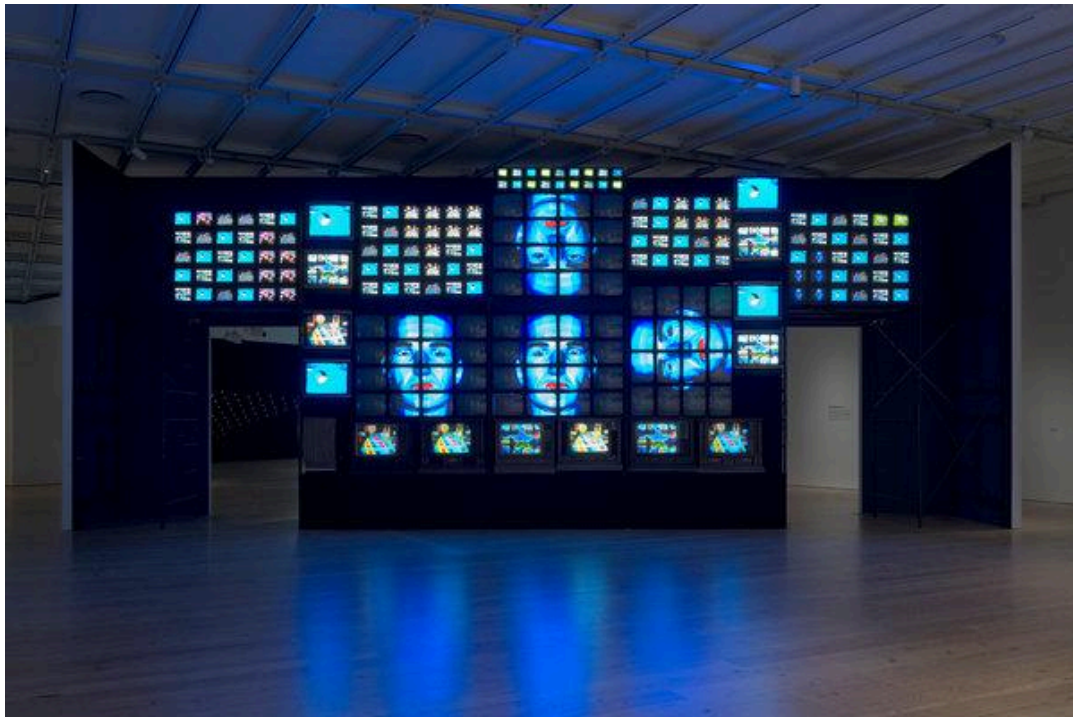


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Nam June Paik at the Whitney: A Work of Dizzying Complexity
The artist's monumental video wall, featuring a flood of imagery and music from David Bowie, Kraftwerk and others, is on view in "Programmed: Rules, Codes and Choreographies in Art, 1965-2018."

Roberta Smith



Nam June Paik's 1989 "Fin de Siècle II" at the Whitney Museum. More than 200 television monitors display images taken from broadcast television and video art. © Nam June Paik Estate, via Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Ron Amstutz

Many of the works in "Programmed: Rules, Codes and Choreographies in Art, 1965-2018," an exhibition at the Whitney Museum, require an electrical outlet. The presentation — drawn mostly from the museum's collection — involves much in the way of video projections, lights, television sets, voice-overs, soundtracks, computers, computer programs and, in the most recent efforts, touch screens.

Yet regardless of whether power sources are needed, all the artworks use algorithms. That is, they are executed according to plans, instructions, numerical systems, or, as the show's subtitle indicates, rules, codes and choreographies. The analog examples tend to be foundational works of Minimal and Conceptual Art: Donald Judd's 1965 aluminum relief based on the Fibonacci

numerical sequence; a Sol LeWitt wall drawing from 1976 executed to written directions applicable to walls of any dimension; and Joseph Kosuth's string of five words in green neon that reads "Five Words in Green Neon" (1965).

Then there is the show's most plugged work in several senses: Nam June Paik's 1989 "Fin de Siècle II," a monumental video wall of dizzying complexity formed by 207 television monitors of varying sizes arranged in adjoining grids. They emit a disorienting, enrapturing flood of images and music taken from broadcast television and video art and programmed to repeat relentlessly, mutate wildly and change abruptly, although a driving, danceable beat is constant.

All kinds of culture, high and low, pass before our eyes and into our ears. David Bowie pirouettes in a white suit with Louise Lecavalier, a former soloist with the acrobatic Canadian dance troupe La La La Human Steps, while singing "Look Back in Anger." Merce Cunningham, in a red leotard, dances a solo and is shadowed by his own outline, in black. An image of a nude woman is put through numerous paces, multiplied different ways, in different colors, sometimes looking like an early Warhol painting, and is accompanied by an ecstatic blast of Philip Glass's music.

We see the head of Joseph Beuys performing in his signature hat, growling into a mike. His face appears on the central grid of monitors and then goes big, one massive image spread across them all. Especially complex are the machinations of a series of robot-like animated heads, both wireframe and solid blue with red lips. They start small, expand and then zoom in for grids of eyes or mouths. Metallic-looking piano keyboards, musical notes and a vast recording-studio control console twist and churn.

These animations are all from Paik's most extensively used visual and aural source: Kraftwerk's 1986 music video for "Musique Non Stop," a pioneering early example of computer-generated animation by Rebecca Allen. (Her name appears in part of the piece, as does that of Paul Garrin, who, as Paik's assistant, was responsible for the variations on the female nude.) "Musique Non Stop" also supplies the main soundtrack; its mechanized sound and distorted voices, like its animation, are of a piece with Kraftwerk's robot aesthetic.



Paik's video features David Bowie singing "Look Back in Anger." © Nam June Paik Estate, via Whitney Museum of American Art; Ron Amstutz



The video has a series of robot-like animated heads, including a solid blue one with red lips. © Nam June Paik Estate, via Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Ron Amstutz

The grids of smaller monitors around the edges exude layered images and motifs. (Stars reminiscent of the American flag are frequent.) These spin in and out of view, their abstract patterns evoke pulsating electronic quilts.

“Fin de Siècle II” is the lodestar, the magnetic center of “Programmed.” Visitors return to it repeatedly, often with cameras poised, sometimes just staring in disbelief. It seems unbelievable that Paik’s masterpiece is 30 years old. He made it for the Whitney’s 1989 exhibition “Image World: Art and Media Culture” — which like this one, looked to art’s unfolding future. It was given to the museum in 1993, but has never again been on view; the label calls it “partially restored,” indicating a difficult rehabilitation.

The thrill of seeing “Fin de Siècle II” again is part of the thrill of the whole show, which ends with several recent digital works commissioned by the museum. In this way, “Programmed” offers an optimistic snapshot of the Whitney’s mission today, especially its determination to acquire, and foster new, experimental work, while giving older works in its collection fresh relevance.