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# *Mediating States of Media: Nam June Paik's Art of (Im)Mediation*

## Colophon

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- 1 **Nam June Paik, *Electronic Art III: Paik=Abe Video Synthesizer with Charlotte Moorman*, exh. Brochure (New York: Galleria Bonino, 1971), p.1. Quoted in John G. Hanhardt and John Ippolito, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000, p. 107.**
- 2 **Quoted in Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York: Dutton Co., 1970, p. 308. Emphasis added.**
- 3 **“Slow TV: Netflix’s Chill, Mesmerizing Antidote to the Madness of 2016.” *The Daily Beast* 2016.9.5 [http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/09/05/slow-tv-netflix-s-chill-mesmerizing-antidote-to-the-madness-of-2016.html?source=TDB&via=FB\\_Page](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/09/05/slow-tv-netflix-s-chill-mesmerizing-antidote-to-the-madness-of-2016.html?source=TDB&via=FB_Page)**

Video art imitates nature, not in its appearance or mass, but in its intimate “time-structure”... which is the process of AGING (a certain kind of irreversibility).” (Paik 1976, emphasis added )

Widely hailed as the “father of video art,” Nam June Paik lives on.

What begs the question, however, is the sheer diversity of his entire oeuvre *beyond* video. On top of his famous video works, Paik’s artworks encompass music, performance, painting, sculpture, cinema, TV, laser, and digital – let alone everything that wanders between or (re)mixes them. Is this simply a tell-tale sign which proves Paik as one of those avant-garde artists – who poked their noses into virtually everything? Is this not the proof of his (and their) reign whose time has now clearly passed?

Sidestepping such an *idée fixe*, this paper seeks to offer a different reading. For, despite the frenzy born of his dizzying changes of media, Paik’s works seem to betray a striking degree of consistency (if not stability) – in terms of what I call “states of media” wherein mediation soon gives way to the sense of immediacy or “immediation.” Put differently, his artworks mark and embody varying degrees or *states* of media as what not simply *mediates* but fundamentally *transmutates* humans and nonhuman entities.

I will show how these states are coextensive with Paik’s persistent, if at times contradictory exploration of Time, particularly in terms of its irreversibility, aka ‘entropy.’ In so doing, I will try to revise the well-worn myth of Paik’s (putatively naïve) humanism or anthropocentrism – in favor of what Walter Benjamin calls ‘Natural History (Naturgeschichte)’ in which Machine and Human *age* alike. As such, I will demonstrate how Paik’s oeuvre remain more relevant and perhaps contemporary than ever.

## Mediation and Immediation

Among many of Paik’s ‘prophecies,’ the most well-known concerns the one on TV.

The nature of environment is much more on TV than on film or painting. In fact, TV (its random movement of tiny electrons) is the environment of today.”<sup>1</sup>

To this, one can readily add Paik’s following remark on *Silent TV Station* as a more detailed storyboard.

The *Silent TV Station* will simply be *there*, not intruding on other activities, and will be looked at exactly like a landscape or a beautiful bathing nude of Renoir. Normal TV bores you and makes you nervous; this soothes you. It’s like a tranquilizer. Maybe you could call it video-soma.”<sup>2</sup>

*TV Bed* and, particularly *TV Chair* (1968) belong to this category as they are designed in a way that we are likely to ignore its status of media, i.e., as what mediates us. And when properly adjusted, Paik’s remarks can be readily conflated with the recent report on Netflix’s decision to air the so-called ‘Slow TV.’<sup>3</sup>

What is less quoted and much less commented upon, however, is the following remark: “TV without a box is no longer TV but a “video environment.”” (Paik 1970)

