

Teaching

Nam June Paik

ARTIST

Nam June PAIK

(nam june peck)

백남준



Nam June Paik, 1976

BORN

1932, Seoul

DIED

2006, Miami

THEMES

Materials and Process

ART MEDIUMS

**Installation
Film and Video**

“It’s all your life in one. Our life is half natural and half technological. Half-and-half is good. You cannot deny that high-tech is progress. We need it for jobs. Yet if you make only high-tech, you make war. So we must have strong human element to keep modesty and natural life.”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

No figure had a greater influence in revealing the artistic potential lurking behind television’s flickering facade than Nam June Paik. Commonly hailed as the “father of video art,” Paik reshaped perceptions of the electronic image through a prodigious output of manipulated TV sets, live performances, global television broadcasts, single-channel videos, and video installations. Paik’s complex media-based art grew out of his early interests in electronics, as well as his foundations in music and performance. His career took him from Asia through Europe to the United States.

Paik was born in 1932 in Seoul, during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Paik and his family fled to Hong Kong, and later, Japan, where he settled to study. Following his graduation from the University of Tokyo in 1956, Paik moved to Germany and studied musical composition.

Arriving in New York in the mid-1960s, he joined a new generation of artists that were altering the ways in which one interacts with the moving image. Paik became a prominent member of the avant-garde Fluxus movement, whose aims included the transformation of everyday actions into art. Quickly emerging at the forefront of this international group, Paik also sought to involve the viewer as an active participant in his performances and installations, often introducing surprising, unfamiliar elements.

TV Garden (1974), one of Paik’s seminal installations, illustrates his profound grasp of the capacity of video technology and demonstrates the new aesthetic discourse that he helped to create. To enter the piece is to experience an uncanny fusion of the natural and the technological. Hidden amid undergrowth of living plants are video monitors of various sizes. All are playing the artist’s 1973 collaboration with the engineer John J. Godfrey, *Global Groove*, a pulsating pastiche of performers, pop iconography, traditional Korean dancers and other cultural references, and even Paik himself.

TV Garden set a new standard for immersive, site-specific video installations with its invitation to visitors to recalibrate their senses in this lush technological jungle of color and sound. Restaged for the artist’s solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 2000, it is a powerful reflection on how technology and media have enabled new possibilities for global communication, radically reshaping our understanding and experience of the world.

¹ Nam June Paik, quoted in Douglas C. McGill, “Art People,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/03/arts/art-people.html>.



Nam June Paik, *TV Garden*, 1974 (2000 version). Color video, with sound, 29 min., with minimum of 30 television sets, and live plants, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the International Director's Council and Executive Committee Members: Ann Ames, Edythe Broad, Henry Buhl, Elaine Turner Cooper, Dimitris Daskalopoulos, Harry David, Gail May Engelberg, Ronnie Heyman, Dakis Joannou, Cindy Johnson, Barbara Lane, Linda Macklowe, Peter Norton, Willem Pepler, Denise Rich, Simonetta Seragnoli, David Teiger, Ginny Williams, and Elliot K. Wolk; and through prior gift of The Bohen Foundation 2001.⁶

View and Discuss

→ Look at images of the installation *TV Garden* (1974 [2000 version]). It is difficult to comprehend an artist's life work by looking at any one piece. This may be especially true of Paik, who explored so many artistic paths.

To get a better understanding of his work, you may want to view these websites with your students:

- Artsy: artsy.net/artist/nam-june-paik
- Gagosian: gagosian.com/artists/nam-june-paik/
- Smithsonian American Art Museum: americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/paik

How does *TV Garden* fit into the arc of Paik's work?

→ *TV Garden* was shown at the Guggenheim as part of the retrospective exhibition *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* in 2000. Each of the screens played Paik's 1973 collaboration with John J. Godfrey, *Global Groove*—a whirlwind, multimedia piece and one of the most influential works of video art. Woven into *Global Groove* are films and videotapes by other artists, interviews and voiceovers, pop music, appropriated commercials, and broadcast breaks.

View a segment of the work at medienkunstnetz.de/works/global-grove/video/1/. Discuss student responses, keeping in mind that this video was made nearly four decades ago.

→ In 1989 Paik said, "Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence."²

Discuss this quote. In what ways do you agree or disagree with his statement?

² Nam June Paik, quoted in Eva Respini, *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today*, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 78.

Classroom Activities

The Power of Video Art

Paik envisioned that video was a medium that could support a new art form. He is therefore frequently referred to as the “father of video art.” In 1969, before the Internet, cell phones, and cable TV, Paik wrote:

“I want to shape the TV screen canvas as precisely as Leonardo, as freely as Picasso, as colorfully as Renoir, as profoundly as Mondrian, as violently as Pollock and as lyrically as Jasper Johns.”³

He also claimed:

“As collage technique replaced oil paint, the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas. Someday artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk. There are 4,000,000 dots per second on one television screen, just think of the variety of images you can get. It’s so cool. It’s like going to the moon.”⁴

Read and discuss these quotes. Do you feel that Paik’s vision has been realized or not? Support your responses with examples.

³ Nam June Paik, “Versatile Color TV Synthesizer” (1969), quoted in Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1998), p. 154.

⁴ Nam June Paik, “Manifesto” (1965), quoted in Jasia Reichardt, *The Computer in Art* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), p. 95.

Classroom Activities

Create and Recycle

In 2009 the Smithsonian acquired Paik's archives from his estate. It filled seven tractor trailers. During his lifetime, Paik traveled the world collecting things, including televisions, video projectors, radios, record players, cameras, toys, games, and folk sculptures.⁵ His interests were vast, and each object held the potential of finding its way into a future work.⁶ Today, laptops, mobile phones, and other discarded electronic goods are the world's fastest growing waste problem, and the amount of technological junk continues to rise, with only about 20 percent being recycled.⁷



Nam June Paik's studio

Collaboratively collect discarded electronics and other materials to use in new works of art. Once works are completed, be sure that students learn how to responsibly dispose of any unwanted or unused components.

5 The Nam June Paik Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/research/paik>.

6 Jon Anderson, "Nam June Paik: Preserving the Human Televisions," *Art in America*, February 5, 2013, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/nam-june-paik-smithsonian/>.

7 Sarah Knapton, "Discarded Phones, Computers and Electronics behind World's Fastest Growing Waste Problem," *Telegraph*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2017/12/13/discarded-phones-computers-electronics-behind-worlds-fastest/>.

Resources

Websites

- Gagosian. <https://gagosian.com/artists/nam-june-paik/>.
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, *Nam June Paik: Global Visionary*. <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/paik>.

Videos

- Asia Society. "Introducing *Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot*." August 28, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmkYjGVVRFA>.
- Munroe, Alexandra. "Nam June Paik: The Father of Video Art." August 20, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIK1mfLmYto>.

Audio

- Reed, Josephine. "Nam June Paik: The Artist Who Invented Video Art." National Endowment for the Arts, 2013. <https://www.arts.gov/photos/nam-june-paik-artist-who-invented-video-art>.

Articles

- Hanhardt, John. "Rediscovering Paik: A Chat with Smithsonian Curator John G. Hanhardt." Interview by John Anderson. Smithsonian American Art Museum, March 31, 2011. <https://americanart.si.edu/research/paik/resources/hanhardt>.

Books

- Hanhardt, John. *Nam June Paik*. Exh. cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from his given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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