

GAGOSIAN

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Standing Up for Humanity in a World of Screens

A major retrospective of Nam June Paik, the foremost innovator of media art, begins a three-year international tour at Tate Modern in London.

Jason Farago



“Sistine Chapel,” a 34-projector installation by Nam June Paik, at Tate Modern ©. Estate of Nam June Paik; Andrew Dunkley/Tate

One of Europe’s leading museums has devoted its biggest show of the season to someone who saw the future more clearly than any artist of his century. He was a restless traveler and a keen student of anatomy who danced across the boundaries of art and science. He blended ancient religion with new forms of representation, and sketched strange new machines that would be realized long after his death.

You thought I meant that lefty at the Louvre? Forget Leonardo: I’m talking about the Korean-American conjurer Nam June Paik (1932-2006), who appears as pioneering as ever in a broad retrospective at Tate Modern in London, and more urgent than ever as a defender of human life in a world dominated by technology.

Capsule bios call Paik the “father of video art” — and he almost certainly invented the medium in 1965, when he shot footage of a papal procession with the first Sony Portapak to reach the United States.

He also turned television screens into clothing, furniture, garden decorations and musical instruments; repurposed closed-circuit surveillance cameras into live, participatory installations; and, more practically, invented new video editing technologies that prefigured today’s push-button camera filters.



“TV Garden” (1974-77) © Estate of Nam June Paik; via Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf; Andrew Dunkley/Tate

You’ll find all of that nifty stuff at the Tate exhibition, which includes more than 200 works and culminates with Paik’s imposing 34-projector installation “Sistine Chapel,” presented for the first time since its debut at the Venice Biennale of 1993. (The show tours next year to Amsterdam and Chicago, and in 2021 to San Francisco and Singapore.)

Even more important than what Paik made, though, is how he thought, spoke and wrote about art and technology.

Decades before Snapchat and Instagram, Paik became the first major artist to foresee how mass media would give way to multidirectional communication. Long before Skype and Google Hangouts, he masterminded global satellite transmissions that allowed artists to collaborate across oceans — collected in a joyous gallery at Tate Modern, featuring Paik’s live television broadcasts with David Bowie, Oingo Boingo and rockers from what were then Leningrad and Peking.



“Internet Dream” (1994) © Estate of Nam June Paik; via ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; Andrew Dunkley/Tate

And when other artists still used video merely for documentation, and treated mass media as at best a target for criticism, Paik correctly foresaw that the exclusionary mechanisms of high culture were on their last legs. The art gallery would be superseded by a worldwide network of images and voices that he called, two decades before Al Gore took up the phrase, an “electronic superhighway.”

Paik was born in 1932 in Japanese-occupied Seoul; he studied musical composition in Japan and later in West Germany, where he met the composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage and fell in with the zany experimental artists of the Fluxus movement.

The European avant-gardes of the mid-1950s were besotted with Zen Buddhism, and Paik, who filled notebooks with gleanings from Asian philosophy, began writing compositions and staging performances that could be meditative, paradoxical or just plain weird.

In his 1962 performance “Zen for Head,” seen at the Tate in a video reel of a chaotic Fluxus night at the theater, Paik slathered his hair with ink and painted a long black track on a scroll on the ground. The next year, he filled a villa in the German city of Wuppertal with detuned and junk-stuffed pianos, a record player with a dildo instead of a tonearm and the head of a freshly slaughtered ox.



“TV Buddha” (1974) © Estate of Nam June Paik; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Andrew Dunkley/Tate

While preparing his Fluxus funhouse, Paik discovered that a television he’d had shipped to Wuppertal had broken in transit. The cathode ray tube was broken, and the screen displayed only a single white line on a black background.

As Marcel Duchamp had done with a urinal 45 years previously, Paik turned the television on its side, and baptized it “Zen for TV” — the first of many artworks in which broadcasts, recordings or transmission glitches transformed the possibilities of sculpture. Magnets affixed to televisions turned President Richard Nixon into a spiral-shaped ghoul. A CCTV camera trained on an 18th-century statuette of the Buddha found a place for the spiritual amid the vapidities of broadcast.