- 4 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, p.1
- 5 Ibid. p. 2. Kittler's "Hegelianism in disguise" is pronounced increasingly toward the later phase of his work where he harks back to the ancient Greeks, declaring their alphabet system as the origin [Ursprung] or the blue print of the Turing system, whereby our current age is rediscovered as the culminating point of (Media) History. On this point, see Wolfgang Ernst, "Kittler-Time," In *Media After Kittler*, eds. Eleni Ikonidou and Scott Wilson, Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2015, 51-66.
- 6 "In some installations the viewer is required to lie flat. Paik neither analyzed TV messages and effects, nor provided a counterdiscourse based on rational exchange, nor made the technology available to others...Paik's playful poetry pins the person in place." Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment." In *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, New York: MIT Press, 2004, p. 74.
- 7 Ibid. Emphasis added.
- 8 Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment." In *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, New York: MIT Press, 2004, p. 74.
- 9 David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).
- 10 Nam June Paik, "Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television." In *Fluxus* (New York), June 1964, p.7.
- 11 Wulf Herzogenrath *Video Works 1963-1988*, (London: Hayward Gallery, 1988), p.43.

Why is this distinction necessary?

To answer this question, let's take a brief detour.

Declaring the advent or, rather, the arrival of a world in which "[t]he general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media,"<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Kittler – unambiguously hinting at Hegel – (in)famously predicted that "[i]nstead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run as an endless loop."<sup>5</sup> As "any medium can be translated into any other," goes on Kittler, "a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium."

In light of Kittler's bold argument, it is quite tempting to quote Paik's following statement as utterly prophetic.

As the Happening is the fusion of various arts, so cybernetics is the exploitation of boundary regions between and across various existing sciences.

Nonetheless, Paik's insistence on the distinction between 'TV with a box' – which serves as arguably *the* signature icon of Paik's numerous oeuvre – and 'the video environment' is of crucial implication for our discussion of (im)mediation since it points to the *flickering mechanism of recognition and forgetting* of mediation process.

The scathing tone of her argument notwithstanding<sup>6</sup>, feminist artist and critic Rosler's brief discussion of Paik in this regard contains some useful observations. Particularly notable is her emphasis on "Paik's interference with TV's inviolability, *its air of nonmateriality*."<sup>7</sup> While she takes Paik to task in terms of his "anti-aesthetic aestheticism," and, it must be admitted, she does not develop this point further, her valorization of Paik's intervention as well as his endeavor to render the material dimension of TV manifest is highly relevant to our discussion.<sup>8</sup>

What Paik engages with is the relationship between 'figure and ground' – arguably the central conceptual backdrop of *Feedback*, David Joselit's fascinating study of Paik, Warhol and Malcolm X as part and parcel of the fluctuating mediascape of the U.S. in the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> Put differently in my own terms, what Paik seems to have in mind is the relationship between mediation and immediation whereby what was foregrounded as mediation gets forgotten, receding into the background.

### (Inter)Facing Time with Technology

The real issue implied in "Art and Technology" is not to make another scientific toy, but how to *humanize* the technology and the electronic medium, which is progressing rapidly.<sup>10</sup>

This sentence is arguably one of the most frequently cited among Paik's innumerable statements, as what putatively best describes Paik's art as "humanist" at its core. Concluding his catalogue essay for *Video Works 1963-1988*<sup>11</sup>, for example, Wulf Herzogenrath, while quoting a similar statement ("One must know technology very well in order to be able to overcome it."), thus writes of "an effective humanization of technology."

What begs our question, however, is what we mean by "humanization of technology"? As I suggested above, I argue that this is not so much adding some human warmth to the allegedly cold and indifferent technological assemblages as rendering the latter as part and parcel of Nature at its most historical. As Adorno, having absorbed

12 T. W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," trans. Robert Hulot-Kentor, *Telos* no. 60 (1984), p.111.

Benjamin's core insights, expounds in his "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," originally presented in July 1932 as a lecture to a Kant Society gathering in Frankfurt, this notion is designed to overcome "the customary antithesis of nature and history...to push these concepts to a point where their pure opposition is transcended."<sup>12</sup>

However esoteric it may sound, the idea of 'Naturgeschichte,' I argue, is a powerful tool to grasp the world in its vertiginous transformation whereby the distinction between artificial and natural increasingly and effectively collapses. Furthermore, and perhaps more fundamentally, this notion for Walter Benjamin is unthinkable without the sense of transience. Under the gaze of *Naturgeschichte*, everything is doomed to aging. Nothing can last forever – perhaps even machines. And it is precisely in this regard that I argue Paik's works can be best captured.

