

MAGNETIC MEMORY: A DAY LONG TRIBUTE TO NAM JUNE PAIK

This twelve-hour event, devoted to the single screen video work of Nam June Paik, was organized by Electronic Arts Intermix in New York, where the first screening was held in February 2006. It was shown at Tate Modern, London, on 10th June 2006. It is one of a series of events commemorating the work of Paik, who died in January 2006. Over forty tapes, lasting twelve hours in total, were shown in reverse chronological order. This was as fascinating as it was demanding, insofar as it required one's continual presence -the works were shown without any break- in order to see the entire span of his career. Even so, this survey represented only a minute fragment of Paik's prodigious output.

Paik was a mercurial figure, an arch-networker, whose activities lay at an intersection between a number of key, predominantly New York-based experimental filmmakers, musicians, artists, and activists. His video/TV work falls into at least three categories; anthropomorphic sculptural constructions made from recycled, functioning TV sets: the *Family of Robots* series, multi-monitor works that expand and/or subvert the normal functioning of TV technology, and single screen video works. Many of the projects had a high public profile as live broadcasts or as installations in banks, plazas, lobbies, schools and apartment blocks, as well as galleries and museums.

The single screen pieces work on a number of levels: as densely spectacular explorations of image processing technology, as meditations on the strongly-expressed tension between iconic, mass-media images and the inevitably abstracting effect of the processes to which reworking subjects them, and as documentary, often diaristic, records of the activities of the many important artists that Paik knew and worked with, among them Karlheinz Stockhausen, Joseph Beuys, Yoko Ono, Allan Kaprow, Charlotte Moorman and John Cage. These recordings are never straightforwardly documentary, however, but always form

part of a rapid montage that typically juxtaposes specially shot footage with off-air TV news and other recordings, and archival film –“found footage”, and including recycled images from his own archive.

Paik was born in Seoul in 1932. Initially he studied music in Korea, but during the Korean War his family moved to Hong Kong, then to Japan where he completed a thesis on Arnold Schoenberg. This led him in the 1950s to Darmstadt, home of the annual new music school/festival, notable for its promotion of highly complex, minutely ordered music, championed by composers such as Pierre Boulez, and for which Paik’s study of Schoenberg would have prepared him perfectly: Boulez took his cue for a music of total serialism from Schoenberg’s own pupil Anton Webern. Somewhat fortuitously, however, Paik met Karlheinz Stockhausen and, more importantly, John Cage at Darmstadt, during a brief period when the serialists admitted a degree of performer autonomy, of limited free choice, into their work, whereby the performer could, for example, choose the order in which to play the sections of a composition. Paik’s encounters with Stockhausen and Cage were crucial both in steering him away from the rigidities of serialism, and for kindling an interest in more spontaneous, theatrical forms of music performance. This approach strongly informed Paik’s subsequent understanding of video as something ephemeral, mutable and transitory. An interest in Zen, which he shared with Cage, was also important in generating an attitude of free exploration that refuses to rule out any sounds as being intrinsically non-musical, and which equally refuses to order material hierarchically, according to predominant 19th century aesthetic conventions. These attitudes Paik also transferred enthusiastically to his subsequent work.

The arena within which much of Paik’s post-Darmstadt formation took place was the European Fluxus movement, an iconoclastic, neo-Dada grouping that stood in a similar relation to post WW2 culture that the original Dada movement had to WW1. The widening gap between Darmstadt and Fluxus can be witnessed in

Paik's increasingly free use of new technologies. In 1959 he made compositions at the electronic music studio at WDR Cologne, where Stockhausen also made his first electronic pieces. However, whereas Stockhausen used the WDR studio to create short *Studies* meticulously compounded from pure sine waves, Paik created frenetic collages of sounds gathered from a variety of sources. These were played during performances, which might also include the playing of records of Haydn string quartets alongside the recordings and sounds generated in the performances, which typically consisted of simple pouring, tearing and beating actions. Meanwhile, the skills Paik developed in practical electronics were deployed in parallel fashion in his video work, and later facilitated his involvement in the development of an early video synthesizer.

The practice of mixing and collaging sounds is also a common component of many of Cage's composition-performances. However, where Cage's rebuttal of western musical norms was frequently expressed in whimsical and understated ways, as in his famous *4' 33"* (1952), or his delicate "preparation" of pianos, in which the instrument's traditional tones are modified by the careful insertion of objects between the strings, Paik was closer to the more forceful end of Fluxus in his aggressive confrontations, which in an emblematic piece like *One for Violin Solo* (1962) involved the violent smashing of a violin, a symbol, like the pianos which also fell victim to such treatment, of a high culture in thrall to the music of dead composers.

