

# Video Art Review

A SERIES OF EIGHTEEN PROGRAMS PRESENTED BY ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES IN COLLABORATION WITH ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX.

All showings at 80 Wooster Street, New York City 10012.

For information call 212-226-0010.

NAM JUNE PAIK

November 1980

Global Groove (1973) 30 minutes

Suite 212 (1976) 30 minutes

Guadalcanal Requiem (1979) 29 minutes

Lake Placid '80 (1980)

Nam June Paik has been called the grand-daddy of video for good reason. His richly varied career spans the development of video as an art form. Paik is a bricoleur whose single channel videotapes are only the tip of an iceberg of activities that include installations, performance, and music. Born in Korea in 1932, Paik was a music student in Germany in the 1950s, specializing in electronic music when he met John Cage. The meeting triggered a whole new approach to "art" for Paik, sending him far afield from traditional avant-garde music to explore the outrageous. Around 1960 Paik specialized in funny, aggressive performances in a latter-day form of Dada influenced by Happenings, and in 1961 he began to perform in the newly inaugurated Fluxus festivals. At the same time he began tinkering with television sets with an engineer friend in Cologne, Germany, learning about television from the inside out. Of this stage he has said, "I did not consider myself a visual artist, but I knew there was something to be done in television and nobody else was doing it, so I said why not make it my job?" In 1963 Paik showed thirteen doctored television sets in which the screens showed a single horizontal or vertical stripe (at the Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, an exhibition more memorable at the time for the dead ox hanging over the door). Paik says, "I buy thirteen second-hand 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."

Paik met cellist Charlotte Moorman in the early 1960s. She was to become his long-time collaborator, wearing and playing his television sculptures—such as the TV bra, TV cello, and the TV bed. At this time Paik also began working with the Japanese engineer Shuya Abe. He would become Paik's collaborator on a number of projects of which the Paik/Abe synthesizer is of the greatest importance.

In the mid-1960s Paik continued his investigation of television using its own mechanisms to generate images. Magnets and degaussing coils, devices originally intended to correct the pictures in early television sets were employed to produce visual distortions. Paik began to use the self-referential process of feedback for further image generation; in 1966 he produced a looping wave pattern from three audio input signals. With the development of lightweight, portable cameras, he gradually switched his emphasis to recording. In 1969, after the first of what became a number of fruitful residencies at television stations, he showed The Medium is the Medium on WGBH-TV in Boston. It was the first showing of video art on broadcast television. The following year the newly developed Paik/Abe synthesizer began to be used extensively in his work.

The synthesizer/colorizer serves several key functions in Paik's work, and the precedents he has established for its use have important implications for the whole genre of synthesized work that has evolved in

his wake. Paik's synthesized work continues a tradition of finding equivalents between media, a tradition that may have originated with Pere Castel's 1734 color organ, the Clavecin Oculaire. Castel's organ—and Goethe's "Color Music," Rimbaud's colored vowels, and the color organ as used by Wagner, Scriabin, and Wilfred (in the Lumia Theater)—all sought to establish a reciprocity between sound and color that enhanced the impact of each. The synthesizer breaks down the earlier separateness of forms and fuses image, pattern, sound, and dance into a single harmonious surface.

Paik's synthesized and colored tapes are based on the assumptions of abstract art and German Expressionism. Forms are simplified, colors altered and intensified with the expectation of revealing their essential content. The synthesizer goes beyond the limits of painting and film, electronically bursting the boundaries of shape, permitting an osmotic interpenetration where color and form physically continue to evolve and change in time. In the fan dance section of Global Groove, the dancer's erotic game of peek-a-boo is dissolved into interpenetrating patterns like a moving color field painting whose softly pulsating concentric forms suggest the state the dancer is trying to arouse.

Paik's tapes often appear to be simply entertainment: he has said, "I have to be entertaining." But underneath their bon homie there are more radical concerns. Paik is the master of the non-sequiter, and his most characteristic structure is the collage. Paik has always used editing to achieve his ends (even in the early 1970s when editing was disdained by video artists in favor of "real time"). Editing permitted him to build chains of barely related events in Suite 212, Global Groove, and others. Paik emphasizes discontinuity. His most provocative structure is that of the koan, the Zen question designed to produce enlightenment. Similar to metaphor, which he uses more rarely, the koan joins two substantially different elements. Unlike metaphor, there is no connector making the two into a third object with greater meaning. Paik emphasizes the space between the parts which are only superficially held together by the synthesizer. The radical juxtaposition of events in tapes such as Global Groove—with its look of random channel hopping and its pairing of Go Go dancers, with Japanese Coca Cola ads or classic oriental musicians—is too choppy and jarring to build a rational narrative. Instead, you are asked the unanswerable question of the koan, "What links these together?" Seeing the chasm between vignettes, one begins to feel the actual meaning of the kind of spatial and temporal unity, the planet-wide culture, television has helped to produce.

Suite 212 was originally broadcast on WNET as a series of three to eight minute pages from Paik's "personal New York City sketchbook," and included the work of other video artists. Each of the segments was structured differently, and were intended to be seen separately. In many, chains of unrelated events are woven together to suggest the effect of a place in flux or process, how it is felt in time. "The Selling of New York" is a simulacrum of the sensation of information-overload experienced there. Some of the highly edited, collaged snippets provide complex portraits of New York City communities such as the East Village.

In Nam June Paik Edited for Television (1975) Paik misquotes Freud, saying all of life is about "eros and destruction." It is the destruction of the past Paik fears and will not permit. He has said, "Once on

videotape, you are not allowed to die . . . in a sense." His tapes literally prove the tenet of psychology that events of the past continue to act in the present, directly influencing it. In a form of self-ancestor worship that includes his pantheon of heroes and collaborators, all of the works reveal videotape's ability to serve as a palimpsest or trace of the past, permitting Paik repeated recapitulation of his career in the form of disengaged flashbacks that recycle the past.

His concern with the action of time, memory, and death led Paik to make Guadalcanal Requiem in 1979. It is a Krapp's Last Tape of a place in World War II showing an entropic view of events. Actual war footage is intercut with the place today, middle-aged men discussing their memories, and past and present aspects of the island's pre-existing native culture, including Paik's emblem of thanatos, massed skulls. A watch washed up in the surf at intervals as a device indicating the passage of time. Moorman performs various ritual mourning gestures. In a homage to Hitchcock, Paik moves slowly towards Moorman and the beach and passes her unseeingly, as if they inhabited different time zones. The compression and decay of memory, the fissures between past and present—themes that have been the sub-text of previous tapes are here abstracted and depersonalized, forming a cohesive meditation on the action of time.

—Ann-Sargent Wooster

The tapes in this program are available from Electronic Arts Intermix in videocassette format (84 Fifth Ave., New York City 10011, 212-988-2316).

This screening supported in part by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.