Let's take *Gertrude Stein* (1990) for instance. As is well-known, this celebrity robot figure – along with *Beuys Voice* (1990) – attests to Paik's life-long interest in cyborgs – which harks back to, say, *The Robot K-456* (1963/64). Made up of miniature TV monitors from head to toe, however, this robot belongs to a series of TV works Paik began making, using the wooden cabinets of antique TV sets from the forties and fifties. Not unlike those works such as *Candle TV* (1975), in which "[t]he design of TV sets, the objects of the future, rapidly comes to look dated and nostalgic," newer if smaller monitors are found inside much older and bulky boxes here. In doing so, they "mak[e] it possible to see the rapid transformations in technology."

Crucial here is the fact that the newer television sets were not installed later to keep the work up-to-date. Rather, they were inserted there from the outset. As such, they serve to mark, if not halt, the passing of time. Far from trying to stand the test of time, Paik's works such as *Gertrude Stein* opt for archiving the passage of time (to come). For us, what matters is not so much hailing this archiving as a triumph over time as thinking through the way in which Paik copes with the issue of temporality.

Ranging from *TV Clock* (1963) to *Moon Is the Oldest TV* (1965), many of Paik's works have manifested the artist's keen interest in time. Nonetheless, what is notable in the later works we touched upon is the way they grapple with the issue of entropy or irreversible progression of time, accompanied by its de(con)structive effects on any entity. The prime example in this regard is *Confused Rain* (1967). Despite its affinity with, say, Marcel Broodthaers' *La Pluie (projet pour un texte)* (1969), what distinguishes one from the other is, again, the protocol of entropy as Paik's works show alphabets fall from above in random fashion. The often-noted tropes of indeterminism and contingency, I argue, can be channeled into the idea of entropy as their putatively free or random status are strictly coextensive with the former.

### Obsolescent New Media

It is precisely at this particular juncture of rapidly transmogrified mediascape, however, in which Paik's works merit our attention – particularly as to the issue of conservation and obsolescence.

For instance, it has been more than a decade since Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., which had owned the Quasar brand, stopped making the model Paik extensively used in *Video Flag Z* in 1988. Acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, this work is designed to flourish a 6-foot-high grid of 84 white Quasar monitors, flashing a changing constellation of images that amounted to an American flag in pulsating red, white and blue. As time passed, however, its screens turned dark, falling prey to "the very modernity to which they paid tribute" while "the artwork's parts,

13 "Art That Goes on the Blink," *LA Times* 2004. 10.4 <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/04/business/fi-art4>

14 "Nam June Paik | Conservation of 'Untitled'" The Museum of Modern Art *Youtube* channel 2013.5.8 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO\\_lwjhoSiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO_lwjhoSiU)

15 "Taking care of obsolete technology in art: Conservation | 'Untitled' by Nam June Paik." <https://m.redd.it.com/r/onthegrid/comments/2vdaki/>

16 "Art That Goes on the Blink," *LA Times* 2004. 10.4 <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/04/business/fi-art4>

17 "Art That Goes on the Blink," *LA Times* 2004. 10.4 <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/04/business/fi-art4>

18 Gregory Zinman, "The Archival Silences of Nam June Paik's *Etude*" (2016) [https://www.academia.edu/27123201/The\\_Archival\\_Silences\\_of\\_Nam\\_June\\_Paiks\\_ETUDE](https://www.academia.edu/27123201/The_Archival_Silences_of_Nam_June_Paiks_ETUDE)

including the 84 defunct television sets, are packed in the museum's warehouse."<sup>13</sup>

Describing his two-year restoration efforts of Nam June Paik *Untitled* (1993), Glenn Wharton, MoMA media conservator confessed: "This work is either a conservation nightmare, or a conservation dream."<sup>14</sup> The worries he shared with his team that they "wouldn't be able to show it in the future, since it's dependent on the technologies that go obsolescent over time,"<sup>15</sup> are no less tangible and timely than ever.

