Lasker offers a rewarding experience with current urban painting. Perhaps it is inaccurate to name this kind of painting as "abstraction" or "new abstraction" since it tirelessly represents itself within itself and reintroduces form and character through many of these paintings spanning the last ten years. This is a significant body of drawings and studies that affirms Lasker's dedication to utilizing simulacra as an inherent, intellectual process of creativity. This renewed expressionism is the perfect metaphor for a post-historical era.

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The Worlds of Nam June Paik
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
February 11 to April 26, 2000

Figure 1. Nam June Paik, 1986 (Photo by Rainer Rosenow).

Long acclaimed as the George Washington of video art, Nam June Paik has had an active career moving from music to robotics to cybernetics and electronic media. This carefully-curated and precisely-annotated retrospective, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from February 11 through April 26, 2000, was organized by Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts, John G. Hanhardt. The exhibition surveys Paik's artistic production as well as a history of the medium of video itself. At sixty-seven years old, this is Paik's largest solo exhibition. He has come a long way since the days when critics described him as a "terrorist of esthetic expectations." It was an understandable label given his antic performance pieces of the 1960s when, as part of the avant-garde Fluxus movement, he stunned onlookers with piano demolitions, imageless films and the now-legendary topless cello concert performed by Charlotte Moorman. These days Paik contends that he has entered his "sublime" period: "like late Rothko," he says, "like the great French Gothic cathedrals."[1] Paik's focus over the years may have shifted from performance art to multi-screen television installations, global satellite productions and complex laser displays, but to describe his work as sublime is indeed an understatement.

Paik presented his first television pieces in 1963 at his first solo exhibition, *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*, at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany. This milestone exhibition featured Paik's prepared televisions in which he removed the TV set from its customary context and function, and altered its components to produce unexpected effects. This work signaled the beginning of a lifelong effort to deconstruct and demystify television and to change the perception of television as simply an instrument of mass home entertainment. Since these initial television sculptures, Paik has used television sets in a multitude of ventures from massive video walls, ceilings and floors comprising hundreds of TVs, to quirky electronic robots whose limbs and bodies are often constructed from monitors. In 1965 he bought one of the first Sony Portapak video recorders and videotaped the Papal entourage making its way down Fifth Avenue in New York. Paik took the footage of the Pope, shot from a cab, and that night showed the results at artists' hangout, the Café a Go Go, in this first presentation of video art.[2]

For Paik and other early practitioners of video art, including Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas and John Baldessari, it was video's capacity for instantaneous transmission of an image that was most appealing, in addition to its relative affordability. For these artists, who all preoccupied themselves with themes concerning time (and often memory), the spontaneous and instantaneous quality of video was crucial. Video recorded and revealed instant time, whereas film had to be treated and processed. Paik ultimately became the first spokesperson for video art and, in a famous quote, has stated that: "As collage technique replaced oil paint, so the cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas." And, as multiple projection devices were formulated, especially by Paik, it was possible to represent the often chaotic and random feel of multiple images competing constantly for our attention.

The works on display in the Guggenheim exhibition provide proof of this. At the center of this show is the site-specific *Modulation in Sync* (2000), which includes two laser installations created with Norman Ballard for the museum rotunda that transform Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture into a dynamic audiovisual space. Projected onto the rotunda oculus, *Sweet and Sublime* is a rapidly changing display of geometric shapes that echo Wright's design. In *Jacob's Ladder*, laser projections pass through a seven-story waterfall that cascades from the top of the museum. On the rotunda floor, a cluster of television monitors, eighty in all, with their screens facing up, project a vibrating display of

1. From a January 2000 interview with Ann Landi, an *ARTnews* contributing editor.

2. In 1969, Howard Wise presented the first exhibition in America devoted to video art in his gallery in New York; the show included Paik, Paul Ryan, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Earl Reiback, and Aldo Tambellini. A proliferation of video exhibitions followed, first in alternative spaces and later in museums. After Wise closed his gallery in 1970, he formed the first artists' video distribution organization, Electronic Arts Intermix. Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend followed, creating Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films in 1972, and in 1976 Video Databank was founded in Chicago.

