toy piano that collapsed during the crescendo. The orchestra was said to be dissatisfied, but viewers were delighted.

Paik is the only artist whose work has been consistently successful on broadcast television, largely because its fast pace and ironic humor effectively parody commercial television entertainment. Not all of Paik's video pieces can be broadcast, of course. *T.V. Garden*, first exhibited at the Galeria Bonino in 1972, encouraged visitors to stroll among upturned color television sets showing *Global Groove*. Nothing sold, but, as Paik recalls with delight, one of the sets was stolen. Later, in an expanded *T.V. Garden* installation at the 1973 retrospective at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, thirty altered sets were planted faceup among potted flowers so that viewers could watch Paik's videotapes (among them the Boston Symphony tape and *Global Groove*) from a balcony above. In *T.V. Garden*, as in popular culture, television



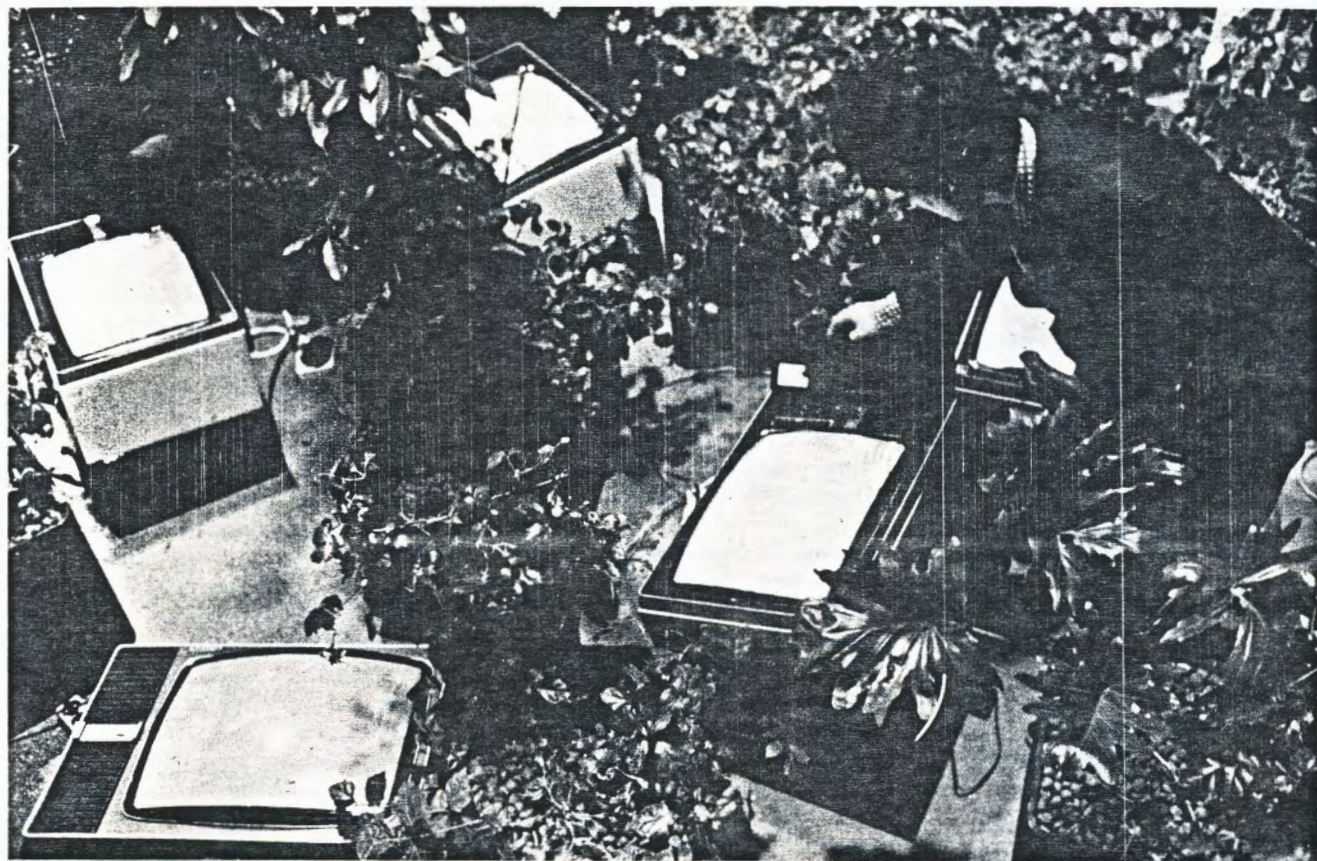
has supplanted nature. (This piece was also the most influential video piece at the 1977 *Dokumenta* in Germany.)

Recently, Paik has moved away from the performance aspects of his earlier work. His newest interest is a system for projecting video images with a laser beam, a technique pioneered by German laser artist Horst Baumann, who persuaded a laser manufacturer to provide him with \$100,000 worth of equipment. Baumann taught Paik, who—characteristically—gives him full credit. As with his other video work, Paik is as interested in laser technology's image-transforming effects as he is in the image itself.

So far in his career, Paik has combined popular showmanship with the most rigorous pursuit of avant-garde ideas. "I have a theory about American avant-garde art," he explained in 1974. "Serious avant-garde art here is always in opposition to American mass culture. In a way, mass culture conditions serious art. . . . Popular culture is setting the rules, so you have to define what you do against what they are doing. We want to make more crude if they are perfect, we want to make more boring if they are exciting. . . . Americans need not be entertained every second because they are so rich. . . . I come from a very poor country, and I am poor. I have to entertain people every second."

But Paik does more than merely entertain. His grasp of irony has enabled him to couch the most outrageous avant-garde iconoclasm in the guise of entertaining anecdotes. Perhaps his Oriental origins gave him an intuitive feeling for the invisible impulses of electronics—technical equivalents of the metaphysics of Eastern philosophies. If this analysis is correct, Paik has, with great success, joined his native empathies with advanced world culture. The global reach of television, of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," is nowhere embodied more intelligently than in the art and life of Nam June Paik. □

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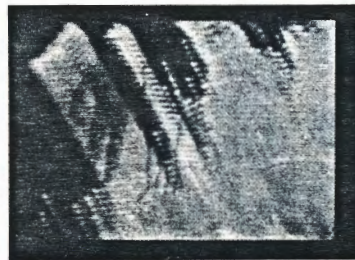
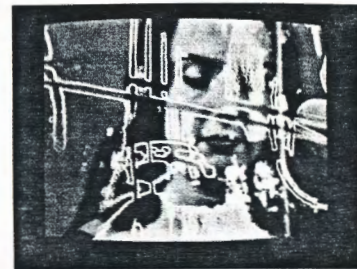
*Above: T.V. Garden, which Paik first installed in 1972, replaces flowers and foliage with television sets, a wry suggestion that popular culture has supplanted nature. Left: Using a video-synthesizer he developed with engineer Shuya Abe, Paik produced his 1971 Portrait of Charlotte Moorman.*

PHOTOGRAPHS LEFT: PETER MOORE



*Right: In 1973, Paik combined a potpourri of cultural imagery from around the world in his McLuhanesque Global Groove.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOCK GILL



*Left: Merce by Paik, Part II, a 1978 videotape, consists of electronically generated images of modern dancer Merce Cunningham.*