Appreciation

Nam June Paik (1932–2006)

Video Art Pioneer

John G. Hanhardt

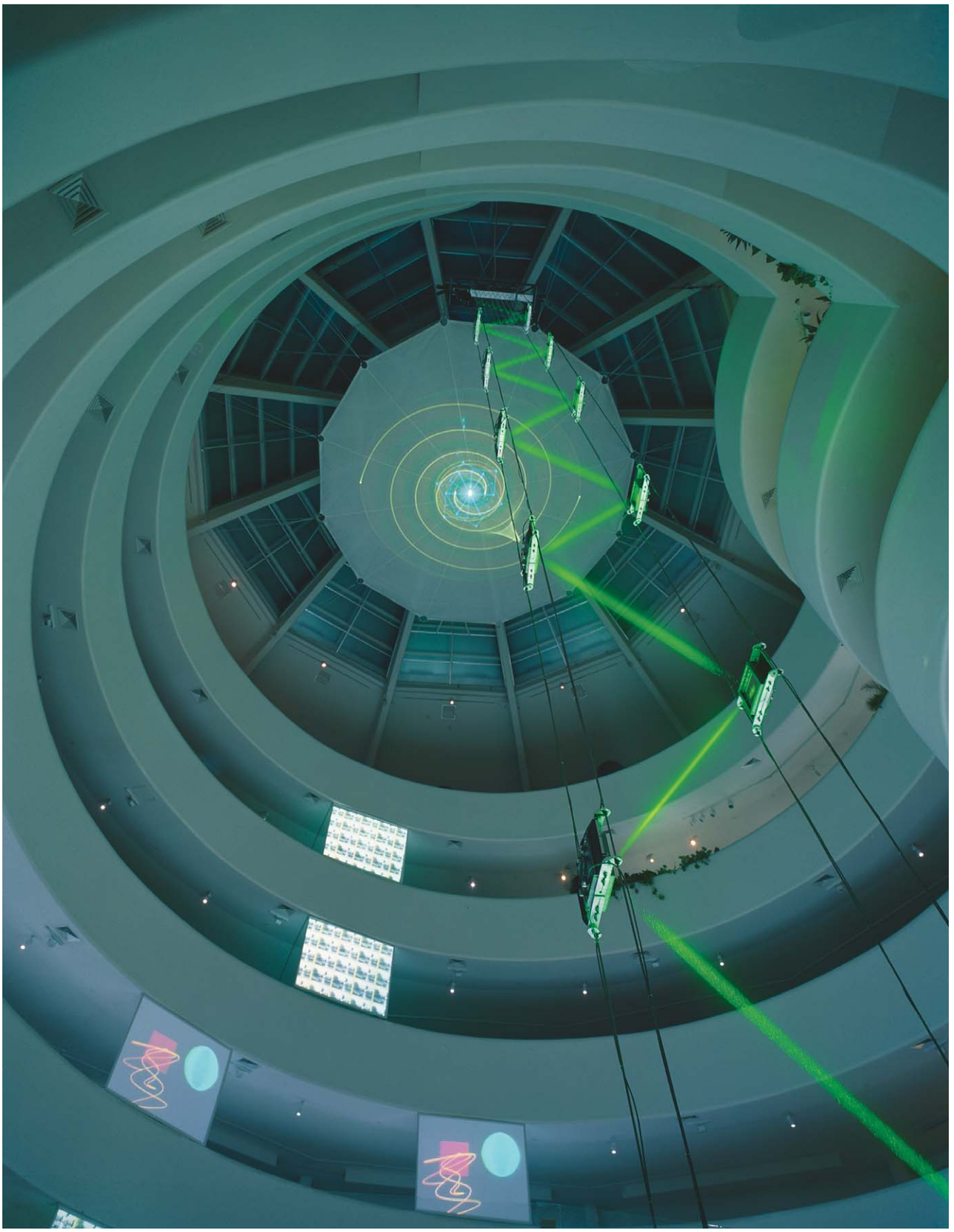
With Nam June Paik's death this year, there is a sense of enormous loss felt among artists and those of us who participated in the emergence of video art. He had been in declining health for some time, but his presence remained powerful. A special sensibility was embodied not only in his art but in his person. Nam June was an original in every sense of that word—from his art and ideas to his appearance and language.

Nam June Paik's critical role in the establishment of video as a contemporary art form cannot be overstated. Commentators tried to find the words to convey his contribution, calling him "The Father of Video Art" and "The George Washington of Video Art" in recognition of the range and quality of his art making and the fact that his support for video art at large created opportunities for other artists. The story of his accomplishments speaks to fundamental changes in our visual culture—changes he helped to realize—as media took on a more significant role.