rapidly changing imagery. A kaleidoscope of images flash across the screens, forming a constantly-changing, pulsating canvas-- a visual convulsion replete with images from both East and West. Japanese music videos are displaced by footage of David Bowie in concert, still pictures of a full moon and Merce Cunningham dancing. This mesmerizing multimedia installation of rapidly moving video and laser imagery transcends boundaries of time and place. The work, which is set to audio that ranges from ceremonial chants to rock and roll, is orchestrated by a complex system of laser disk players, computers and digital sequencers. This dramatic merging of lasers, video and natural elements can be viewed all along the ramps that circle the rotunda, providing a visual link between images on the ground and those on the oculus, offering the viewer multiple perspectives of the work. According to Hanhardt, in the comprehensive catalogue accompanying the exhibition, this particular work symbolizes the correlation between Paik's historical remaking of video into an artist's medium and his latest transformation of laser into a dramatic "postvideo" treatment of energy and light.

Indeed, the significance of Paik's work can be said to speak particularly to those of his own generation whose art was born out of the 1960s American counterculture: the utopian desire for an expanded perception through new technology, the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements, and a rebellion against the institutional authority of mainstream television. From its inception in the mid-1960s, video developed in three directions: psychedelically-inflected image processing, politicized community activism, and performative art videotapes and installations. Paik, who studied aesthetics and music in Japan in the 1950s, is clearly representative of the video artist, as opposed to the activist or reporter. A native of Korea, he moved to New York in 1964 from Germany where he had been a student, specifically, as he says, because of John Cage, whose experimental work in music and performance had a tremendous impact on many young artists at the time. While in Germany he met Cage and other Fluxus artists, and participated in what is considered the first Fluxus festival, The Fluxus International Festival of Very New Music, held in the auditorium of the Stadtisches Museum in Wiesbaden.[3] It was in Germany that Paik's lifelong obsession with fusing music, art and electronics emerged. "A German who studied radar during the war told me that radar waves make an interesting painting," says Paik. "Then I had an idea. Why don't I move from electronic music into electronic painting with the TV? Then I will find something new--the moving painting, with sound."[4]

The Tower Gallery of the museum features video and photo documentation of Paik's early Fluxus performance work, showing connections between performance art and video. A tribute to Charlotte Moorman is also on view in the Tower Gallery, including *TV Cello* (1971), along with videos and photographs that celebrate their unique artistic relationship. Paik began his long collaboration with Charlotte Moorman (also a longtime Fluxus "fellow-traveler"), classical cellist and the organizer of the New York Avant Garde Festival, in 1965. Paik's numerous collaborations with Moorman challenged the way music was traditionally played and heard. In the famous *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1968) Moorman is taped, topless, playing the violin, and wearing two circular mirrors on her breasts, which reflect cameras, focused on her face. Perhaps their most famous collaboration was on Paik's *Opera Sextronique* (1967), during which Paik's shirtless back became the "bass" for Moorman's bowstring and for which they were arrested, jailed, tried and found guilty of "an act which openly outraged public decency." According to Moorman, the case tested "the limits of artistic censorship" and resulted "in the changing of that law" for which they were arrested. "I wanted to stir up the dull waters of sexless men and women in black suits playing music," Paik once said. Paik and Moorman collaborated on several such projects, including *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotape* (1971) in which she ran her bow across stacks of television sets containing prerecorded and simultaneous images of her running the bow across the televisions. Paik's particular interest was in visualizing time. "It must be stressed," he wrote in 1962 prior to his first show at Galerie Parnass, "that my work is not painting, not sculpture, but rather Time art: I love no particular genre."

