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‘Nam June Paik’ Review: The Father of Video Art’s Wide Net
A major retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ranges widely, revealing the artist’s uncanny prescience when it came to creativity and technology.

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*Nam June Paik’s ‘Sistine Chapel’ (1993/2019) as seen in the current retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
PHOTO: ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK; PHOTO: ANDRIA LO*

Nam June Paik (1932-2006) is often called the “father of video art.” But he’s much more than that, as the career-spanning, internationally traveling retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art makes clear. Organized by Rudolf Frieling of SFMoMA and Sook-Kyung Lee of the Tate, with SFMoMA’s Andrea Nitsche-Krupp, “Nam June Paik” is making its sole North American stop in the Golden State. With over 200 works in an abundance of media, it’s a detailed portrait of a singularly forward-thinking artist whose influence is strongly felt today.

If the Korean-born Paik is pigeonholed by art history for his work with video, it’s because the screen was the most ubiquitous element in a career that is otherwise hard to categorize thanks to the sheer variety of ideas it grappled with: Zen Buddhism, sex and classical music, and interconnectivity in a world of global broadcasting, just to name a few. And beyond using film in the same way a painter uses brushes and pigments, video itself is usually only one small part of a much larger project. Aside from videos, the show also includes LPs, collage, photography, sculpture and more by this omnivorous talent. Paik may be the father of video art, but he’s also a composer, a designer, a VJ, a conceptualist, a performance artist and a futurist.

We get an idea of Paik’s catholic creative mind in the first gallery with “TV Buddha” (1974), in which an 18th-century wooden Buddha sits, staring straight ahead into a television screen that displays his own image, broadcast via a closed-circuit camera. On the one hand, it’s a humorous

play—and Paik often laced his work with humor—on (self-)reflection, enlightenment and the challenges of meditation. However, it’s also a tongue-in-cheek warning about vanity and carefully crafted public images in the age of television.



Timm Rautert's 'Nam June Paik Lying Among Televisions, Zurich' (1991). PHOTO: TIMM RAUTERT

The following gallery steps back to 1963 to examine Paik’s first solo exhibition, “Exposition of Music—Electronic Television” at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany. Filling all three floors of that exhibition space with immersive and interactive works, a practice common in today’s contemporary art world, Paik’s show was groundbreaking for its time. Drawing from his training in classical music and relationships with avant-garde composers such as John Cage, whom Paik met in Germany after moving there from Japan in 1956, this was the first of many experiments in which the artist tried to tear down the barriers between visual art and music, and between audience and artist.



Paik's 'TV Cello' (1971). PHOTO: ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK

One area featured several “prepared pianos”—instruments that had been altered or tampered with, usually by adding hardware-store jetsam to their inner workings—that visitors were invited to interact with, one of which is on display here. Elsewhere, audiotape was cut up and adhered to a wall in an abstract fashion; guests could use a detached tape-head to play their own music by running it along the fragments (a version of the piece is here as well, with museum volunteers

providing occasional demonstrations). “Broken” TVs were repurposed into sculptures in their own right—readymades for the nuclear age. In the lavatory, dismembered mannequin parts bobbed in a bathtub.



*Peter Moore's photo of 'Charlotte Moorman With TV Cello and TV Eyeglasses,' (1971)
PHOTO: BARBARA MOORE / ARS, N.Y./PAULA COOPER GALLERY, N.Y.*

Paik's radical prescience is on display in ways big and small in the next gallery, which looks at the period when he worked in the Studio for Electronic Music of West German Broadcasting (WDR) in Cologne, and later at Bell Labs in New Jersey and WGBH-TV Boston. The “Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer” (1969-72) is hard to miss: a chunky control stand Paik developed with electrical engineer Shuya Abe in Boston that allowed him to manipulate video in real time. Though it looks more like something you'd find in a control room at Chernobyl than at CNN, it was adopted by several TV studios at the time and presaged Paik's later work in satellite broadcasting and live video (the examples here, “Good Morning Mr. Orwell,” 1984, and “Bye Bye Kipling,” 1986, have an absurdist, Vaporwave flavor that's right at home in 21st-century digital art).

Easier to overlook but not to be missed is “Do You Know” (1973), a small screenprint in which Paik asks viewers if they realize “how soon artists will have their own TV channels.” While every artist might not have his or her own television station today, the internet and social media

have given them a platform that would have been nearly unimaginable in the 1970s. Nearly, that is, because Paik himself, in a 1974 report for the Rockefeller Foundation, predicted the creation of what he called a “broadband communication network” or “electronic super highway.”



*Paik's 'Merce/Digital' (1988).
PHOTO: ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK*

Galleries dedicated to Paik's relationship with other artists reveal just how much he valued collaboration. Cellist Charlotte Moorman, the interlocutor with whom he is most closely identified, is central here, and SFMoMA has collected some of the most iconic objects related to their partnership. Together, they advocated for avant-garde art and music, aimed to humanize technology, and tried to make classical music overtly sensual. He created “TV Cello” (1971) out of a trio of TVs; perhaps the best known Paik work, it is a major highlight. Recordings nearby of Moorman playing the instrument are simultaneously captivating,

humorous and retro-futuristic. Other standouts in these sections include “Zen for Film” (1964), a blank reel of projected film that clearly draws from Cage's once-controversial, silent “4 '33 ”,

and “Merce/Digital” (1988), which honors legendary composer Merce Cunningham by combining 15 monitors into a “robot” dancer, frozen midpose.



Paik's 'TV Garden' (1974-77/2002). PHOTO: ESTATE OF NAM JUNE PAIK; PHOTO: PETER TIJHUIS

“ Nam June Paik ” is an undeniably dense, complex show. Fortunately, the curators have avoided making it an overly academic presentation, and the exhibition is anything but dry. In this they’re greatly aided by Paik’s own ambitious installations. If works that explore Cage’s notion of indeterminacy or photos documenting decades-old performance pieces barely register for the Instagram set, there’s “TV Garden” (1974-77/2002). A collection of televisions in various sizes and positions scattered throughout a field of live plants, it isn’t just a rumination on the way technology can be integrated into the natural world—it’s also enticingly postable. And Paik’s monumental “Sistine Chapel” (1993/2019), created for the 1993 Venice Biennale and restaged here in the show’s final gallery, uses 33 projectors to screen a collage of his past video pieces across surfaces scattered throughout the room. In a sense, Paik created his own mini-retrospective in that work, looking back at the myriad people and movements he embraced during his career. It’s a fitting cap to this grand exploration of a remarkable creative mind.