Paik began his artistic journey with an interest in music while growing up in a prominent family in Seoul, Korea. He continued music and art studies in Japan at the University of Tokyo and in the 1950s traveled to Germany, then a center for new music. Through his performances there, he first established himself in the European avant-garde. In 1964 he moved to New York City, which became his permanent home, but he always traveled internationally. This constant movement linked his friendships and creative partnerships across time zones and diverse places and cultures. He was a truly global artist whose work was exhibited in and collected by many museums around the world, including the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, as well as being featured in such international exhibitions as Documenta in Kassel, Germany, the Venice Biennale, and the Kwangju Bienniale in Korea.

Throughout his life Paik made many friends to whom he remained loyal and whose work he valued. Among them were Joseph Beuys, with whom he performed and who was featured in his tribute *Beuys Projection* (1990); John Cage, his great teacher and inspiration through his treatment of chance in art making (*A Tribute to John Cage* of 1973); George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, who, impressed with Paik's performances in Europe, invited him to become a member; and Robert Breer, animator-filmmaker, and Jonas Mekas, leader of American avant-garde film, both of whom had film footage in Paik's *Global Groove*. Among the creative collaborators with whom he worked were

Nam June Paik, collaborator Norman Ballard, *Modulation in Sync: Jacob's Ladder*, 2000. Laser, water, mirrors, and steel structure, dimensions vary with installation. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift of The Bohen Foundation



Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, who helped create the *Paik-Abe Synthesizer* and *Robot K-456*; laser experts Horst Bauman and Norman Ballard; performance artist Charlotte Moorman, for whom Paik made his *TV Cello*; Jud Yalkut, who worked with him on his early films and videotapes; Paul Garrin, an editor who contributed to Paik's videotapes of the 1980s; and Jon Huffman, who worked in his studio and provided important assistance to his art making after Nam June's stroke in 1996.

Nam June's first taste of what was possible in art came through his studies at the University of Tokyo, where he wrote his thesis on modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg. The possibilities of modernism, its break with classical conventions, took on a variety of radical forms in the constellation of avant-garde movements that included happenings and Fluxus. It was within this culture that Paik discovered the possibility of an ultimate break from the protocols and conventional languages of music, composition, and performance. His performances throughout Europe became legendary as he employed record players, which he manipulated, and played collages of sounds produced on audiotape. Karlheinz Stockhausen's astonished description of Nam June in performances remains as fascinating to read today as it was to experience in the 1960s:

Peter Moore, *Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman with* Robot K-456 *in Paik's Lispenard Street Studio*, New York, August 17, 1964 © Estate of Peter Moore/ VAGA, New York

Then he slowly shook a bag of flour or rice over his head. Finally he jumped into a bathtub filled with water and dived completely under water, jumped soaking wet to the piano and began a sentimental salon piece. He then fell forward and hit the piano keyboard several times with his head.

In the 1950s Paik began to explore ways to engage the emerging technology of television. The relationship of his sound and performance pieces to his reworking of television was signaled in the title, *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television*, of his first one-artist show in 1963 at the Gallerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany. This exhibition featured his prepared televisions and pianos. The *Klavier Integral* (1958–63) from that exhibition, now in the collection of the Museum Moderne Kunst, Vienna, is a piano covered with a bizarre assortment of noisemakers, barbed wire, clocks, eggshells, and a bra. Paik's transformation of a number of television sets in that exhibition, like his treatment of the pianos, began by removing them from their customary position, placing them on their side, upside down, and scattered about the room. He also altered the received broadcast image, and in so doing sought to seize control of the television set, refusing its standardized broadcast message and remaking it into his own. Even before the commercial development of the portable videotape player and recorder, he understood that television could be an interactive and artist-empowered instrument,

Nam June Paik at his video-editing studio in his Mercer Street home, New York, 1999

not simply a one-way conduit of received programming.

Paik's goal was to both humanize technology and remake it through a spirit of play and freewheeling invention. He also wanted to empower the viewer to interact with the artwork. An example of his interactive pieces in the Gallerie Parnass show was *Random Access* (1963), where a reel-to-reel audiotape recorder/player was taken apart so that participants could hold the magnetic recording head of the player and rub it over tapes stuck to the gallery wall. As the tape recorder head was run over the magnetic tapes, Paik's sound collage emerged from the speakers. A wonderful expression of his humanizing technology was *Robot K-456* (1964), a fully remote-controlled robot that was part of his performances onstage and in the streets. Here the materials of technology, wires, and tape recorders were fitted together into a human shape that shuffled through the streets playing political speeches. Twenty years later, I watched as Paik had *Robot K-456* lumber down the sidewalk as part of his 1982 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and cross Madison Avenue, where a car ran into it in a staged accident. This media event was covered by local television, where a news reporter asked what was happening and Paik responded, "It is the catastrophe of technology in the twenty-first century. And we're practicing how to cope with it."