The Tower Gallery also has on exhibit a selection of Paik's audio and video recorded works and key sculptural and interactive works from the 1960s and early 1970s. These early-prepared television and interactive video pieces, including *Magnet TV* (1965), *Random Access* (1963) and *TV Cello* (1971), offer a sophisticated, radical treatment of the ways in which interactions with technology can yield new visual experiences. Adjacent to the gallery, a single channel screening room presents continuous showings of a selection of Paik's recently restored videos and television productions from the 1960s to the present including *9/23/69 Experiment with David Atwood* (1969), *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984) and *Living with the Living Theater* (1989).

The museum's High Gallery hosts Paik's recently completed three-dimensional laser sculptures, while exhibition bays along the ramps display feature Paik's landmark video installations and sculptural pieces. In works such as *Real Fish/Live Fish* (1982), *TV Chair* (1968), *Video Buddha* (1976), and *Family of Robots* (1986), the artist employs video cameras and monitors to explore our perceptions of time and space, nature and culture. These smaller works are arranged together with the multiple monitor installations *Video Fish* (1975), *TV Garden* (1974), and *TV Clock* (1963). In addition, recent autobiographical works such as *Beuys Projection* (1990) and *Mongolian Tent* (1993), reflect on various periods in Paik's life, from his early years in Korea to the time he spent in Japan, Europe and the United States.

Perhaps the most intriguing example of how nature meets

3.At the festival, Paik "enacted" a "score" by composer LaMonte Young that consisted entirely of the direction "Draw a straight line and follow it." Titled *Zen for Head*, Paik dipped his head, hands and necktie into a bowl of ink and tomato juice and dragged them across a long horizontal piece of paper. "Fluxus," meaning "flowing," took its name from the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who wrote that "All existence flows in the stream of creation." The group officially established itself in 1962 under the sponsorship of George Maciunus, who ran the AG Gallery in New York, at the Festival of the Most Recent Music, in Germany. The success of Fluxus consisted in its remaining flexible and open to new growth, to an opportune revision of experience. As Paik has said, "Fluxus is like a Korean plant; when it looks dead, it's about to blossom."

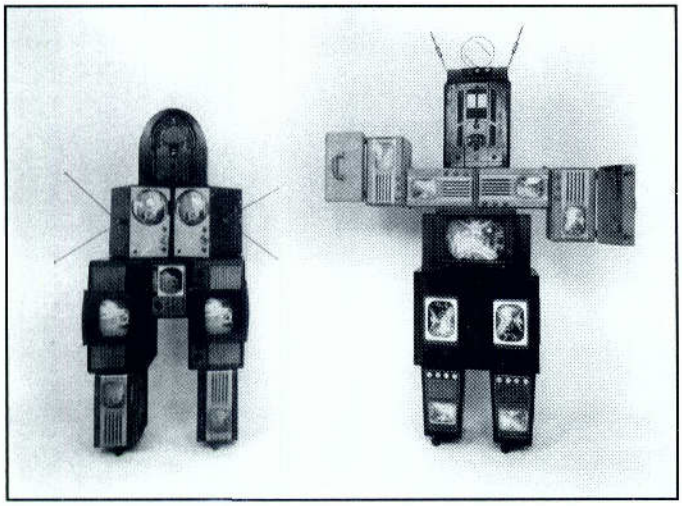

Figure 2. Nam June Paik, *Grandmother* and *Grandfather* from the *Family of Robot*, 1986, video monitors, television and radio cabinets (The Robert J. Shiffler Foundation, Greenville, Ohio; photo by Cal Kowal).

