

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Mellencamp, Patricia, "The old and the new: Nam June Paik, video artist and sculptor," *Arts Journal*, Winter 1995

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Nam June Paik, *Klavier Intergral*, 1958-63, Upright piano with alterations and additions, 53" X 55" X 17" Detail

In 1993 for the Venice Biennale, Nam June Paik initially proposed to title his exhibition in the German Pavilion Electronic Super Highway: "Bill Clinton stole my idea!" His brash claim comes from a 1974 document commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, in which Paik proposed connecting Los Angeles and New York with "multi-layer to broadband communications networks, such as domestic satellites, wave guides, bunches of co-axial cables, and fiber-optics. The expenses would be as high as the moon landing, but the ripple effect 'harvest' of byproducts would be numerous."

As an incredulous curator said: "Frankly, we did not believe you [about Clinton's plan, not Paik's]. However after reading Time . . . we

have grown wiser: the Electronic Superhighway is no longer the crazy fiction or an intellectual utopia of a little Korean Guy." Paik concluded his 1974 "media plan" with a second prophesy that had already come true: "One hundred years ago Thoreau wondered: 'Even if the telephone company succeeded in connecting people in Maine with people in Tennessee what would they have to say to each other?' The rest is history." More of Paik's highways, later.

Video entered the cultural vocabulary of the United States in the mid-1960s as a technology and a futuristic set of electronic possibilities lifted freely from the tech talk of computer inventors. And it was video, not computers, that lodged itself simultaneously within activist politics and the art scene, zigzagging between counterculture communes and the cultured art world. Dropouts and artists alike extolled sci-fi principles derived from information theory and cybernetics.

Information was energy, process, and power - which had to be dispersed to the people through video. As Guerilla TV put it, "Only through a radical re-design of its information structures to incorporate two-way, decentralized inputs can Media-America optimize feedback." Video would foster new communities and radical politics; it would challenge commercial TV ("beast TV") and art - two leftovers from what was called "product culture."

The art historical legend begins earlier, in Korea. Paik, a Marxist ("Koreans are not as docile as other Asians. It was partially just radical chic"), left Korea in the 1950s to study music in Japan. An aesthetics degree and thesis on Arnold Schonberg in hand, he then went to West Germany. ("At the time, it was popular for every young, rich Korean to go somewhere in the Western world. I chose Germany first . . . because it was said there was no modern art in America in the fifties.") There, and forever, he bonded with John Cage ("I came to the U.S. only because of John Cage") and the other theorist/practitioners of Fluxus. He literally attacked the piano (and the musical tradition it represented, scaring Cage in the process) and

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then the TV set in performance events. (Now Paik collects classical TV sets, using them to create lovely human monuments and intricate collages.)

Paik moved to New York in 1964. The story of video art is what I call a primal story, and it begins here, at the Liberty Music Store, with Paik's purchase, using U.S. grant money, of a Sony portable video camera and recorder from Japan's first shipment of equipment to the U.S. As the tale is remembered, Paik's first video recording occurred that very day. As he was on his way home, his cab intersected with the Pope's visit to New York. Voila! The results were previewed to an art audience that same night: video art was born. (The irony of Japanese consumer technology in the hands of a Korean in New York filming the Pope and triggering an art movement funded by NEA and the Rockefeller Foundation is delightful indeed. Perhaps this is why it has been told for now thirty years.)

Video's ease, simultaneity, and immateriality snugly fit with performance art and happenings, Conceptual, kinetic, and Pop art. Anyone could be (and was) a video artist, which caused Bill Viola to say somewhere of early videotapes that life (particularly an artist's life) without editing is not all that interesting. This period also saw the U.S. revival of the historical (European) avant-garde - particularly the critique of art institutions (in retrospect, a critique of the business of art). Today museums are in fashion, along with art and celebrity artists. Art has always been a prime commodity for financial markets. Right after hog, grain, and futures prices come the art auctions in the Wall Street Journal (with a direct correlation between U.S. trade, tourism, and the price of international art). In 1995 the neoclassical economics of art is in high style, and big bucks are seen as a very good thing. But in the 1960s and 1970s, money was not valued by many intellectuals or artists. Materialism was strictly dialectical except for Andy Warhol, who always saw art as business: "Business art is the step that comes after Art."

What was in style were critiques of art's traditions and forms, for example, Cage on music, Merce Cunningham on dance, Jackson MacLow on poetry, Joseph Beuys on politics/art. (Although these critiques were recently labelled deconstruction from literary theory, demolition is more accurate. Deconstructors always find more, whereas these guys looked for and found less, a minimalist aesthetic.) Cage and Cunningham, along with Charlotte Moorman, appeared regularly in the videotapes of Paik, whose eclectic, high-voltage style included rock 'n' roll early on, inspiring MTV. His video gang included art critics like Russell O'Conner and Gregory Battcock, Allan Kaprow, and the video artist Shigeo Kubota, his partner in art.