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Olivier Lussac

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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The Media Machine: the Nam June Paik Archives

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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“Marcel Duchamp has already done everything there is to do – except video. He widened the entry but narrowed the exit. That very narrow door is video art and only through video art can we get ahead of Marcel Duchamp.”¹

- 1 From a mechanical age to the age of electro-mechanics, we have shifted very quickly to an age of electronics, which is hallmarked by a re-promotion of the machine. Despite the reluctance of many philosophers, isn't the machine the sign and the culmination of man's technical intelligence? Pierre Francastel has underscored the appearance and development, since the XIXth century, of a tendency to “humanize” technology in the field of the arts, which shows that inseparable links connect art, technology and social changes (*Art et technique aux XIXe et XXe siècles: la genèse des forces modernes*, Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1956). In 1983, in his introduction to the famous catalogue *Electra*, Frank Popper likewise wrote that: “Electrical and electronic circuits, tape recorders and video cameras, computers, laser and holograms all inform today's demiurges and magicians, with works

where scientific rigour espouses creativity. Everything here intrigues, fascinates and questions: will technology, which radically transformed man in the XXth century, one day sweep away all other forms of traditional artistic expression? [...] Nothing permits us to think such a thing. [...] It is no less certain, [...] that the fertile field of science has brought forth prodigious means which have alerted many creators and aroused their interest.”² Since the 1950s, new forms of plastic expression, of electronic origins this time, have come to the fore.

- 2 The Korean artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006) has long been recognized as the pioneer of video art, with an extremely diverse range of works in the fields of music, performance and video installation. Having discovered how to alter a cathode image, he was forever, and not unwittingly, transforming its appearance to obtain visual scratches, like white noises produced by acoustic collages. Like his guru, John Cage (the *Prepared Pianos*), he understood in the early days of his career that TV images would radically change our perception of the world, and he duly announced a new creative strategy with his prepared televisions. From then on, and throughout his career, Paik spoke out against the influence and grip wielded by these planetary communication images, by creating an anti-technology at the service of technology.

Vue partielle du Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi-do, 2014 © Jean-Marc Poinot

3 Music, action and technology

- 4 The multi-faceted and humorous Nam June Paik ushered in a personal language, which was a mixture of three strategies: first, music (he took a course in dodecaphonic music in Japan), which he electronically modified. Then, performance, with his lifelong partner Charlotte Moorman. With her, he formed the well-known explosive twosome. In 26^{1.1499}, for a string musician (performed at the Go-Go café in New York, 1965, ph. Peter Moore), Nam June Paik incarnated a human instrument, holding the instrument's string behind his back. He became a performer in the video *Guadalcanal Requiem*, 1979, where the two authors enact a sinister masquerade around the issue of war and music. In passing, they made many different references, to Luis Buñuel's violin being dragged along the ground to Joseph Beuys's red cross, by wrapping up the cello; before Charlotte Moorman crawled on the floor with her cello on her back (a gesture coming from *Military Piece*, produced in

1970). Lastly, he strove to alter the look of TV sets, the most significant revolution, so that they became sculptures and installations, suitable for broadcasts of extremely shrewdly modified images (*Concerto for TV Cello and Video Tapes*, 1971).