the electronic age is in the spectacular *TV Garden*. Forty television sets, situated among live and fake vegetation, take on the form of exotic electronic flora in a lush garden of sight and sound. Color, rather than scent pulsates through the petals of these unnatural flowers in a series of intricate collages, including *Global Groove*, which was created in 1973 using a video synthesizer that Paik invented in 1969 with Suya Abe, a Japanese engineer. The synthesizer, one of the first artist-made video image processors, is on view in the gallery and is installed with a selection of videotapes the artist produced. The synthesizer enabled Paik to mix, polarize, layer, color and distort images from several video and TV sources to create dazzling arrays of color and sound. These early environments, which reflected the psychedelic sensibility of the 1960s, functioned as sensory, communal dream spaces, in which the audience became fully involved. Though the distorted images in this early example of his media sculpture were not Paik's own, this reconfiguration and displacing of the television set from its normal setting in the living room of a home has remained a central preoccupation of the artist. Specially installed for this exhibition, such pioneering works take on a particular relevance to the prevalent use of video by younger contemporary artists such as Bill Viola, who worked with Paik as a student.[5]

While Paik abandoned live performance in the 1980s, turning to massive, multi-monitor video constructions, his connection to performance remains evident. It is as if he has made the monitor a performer in its own right. He injects such frenzied life into his installations, with images racing across the screens, that the video sculptures actually appear more like mechanized organisms than inert monitors. He has, in fact, made several "video robots," in which the main visual impression is created by the television sets rather than the images contained in them. He now creates what might be called performative installations.

In these installations he highlights these images, using dramatic ploys such as extreme slow motion, contrasts in scale, shifts in focus, mirrored reflections, staccato editing and multiple or layered screens. Taken together they function, without doubt, as an extension of the ideas and philosophy of the Fluxus of their time, though, they also represent the increasing impact of laser and digital technology in the arts of today.

Each major piece in the exhibition has a separate aim and explores a distinct idea. One or two sculptures is enough to get you thinking about where we are headed and how technology can be a way of destruction or advancement. After looking at every piece in an extensive exhibition such as this, the messages have a tendency to become overstated. The flashing monitors become so much decoration and even annoying after awhile. Many of the works have dozens of flashing video monitors as their primary component, possibly too much stimuli for the content of each work to make its impact. This could have been intentional, but when one looks at individual pieces, it seems doubtful that each work was intended to be muddled together as they are by the repetitive monitors and shared images. As annoying as this show could be for some viewers, it is easy to want to focus on the less active pieces as a respite. If one does this, Paik still gets part of his message across.

Since Paik suffered from a stroke in 1997, his activities have been limited. Paik no longer physically assembles his sculptures. Instead, he sketches his designs and relays them to assistants. He does give credit to his wife of almost thirty years, the video artist Shigeko Kubota, for her input and collaboration. In fact, he credits her for the waterfall idea in this impressive retrospective. Organizers of the exhibit say Paik has a talent for conducting himself with highly personal directness while presenting his ideas with engaging charm and lucidity. As a result, he works well with an extraordinary range of people: from representatives of the Merrill Lynch corporation, who sponsored the exhibition, as well as officials from Sony Corporation, and a variety of fellow artists.

Paik's video sculptures, installations, and performances anticipate much of the dramatic technological change that has shaped our lives in recent years--change that continues to engage and challenge us at the dawn of the new millennium. Paik coined the term "electronic superhighway" in a 1976 paper written for the Rockefeller Foundation. In the years since, his art and career have taught us that technology has the capacity to enrich and enhance our lives in unexpected ways, perhaps most importantly by helping us to see and understand our changing world with greater clarity. *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* transforms the Guggenheim Museum into a commemoration of the moving image and brings a new understanding and appreciation of Nam June Paik's extraordinary accomplishments.

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4."Nam June Paik," by Andrea Barnet. *The New York Times*, April 3, 1994.

5.Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Paik worked as a teacher and activist, supporting other artists and working to realize the potential of the moving image. Along with his ambitious sequence of video tapes and projects for television-featuring collaborations with friends Laurie Anderson, Joseph Beuys, David Bowie, John Cage and Merce Cunningham-he created a series of installations that fundamentally changed video and helped redefine artistic practice.