

**Author** KissPál Szabolcs

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# *Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: KissPál Szabolcs*

## Colophon

**Editor** Youngchul Lee, Henk Slager

**Translation** Ji-Young Yoo, Soojung Park,  
Wonhwa Yoon

**Final Editing** Annette W. Balkema

**Designer** TEXT (Jin Jung, Han Jeong Hoon)

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# KissPál Szabolcs

KissPál Szabolcs lives and works in Budapest. Szabolcs develops a computer-based installation and performance practice where an “intermedial” approach towards the elements of the work, including the use of technical and electronic images, pursues an inductive rather than generative methodology.

Over the past decade, both in my artistic practice and in my teaching, I have been closely involved with the phenomenon called “media art”. Although I find it a rather problematic concept challenged even by a number of theorists, it denotes a very important field of contemporary culture based on a tradition influenced decisively by Nam June Paik. However, in the last couple of years a narrow but deep schism has appeared within the historiography of this new field as its traditions and origins are interpreted in two major ways. One places the emphasis on the issues of perception understood as a psychophysical process. This is what Lev Manovich calls the historicizing approach towards media art history. The other aims at contextualizing it as a socially determined process carrying the potential of a deep impact not only on our contemporary visual culture but also on social processes. From this latter perspective – called pragmatical approach by Manovich – the usage of media and communication networks as well as of the “new media” is interpreted as a channel through which contemporary society is shaped by various historical forces.

Although the two interpretations exist in parallel, they deal with two different definitions of subjectivity. One conceives of it as a rather apolitical entity delimited by its own senses in relation to the world, the other thinks of it as of an individual subjected to social interactions in relation to his work as the basic human activity and in a situation of dependence on power. In both cases, the issue of participation comes into the foreground, although with different connotations. In the first case, we can speak about a **user**, in the second about an **individual**.

It is not by chance that the Fluxus movement has a highlighted importance in this second historical

narrative due to its transitory position between art and life. The turning point represented by this movement is also mentioned by Bourriaud's relational aesthetics in close relation to the concept of participation. But while he considers the connectivity induced by the communication networks a plain transition from the society of spectacle to the society of statistics, the act of participation is attributed to a subject understood as a **viewer**.

In spite of their technological traits, Nam June Paik's experimentalism and attitude towards media objects deals with a different kind of subject. I think one of the most important contributions Nam June Paik has made to contemporary art is the modification of art's attitude towards its technically changing environment, which is shaped by a fast and dramatic process. The impact of his artistic attitude has come to influence our relationship towards technical devices not only as objects, but also as cultural and social phenomena. Instead of framing the viewer in aesthetical terms, Nam June Paik positions him/her rather as an **individual** who frees him/herself from the control of technology. To support this idea, I would only mention the Robot K-456, which in a performance of 1982 suffered a staged "accident" outside the Whitney Museum of American Art, thus creating not only a metaphor of the fragility of technology itself but also of the mankind depending on it. As this dependence **has** continuously been growing ever since its occurrence, the reformulation of the individual's integrity is necessary both in anthropological and social terms.

Even though his works are difficult to label as political since they lack explicit social connotations, Nam June Paik's oeuvre was to become the point of origin for several important fields of "media art". Many of these are based on the key notion of a social participation, such as the DIY (Do It Yourself) or tactical media. The DIY culture of the nineties, for instance, led at the end of the millennium to the DIWO (Do It With Others) culture, which achieved in my view a much more effective re-politicization of the gaps within the social tissue denoted by Bourriaud as **interstice** spaces. As brilliant examples belonging to the DIWO culture, several projects of the CAE (Critical Art Ensemble) are worth mentioning, first of all the **Free Range Grain** (2003-2004) project. The simple gesture of opening up the access of the individuals towards the field



**Free Range Grain**  
Critical Art Ensemble with Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu, at the Mass MoCA's *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* 2004-2005.  
Image courtesy of Steve Kurtz



Nam June Paik,  
*A Tribute to John Cage*, 1973(still image).  
Nam June Paik Art Center Collection

of corporately owned and privatized knowledge (related to genetic modification) creates a new model of relationality in which the subject is no longer considered a viewer, but rather a social actor.

The same could be stated about the field of conceptual design, especially the projects arising from the MIT course led by Krzysztof Wodiczko in which design as activity forms a bridge between art, society and the individual. While Nam June Paik was “hacking” in the name of the Fluxus-freedom, the emblematic object of the 1970s, the television, Wodiczko’s Interrogative Design Group forms and transforms the fetishistic technical devices of the present in the framework of a cultural anthropological discourse. Both of the two above-mentioned examples distance themselves not only from aesthetic categories in general, but also from the historically consensual concept of art in particular. As they adopt a rather activist approach which challenges the dominant paradigms of the established humanities, namely the human activity called art, and point into the direction of transforming it into applied anthropology. It is without doubt that by doing so a better and more political understanding of “human condition” might occur.

Due to the fact that anthropology itself embraces various aspects of human existence (biological, cultural, social, archaeological, linguistic, etc.), an artistic anthropology should first of all define its position among these. As the structuralist approach of conceptualism proved in many cases to be ignorantly ahistorical, the position most suitable for the present times might be a socio-cultural perspective with a strong emphasis on technical media as the main means through which actual relationality is shaped along with its intercultural aspects. Thus the specific qualities of the medium cannot be left unaccounted either in artistic or in technical sense. Therefore, artistic anthropology cannot be considered (solely) an act of communication, but also an act of knowledge production and dissemination that might lead in time to a radical change of the function of art.

Artistic anthropology in its applied form, on the one hand, and cultural activism on the other might become the major forms that art will be blending into in future times. In both cases, the heritage of Nam June Paik plays a crucial role.