- 5 The musical instruments and television monitors are transformed and diverted from their initial function. As a Fluxus artist, it was important to make a clean sweep with regard to a certain “great music”, or at least get rid of Fine Arts, by destroying the instruments. As a video artist, it was important to say nothing about what the electronic image conveyed: over and above the manipulation contained by the images, that of the spectator’s consciousness that was affected. Unlike film, the television image tries less to film than to work electronic matter. As a video artist, Nam June Paik thus describes the simulacrum, and the deception of the TV image, by denouncing its technological and ideological nature. Using the example of totally revisited and exploded music, Nam June Paik stretches, duplicates, overlays, alters and fragments the images in order to make them unrecognizable. His works, from then on, encompassed many different dimensions, with video becoming a living material, and not just the mere transcription of reality. By using the satellite network, this would make it possible to modify the tangible television images of the entire world, with everything in a form of live audiovisual spectacle, well before our age of excessive worldwide media coverage. Nam June Paik had understood that information would be increasingly de-materialized, and follow an uninterrupted temporal flow. By design, the images captured convey a succession of poetic messages which no longer have anything to do with the “oriented” information broadcast by television. So for Paik this was at once a medium and a creative material. “Someday”, he observed in 1965, “artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk.” In 1968, he added: “I have dealt with the cathode tube [of a TV set] like a canvas, and I have shown that it may be superior. Henceforth, I will deal with a cathode tube the way I have dealt with pencil and paper. If Joyce were still alive, he would undoubtedly write *Finnegans Wake* on a video tape because of the huge possibilities of handling magnetic computer reserves.”³
- 6 Simultaneously as images, sculptures and acoustic and visual assemblages, installations have several aspects in his prolific œuvre. In his series *Family of Robots*, he explores the anthropomorphic dimension by creating static and articulated machines, first of all acoustic with the *K-456* (1964), and then visual. With them, and invariably with an iconoclastic attitude dear to his Fluxus beginnings, he introduces famous figures like *Warhol* (1994). Lastly, much more complex and monumental installations (*Electronic Superhighway*, *Continental U.S.*, *Alaska*, *Hawaii*, 1995) offer more global sensory experiences.

Nam June Paik et Charlotte Moorman, *TV Bed*, 1972, cat. *Nam June Paik : Videan' Videology 1959-1973*, Syracuse, New York : Everson Museum of Art, 1974 – fonds Dany Bloch

7 Media Machines

- 8 Among the archives which contain first-hand documents about the artist, we can mention the Bonotto Foundation, in Italy, the McCormick library in Evanston (Charlotte Moorman collection), and the Smithsonian American Art Museum which, since 2009, has been acquiring a very large share of the Paik archives, including the video material, documentations, correspondence, robot sculptures, television technologies, and videos. The archives include the artist's earliest writings about art, along with correspondence with Charlotte Moorman and John Cage, a complete collection of videos, notes for projects involving video and television works (like those of *Guadalcanal Requiem* [1977-1979]), and installations including *The More The Better* (1988). This archive also contains many technological items, video projectors, televisions from the 1950s and 1960s, old radios, modified musical instruments, and so on, together with notes and plans for the Paik-Abe video synthesizer, invented in 1969. Among the objects preserved, we find, last of all, a variety of toys and the desk that stood in the artist's studio. All these archives are a gift from Nam June Paik himself, following the execution of his will by Paik's nephew, Ken Hakuta (also known as *Dr. Fad*), with the consent of the artist's widow, Shigeko Kubota.
- 9 Two years after his death, a modern building called the Nam June Paik Art Center, dedicated to his œuvre, was financed by local funds and constructed in South Korea. Smallish in size, and located at Yongin-si, in Gyeonggi-do province, the building was designed in collaboration with the artist after an architectural competition, which was won by the agency run by the architects Kirsten Schemel and Marina Stankovic. Covered by a glass surface, the building has an area of 5,000 sq.m./55,000 sq.ft. in which, as well as the exhibition spaces, a library was opened in 2011. The centre in fact requires an adapted

museum context.⁴ Only the works of Nam June Paik may be exhibited in it, the way any other artwork would be presented. The centre has screening rooms and a room in which to consult video archives. The Nam June Paik library can be regarded as a “media machine”, a simple cube set in an empty space. It is at once a sculpture, an installation, and a form of architecture, inspired by the works of the artist himself, who was keen for the building to look like “his spirit living within it”. The library is on the first floor of the art centre and was designed by the American NHDM studio (with Nahyun Hwang and David Moon). This space houses, conserves and offers access to many historical and contemporary documents about the artist, as many books as videos (as well as rare Fluxus films), and sound tracks. One of a kind, it is conceived in the image of the artist who often played with randomness. The library has a “non-linear” access to the multimedia data, meaning that its content remains dynamic.