And with his “video synthesizer,” a machine that he and the engineer Shuya Abe invented in 1969 (a hulking prototype is in a gallery at the Tate), Paik could interrupt the logic of television itself — blending together multiple video sources that he could edit, distort, colorize and interweave in real time.

The greatest of his distorted videos was “Global Groove” (1973), a half-hour video collage that blends Nixon and Cage, Korean musicians and rhythm-and-blues dancers, into a cascade of psychedelic imagery that overturned television’s commercial objectives.

In the mid-1960s, he collaborated with scientists at Bell Labs, where he created a few purely digital works with early computers. Yet Paik quickly figured out that art could not be contained within rigidities of code. The artist’s role was not to embrace technology wholesale, he felt, but to maintain a place for the human amid media transmissions and digital flows.

In this he and Charlotte Moorman, the intrepid cellist who became Paik’s greatest artistic partner, offered perhaps the most important examples of the last century of how to integrate new technologies into art.

When Moorman cradled Paik’s “TV Cello” against her bare skin, or when she donned a 60-pound brassiere made of two small televisions, musician and artist were definitely not buying into technology wholesale. They were imagining new kinds of art, new kinds of music and new kinds of sex that could counter the homogenized, focus-grouped visions of broadcast media.



“Charlotte Moorman with TV Cello and TV Eyeglasses” (1971) © Estate of Nam June Paik and Timm Rautert; via Peter Wenzel Collection, Germany

Novelty isn't everything in art. Time rolls back and forth; styles repeat, echo, remix; some innovations turn out to be dead ends. And for a man so innovative, Paik also made an above-average quantity of junk.

At the Tate, “Global Groove” and the “TV Cello” share space with cheesy jokes and dreary shamanistic installations. Certainly Paik's collaborations with the German artist Joseph Beuys, such as a straw-filled Mongolian yurt meant for glib East-meets-West rituals, have aged very badly.

But if you judge this show on the up-and-down quality of each gallery, you'll miss the full force of his achievement. What mattered to Paik was not the creation of stand-alone masterpieces, but the establishment of better, fresher, more democratic modes of communication.

That is present above all in the glorious gallery titled “Transmission,” which screens his ambitious live performances from the 1980s, originally broadcast by satellite to stations worldwide.

For “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell,” which took place on New Year's Day in 1984, Moorman, the artist Laurie Anderson and the choreographer Merce Cunningham in New York performed in real time with colleagues in Paris, where the actor Yves Montand did a little soft-shoe. “Wrap Around the World,” which coincided with the Seoul Olympics of 1988, was even more ambitious: Bowie kitized in Japanese with Ryuichi Sakamoto, while rock stars on either side of the Iron Curtain played riffs together.

There is such hope and optimism in these transnational performances, such certainty that communication would lead to a better tomorrow, that I could hardly stand it. For while Paik was so prescient about future technologies, he was desperately wrong about their applications.

“Information must be considered an energy alternative,” Paik wrote in 1979 — decades before this era of Big Data and digital surveillance, and the establishment of billion-dollar corporations whose principal resource is knowledge of our lives.

And if Paik in “Global Groove” proposed that all of us would soon have our very own television channels, he did not foresee how narcissistic and unworldly those would be, still less that they could fuel a reactionary politics not seen in the West since the 1930s.



Paik in Zurich in 1991 © Estate of Nam June Paik and Timm Rautert; via Peter Wenzel Collection, Germany

I look to Nam June Paik to remember that it didn't have to be this way, and that smartphones and social media were not predestined to become extractive technologies, turning human experience into data and then into profit.

Within the flows and counterflows of digital communication some spark of opportunity endures, and we can still chart a path to human freedom if we reroute them as thoroughly as he did broadcast television. Livestreamers of the world, unite! A global groove is possible!