Paik moved to the U.S.A in 1964 where, despite cultural differences, he shifted from European Fluxus to its New York wing, a move facilitated by connections he had made in Germany with New York cellist Charlotte Moorman, who soon became his most high profile collaborator.

"Topless Cellist" Charlotte Moorman (29' 1995) is one of a number of tapes which recombine older works in the form of collages, in this case to create a breathless documentary that mixes interviews with Moorman on the Johnny

Carson TV show, with performance fragments, testimonials and statements by Christo, Yoko Ono, John Cage and Moorman herself. The title is deliberately provocative, ironically recuperating the media's salacious interest in a brief but very public moment in Moorman's career, and by which the media aimed to ridicule avant-garde art in general and to denigrate Moorman's status as a serious artist. It demonstrates Paik's willingness to engage with the mass media on its own ground at every level, from the technological to the ideological.

Paik worked with Moorman extensively through the 1960s and 70s. The tape gathers documentation from numerous performances on which they collaborated, including the most notorious, *Opera Sextronique* (1967) in which Moorman stripped as she played the cello, *TV Cello* (1971) in which she plays a cello built from TV sets, and *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969) in which she wears a bra made from miniature TV sets. Aesthetically, Paik's works are characterized by a relentless redeploing of shots and a constant reworking of images. Thus the strong narrative and the extended recordings of performance, overlaid with interview sound that one might expect from a conventional arts documentary is jettisoned here in favour of a rapid montage of shots in which all the elements are given equal balance. We thereby see less of Moorman performing than we might wish for, but in compensation, her cultural milieu and the energy of her working life is strongly evoked in the dense mix of news footage, interview extracts, statements, anecdotes and contributions from many different sources. The radicalism of her career trajectory is emphasized by the juxtaposition of comments by her former college music teacher with shots of her playing her cello covered in liquid chocolate.

Included in this mini-survey of Moorman's activities is John Cage's work *26' 1.1499 for a String Player* (1955). Cage wrote a large number of pieces that allow performers to decide what combination of instruments may be used. For example *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1961-2), a piece for large orchestra, has been

recorded in an arrangement for three flutes. In other words, interpreters of Cage's works may realize versions that have very different sonic qualities to those originally envisioned or performed, providing they observe the explicit performance instructions indicated in the score, and that they respect the spirit of the work by taking it seriously. Paik-Moorman's version of the piece, made in 1971, involved Moorman playing the work as a cellist, on a "cello" that was Paik, who knelt in front of Moorman while holding a string behind his back that Moorman bowed.

Thus on one level the piece conforms precisely to Cage's requirements, in that the title is exactly followed: *for string player* is taken as meaning literally a string. This literalism contrasts with the remaking itself, which is in the form of an event that is as much visual as it is aural. In doing this Paik and Moorman question the hierarchies of sound-image relations, and remind us that visual events are invariably experienced with accompanying sound and vice versa. An interesting asymmetry arises here however, in that we tend not to listen in art galleries, whereas, by contrast, much of the pleasure of concert going is visual. So although Paik-Moorman radically rework Cage's piece, they use that reworking to raise some characteristically Cageian questions about seeing, hearing and paying attention. At the same time, the strong character that Paik-Moorman impart to the work turn it into a jointly authored piece (Paik-Moorman-Cage), and in this sense it arguably takes on a different character, becomes a differently authored work, compared to a version in which the traditional composer-performer relationship is to some extent preserved (as in the three flute version of *Atlas Eclipticalis*). Thus this rendition also raises questions of authorship and ownership: whose work is it now? These are questions that pertain to all art works once they are in the public domain, but are here addressed as central. The work can also be thought of as a form of proto-appropriation art, or as a kind of quasi-sampling: certainly, insofar as it went on to form a part of several larger collage tapes, one can think of it in this way.

Paik was a prolific maker and, perhaps more than any other artist or composer, he continuously recycled footage from earlier work, increasingly so as his career progressed. Thus the footage from *26' 1.1499 for a String Player* had already appeared in an earlier collage work *Global Groove* (28' 1973), among others. In his conceptualization around *Global Groove* Paik describes "the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and a TV guide will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book".