New York City became Paik's home and the center of his quest to transform video, remake television, and expand the art world. His first one-artist show at the New School for Social Research, *NJ Paik: Electronic TV, Color TV Experiments, 3 Robots, 2 Zen Boxes & 1 Zen Can* (1965), was unlike anything seen before. The show featured an array of monitors and televisions to which the artist applied magnets and electronic coils to fashion radically new images out of the cathode ray tube in such celebrated pieces as *Magnet TV* and *Demagnetizer* (or *Life Ring*). His exhibitions at the Galeria Bonino (*Electronic Art*, 1965) and the Howard Wise Gallery (*TV as a Creative Medium*, 1969) solidified his position as the foremost artist refashioning and integrating video into his art making. Paik's ability to seize each new technological development, from the portable video recorder and player to digital editing systems, and master their capacities so that he could remake them to achieve his creative ends became legendary. As he explained in his "Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television" (1964):

In usual compositions, we have first the approximate vision of the completed work (the pre-imaged ideal, or "IDEA" in the sense of Plato). Then, the working process means the torturing endeavor to approach this ideal "IDEA." But in the experimental TV, the thing is completely revised. Usually I don't, or cannot have any pre-imaged VISION before working. First I seek the "WAY," of which I cannot foresee where it leads to. The "WAY" . . . that means, to study the circuit, to try various "FEEDBACKS," to cut some places and feed the different waves there, to change the phase of waves, etc.

Nam June Paik, *Electronic Superhighway (Continental U.S.)*, 1995. Forty-nine-channel closed-circuit video installation, neon, steel, and electronic components, approximately 15 x 40 x 4 feet. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the artist

Not satisfied with the available technology, he invented the *Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer* in the late 1960s as a means to mix moving images, colorizing and transforming them into a new visual language that would become the basis for his single-channel videotapes and works for broadcast. *Global Groove*, a signature videotape for broadcast produced in 1973, spoke in its voice-over of a future where "TV Guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone directory" The tape is a heady mix of popular music such as Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels as well as John Cage, Korean folk music, Allen Ginsberg, and Japanese television commercials for Pepsi-Cola. Paik's wide-ranging writings on laser and cybernetics, Marshall McLuhan and Cage, which explored the ideas that informed his art making, were also being published at this time.

Paik is best known in the art world for his video sculptures and installations that engage a variety of strategies to explore and represent the moving image and properties of media-based art. *TV Garden* fills a darkened gallery with a garden of plants with monitors and televisions of various sizes featuring *Global Groove* in an effusive expression of the spread of television as an artist's medium. His sculptures ranged from *Vyramid* (1982), which is a towering structure built out of all sizes of televisions, from large-scale consoles at the base to Sony Watchmans at the top, all playing a kaleidoscope of Paik's

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video images, to the construction of human shapes out of all manner of television sets and radios in *Robot Family*. Paik's celebrated and effusive video walls expanded the scale and surface of the moving image in landmark pieces ranging from *Megatron/Matrix* (1995) to *Electronic Superhighway (Continental U.S.*).

His playful treatment of illusion and reality and point of view, developed through the use of the closed-circuit properties of the medium, is featured in *TV Buddha*, where a Buddha sculpture faces a monitor on which its image is recorded live from the point of view of the video camera positioned above the monitor, and *Real Fish, Live Fish* (1982), which features two old television sets, one of which has a fish tank inside the cathode ray tube while the other shows the fish live on the screen, transmitted from the video camera placed in front of the fish tank. Another elaborate projection piece was *One Candle (Candle Projection)* (1988), where the live video camera is focused on a candle flame, which is modified in its projection to create a vivid and dynamic surface of moving flames on a variety of scales on the walls of the gallery. For his retrospective *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* in 2000 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Paik created *Modulation in Sync* for the rotunda. It featured a seven-story waterfall through which lasers were projected. Lasers were also projected overhead, video projections were displayed on the walls, and a bed of monitors on the floor featured an edit from his videotapes and international television projects. All together the installation activated the entire space and connected technology to nature in a powerful response to Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas and design. Paik called it a "post-video" piece reflecting through the energy of laser on the future of communication and our global media culture.

In Paik's art and ideas, technology does not determine but enables a dynamic remix of media and an opportunity to expand beyond the artificial boundaries established by critics and art historians to package the accepted interpretation of art. Thus his use of humor is a subversive strategy, meant to draw you in and give you new ways to see and experience the world. Paik's own spoken and written language, which he employed with great wit and sophistication to gain support for his projects, was an aphoristic mix of observations that moved across disciplines, from history to economics, politics to culture. Paik was a master of working within institutions and then surprising everyone by getting them to cooperate and realize his extraordinary and ambitious projects.

In 1996 Nam June Paik suffered a stroke. He continued to work in his studios in SoHo and was planning a project for the John Cage centennial. Paik died at his winter home on Miami Beach on January 29. He is survived by his wife, the video artist Shigeko Kubota.

I was fortunate to have known Nam June and to have worked with him on a number of exhibitions and commissions. His generosity, genius, and constant challenge to the conventions of art making—through the uncanny mix of visionary and pragmatic thinking—created a lasting body of artwork. Korea's national treasure, he was honored around the world in recognition of his unique achievements. He will be missed.