To be sure, Paik's works partake of countless other 'avant-garde' media art works, many of which, as Jon Ippolito, then the associate curator of media arts at the Guggenheim Museum in New York commented, "are decaying badly, on life support or turning to dust in a warehouse." Speaking of "a looming threat of mass extinction on the media arts landscape," he refers to "a great debate" waged "over what to do about it."<sup>16</sup>

The article in question quotes Bruce Sterling, who provides an intriguing thought experiment as to the question at stake as follows:

Let's take George Washington's ax, the one he used to chop down the cherry tree, as a hypothetical... Let's say we had to replace the head three times and the handle five times. But, hey, it still occupies the same space. Is it still the same ax?<sup>17</sup>

Sterling's question pinpoints the conundrums of preservation of "new media art works," and as we saw above, this question is no longer hypothetical. As the once new media art works *age*, not a few of them are in need of maintenance – often badly.

As a matter of fact, Sterling's question was recently answered by Gregory Zinman who, through his archival research, discovered *Etude* (1967), one of the three artworks Paik made during his residency at Bell Labs while toying with the IBM GE-600. As a work that encompasses a diverse array of materials, ranging from computer punch cards to printouts showing the FORTRAN programming language, *Etude* constitutes one of the prime examples that partake of Paik's archival impulse as outlined above. This work was resurrected by Zinman with the help of a computer scientist, i.e., by being translated from FORTRAN 66 code into HTML 5. But

...in the course of reviving *Etude*, most other effects of early digital computing are lost – the physicality of the machines, the abundant mechanical noises they made, their incredibly slow operation. Furthermore, this is no longer Paik's program. It's Johnson's.<sup>18</sup>

Thus we are stuck with the epistemological or ontological question Sterling posed. What is this then? According to Zinman, it is more of "a version" rather than "a copy."

You could think of this a little like a cover version of a song where both the instrumentation and the material form of delivery have changed. In other words, it's not a copy, it's a *version*. (ibid.)

Zinman's suggestion to make reference to music is notable here as it pertains to our discussion of *temporal* aspect of Paik's work rather than in terms of model and copy – yet without resolving the impasse of entropy.

The aforementioned conservation episode of *Untitled*, i.e., its restoration-cum-conservation again constitutes a suggestive case in point worth mulling over. While, when approached by *LA Times*, Paik's refusal to comment on the issue of conservation

19 Nam June Paik, "In-put Time and Out-put Time." In *Video Art: An Anthology*, eds. Beryl Korot and Ira Schneider (New York: The Raindance Foundation, 1976), p.98. Emphasis added.

20 Nam June Paik. "Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan: Communication Revolution."

21 John Durham Peters, "Obsolescence in the Digital Era." 2016. 1.18 *Cosmologics Magazine*. <http://cosmologicsmagazine.com/john-durham-peters-obsolescence-in-the-digital-era/> "Audiovisual and digital hardware are the *memento mori* for postmodern humans, reminders of what was and is no more."

22 Florian Cramer, "What is Post-Digital?" <http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>

of his works in 2004 can be ascribed to his then failing health, one could reasonably counter that it may not be the whole story. Rather, one could point to Paik's following comment on the nature of video art in terms of *aging*.

Video art imitates nature, not in its appearance or mass, but in its intimate "time-structure"...which is the process of AGING (a certain kind of *irreversibility*).<sup>19</sup>

No less relevant is the following paragraph where Paik links Wiener to McLuhan in terms of their commonality, i.e., entropy.

Wiener: "Messages are themselves a form of pattern and organization. Indeed, it is possible to treat sets of messages as having an entropy like sets of states of the external world. Just as entropy is a measure of *disorganization*, the information carried by a set of messages is a measure of *organization*. In fact, it is possible to interpret the information carried by a message as essentially the negative of its entropy and the negative logarithm of its probability. That is, the more probable the message, the less information it gives. Cliches, for example, are less illuminating than the great poems." (Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, p.21) White noise has the maximum quantity of information.<sup>20</sup>

McLuhan: "A cartoon is a 'low definition' simply because very little visual information is provided. The telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meagre amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. Hot media are low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience." (ibid., p.36)

In conjunction with the powerful question Peters recently asks ("What are we to do with graveyards of vinyl, the boxes of VHS tapes, the stashes of audiocassettes, all those entities that survive once they have been evacuated of data?"<sup>21</sup>), these comments need to be thought through and through as they help us penetrate otherwise dizzy array of materials, references, and comments Paik has made throughout his career.