Carton d'invitation *Atout Paik...*, 13 mai 1981 à Vidéo ABI, Paris – fonds Dany Bloch

10 The Archives de la critique d'art also owns writings, catalogues and first-hand photographic documents about the artist, drawn, for the most part, from the Dany Bloch and Pierre Restany collections. Below are a few examples:

- Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, *TV Bed*, 1972, catalogue *Nam June Paik: Video'n' Videology 1959-1973*, Syracuse, New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974 – Dany Bloch collection. A rare catalogue with an action by the two artists, and a little known photographic work
- A letter from Paik addressed to Pierre Restany and José Anne Decock, March 1965 © all rights reserved – Pierre Restany collection, in which he talks about his projects, and in particular about a robot presented in Copenhagen which talks, walks and defecates... with a famous cellist (presumably Charlotte Moorman)
- Invitation *Atout Paik...*, 13 May 1981 to Vidéo ABI, Paris – Dany Bloch collection

- Photographic maquette by Nam June Paik, *Global Groove* (1973), for Bloch, Dany. *L'Art vidéo*, Paris : Limage 2 : Alin Avila, 1983, p. 66-67, (Mise au point sur l'art actuel) – Dany Bloch collection
- Illustrations by Nam June Paik, *Buddha* (1977) and *Le Penseur* (1976), for Bloch, Dany. *L'Art vidéo*, Paris : Limage 2 : Alin Avila, 1983, p. 70-71, (Mise au point sur l'art actuel) – Dany Bloch collection
- Poster by Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, *Jail to Jungle*, NYC, 10 February 1977 – Pierre Restany collection
- Press release for *Jail to Jungle*, NYC, 10 February 1977 – Pierre Restany collection
- Photograph of Nam June Paik, *TV Fish*, 12 February-27 March 1977, Amsterdam : Stedelijk Museum © all rights reserved – Pierre Restany collection
- Unpublished photograph of Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, *TV Cello*, 1976 © Eric Kroll – Dany Bloch collection.

Unpublished photograph of Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, *TV Cello*, 1976 © Eric Kroll – Dany Bloch collection

- 11 Some of Nam June Paik's writings were also published by Editions Lebeer Hossmann in 1993, under the title *Du cheval à Christo et autres écrits* (texts compiled and introduced by Edith Decker and Irmeline Lebeer). The book brings together unpublished writings and essays already published in different catalogues and magazines, in reverse chronological order, from 1992 to 1947, demonstrating Nam June Paik's very subtle way of thinking, witty, erotic, historical, philosophical and artistic. Paik was aware of his artistic output and his writings, which remain inventive, such as "Fluxus a ou n'a peut-être pas son Beethoven, mais compte certainement un Schubert... Ben Vautier" (unpublished text, September 1992, p. 12) and "Avant 1950, les artistes découvrirent l'espace abstrait, après 1960, les artistes vidéo découvrirent le temps abstrait" (p. 18-19). His writings are eclectic and wordy, often tinged with a marked sense of humour. Nam June Paik had a tendency, as in his works, to mix all kinds of ideas, at once memories, notes of intent and thoughts about the way the avant-garde was headed, and about video.
- 12 The Nam June Paik Art Center is currently showing an exhibition titled *Extraordinary Phenomenon: Nam June Paik*, from 27 June 2017 to 4 February 2018, which brings together works which display the relation to "participation" with the public. In this exhibition, however, the participation is solely confined to the interaction between the public and the works. It is also set up as a relation with social and political institutional constructs.

Extraordinary Phenomenon: Nam June Paik explores different works from the early years of his career, such as *Moving Theater*, *New Ontology of Music* and *Symphony of 20 Rooms*, assuming an active public. These latter would in fact have an influence on the rest of his artistic career.

NOTES

1. Nam June Paik, 1974, quoted in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound And Image In Western Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Ed. by Yael Kaduri
 2. Popper, Frank. *Electra : l'électricité et l'électronique dans l'art au XXe siècle*, Paris : Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1984, p. 12
 3. Quoted by Popper, Frank. *Electra*, *Op. cit.*, p. 51 et p. 52
 4. Cf. the recent book by Hölling, Hanna B. *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.
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AUTHORS

OLIVIER LUSSAC

Olivier Lussac is a professor in the Arts Department at the University of Lorraine. He teaches contemporary art history. He is working on the fields of performance, the acoustic arts and more particularly on the emergence of sound-image experimental forms in the latter half of the XXth century (happenings, Fluxus, performance). He is the author of, among other titles, *Fluxus et la musique* (Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010), *Happening & Fluxus : polyexpressivité et pratique concrète des arts* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), and *Arts et nouvelles technologies* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007, a collective volume with Jean-Marc Lachaud).