With this in mind, a much more discreet discussion is called for particularly as to Paik's use of technologies in his works. For instance, one could wonder if the status of TV monitors in many of his works, having played the role of the cutting-edge or fringe for more than decades, has now mutated into the category of the so-called "post-digital" fetish.<sup>22</sup>

Set against this backdrop, Colin Marshall – in his recent review of *Paik Nam June Show*, which runs through October at Seoul's Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP) – can be said to have captured some grain of truth, when he points the vicissitudes of Paik's once "avant-garde" media artworks in the 21st century.

Despite his start in the avant-garde, his work has retained plenty of relevance in our time when the term "avant-garde" itself no longer means much of anything, and when new technology, especially new technology related to the display of images, no longer impresses on anything like as deep a level as it once did. But to the younger generations who've started

23 Colin Marshall, "A Society of Screens: The Korean, and the World, envisioned by Nam June Paik." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Korea Blog. 2016.9.4 <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/the-korea-blog/society-screens-korea-world-envisioned-nam-june-paik/>

24 Richard Grusin, "Radical Mediation," *Critical Inquiry* No. 42 (Autumn 2015), p. 132.

25 Robert J. Fouser, "Having Fun with New Toys: Nam June Paik and the Aesthetic of Chaemi," *TAASA Review: The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1996. <http://www.yuldo.net/having-fun-with-new-toys-nam-june-paik-and-the-aesthetic-of-jaemi/>

to regard VHS cassettes as nostalgia objects, images out of a cathode ray tube look compellingly unusual and rich with imperfection. Twenty years ago, sheer availability had rendered the household electronics Paik made his signature materials almost invisible. In the 21st century, they've regained the something of the strangeness – now accompanied by echoes of the past instead of messages from the future – he must have sensed when first he discovered their artistic potential.<sup>23</sup>

### Do Not Lose *Jaemi* in the midst of Entropy

Paik's works in this regard could be read as a playful if surprising reminder of what Richard Grusin calls "radical mediation," his recent re-packing of what he, along with David Bolter almost 20 years ago called "remediation." According to Grusin, 'remediation' not only points to the ubiquitous presence of media technologies but, more fundamentally, our "immanence" to this media-saturated world whereby mediation has become *immediate*. "The core of radical mediation is," argues Grusin, "is its immanence, immediacy itself."<sup>24</sup> As a sustained attempt to part company with representationalism-qua-dualism, in which mediation is supposed to stand in-between preexistent entities (either for good or for bad), Grusin's idea of "radical mediation" is indeed suggestive to our discussion as well. Nonetheless, what is utterly lacking in his theoretical endeavor is the irreversible directionality of Time and the inexorable material effects accompanied by it.

In consideration of this insurmountable lack, Paik's works, particularly for the figure and presence of those 'boxes' in them, could play a significant role in reminding us of the gap between and virtually imperceptible slippage from mediation to *immediation* – perhaps even better than Christian Marclay's famous work about Time, *The Clock* (2011). In contrast to the monumental yet melancholic impulse manifested in other artworks such as Tactia Dean's *Film* (2011) or Joep van Lieflands' *Video Palace* series (2010-2013), Paik's otherwise familiar works can be rendered singularly distinct for their characteristic joy or, rather, *jaemi*.<sup>25</sup> For us, the latter signifies not so much an a-temporal antidote to 'sadness' or 'anger' as a non-melancholic attitude toward the irreversibility of entropic Time. That is, the real issue Paik tried to cope with was (and perhaps still *is*): how to exist in this world doomed to destruction without losing *jaemi* in the midst of entropy? Perhaps this is what best characterizes the very attitude couched in Paik's artworks.

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