In a late piece *Tiger Lives* (45' 1999), footage from *Global Groove*, including that of Moorman's performance of *26' 1.1499* is again recycled, in a similarly frenetic remix. The work was commissioned by Korean TV for Millennium celebrations, and is the typical product of an artist meeting an endless demand for work. Such pressures often lead either to a thinning of quality, a tendency to which Cage also succumbed in his late career, or to a rehashing of old material (Handel comes to mind as an example from another age). Paik seems to have met these heavy demands for new works by this kind of creative rehashing, combined with an ever-heavier use of image processors, so that one sees a layering of material that constitutes a chronological compendium of image manipulation processes. In his earliest works, many of which only existed as installations or on 16mm film (video-tape was not at that stage readily available), Paik used crude devices such as degaussing magnets and live camera-monitor feedback techniques to multiply and manipulate the image. Multiplication is an important part of his aesthetic, from the redoubling of the in-screen image through the use of feedback, to multi-monitor installations in which the same or similar images play on up to a thousand or more TV sets. In *Tiger Lives*, these techniques are in evidence along with images altered or supplemented through the use of Paik's own synthesizer, developed with a Japanese engineer, Shuya Abe, as well as 1980s hardware like Quantel and Grass Valley Mixers, and yet more recent, digital systems. These latter, high-end, commercial technologies replicate some of the processes that were formerly achieved with simpler means, but offer a high

degree of control and ease of use. Paik deploys them both sequentially, and simultaneously so that, for example, an image from the 1970s, originally replicated with feedback, might be subjected to a chroma-key (matting) superimposition, which, in turn, is overlaid with digital “camera flare” (a 1990s Photoshop type filter). Thus material from the past; go-go dancers, sea gulls, Buddhist statues, the Pantheon and John Cage delivering a monologue, are all updated, or more precisely, a technological palimpsest is created with them.

These works, and many others like them, are occasions for a characteristic fusing of diverse footage into an extremely rapid flow. The complex organization within, as well as between, shots dissolves (sic) the distinction between collage and montage. The two become interchangeable, recalling in some ways Eisenstein’s extended concept of montage, in which elements within, as well as between, shots may form a dialectical relationship. However, Paik’s dialectic is, as often as not, smoothed over through the extensive use of traveling wipe patterns, which are used to bind together disparate elements. In this regard, it lacks the dynamic articulation of an Eisenstein film, and runs the risk of becoming decorative. This impression is reinforced by the fact that it is heavily technology driven, and in the way patterning is reinforced through the multiplication of the same image. There is a qualitative shift between Paik’s earlier, relatively sparing use of image processors, and the later works, in which wipe patterns, for example, become a dominant feature, so that transformations through space and time displace the iconicity of the image. At its best, the wipes interact with layers of imagery to generate spontaneously occurring interference patterns, as in the short opening piece at the Tate’s show: *Analogue Assemblage* (2’ 2000) which recycles experiments made in the 1970s with early video synthesizers. This footage is itself reprocessed using current technology.

As artists over produce, they reveal their limitations, and strategic strengths can become irritating formal tics when they are overused. This effect is relayed by

their work being seen en masse, as at the Tate Modern day. *Lake Placid '80* (1980) was commissioned for the 1980 Winter Olympics. TV footage of ski jumpers, ice skaters and hockey players receive the familiar makeover of colourization, fragmentation and multiplication. The Go-go dancers from *Global Groove* also make another appearance, as does Allen Ginsburg, a veteran of several earlier Paik works. In its time the piece would no doubt have done admirably what its commissioners wanted, but it doesn't necessarily stand up as a self-sufficient video tape.

At this point it may be useful to situate Paik's approach to video by comparing it to the work of Steina and Woody Vasulka, an Icelandic-Czech couple who arrived in New York City in 1965, the same year as the Sony *Portapak* portable video camera and recording deck, the first one of which Paik legendarily acquired, and with which he filmed Pope Paul 6th's visit to New York, footage of which was screened later the same day at the Café a Go-go, an event said to have inaugurated "Video Art".

Paik is often cited as the "founder" of video art, but insofar as artists have always adopted new technologies, there is in this assertion, at the very least, a conflation between the adoption of a new technology and the development of genuinely new art forms. For every video artist there is a different take on the technology and correspondingly different, and no less novel, forms of work. The Vasulkas, who came to video from similar backgrounds to Paik, she a violinist, he an engineer, also developed technologies for manipulating the video image. However, where Paik's address is predominantly to mass media, mass audience and iconic imagery (which he rarely, if ever, shot himself) the Vasulka's concept is based around the idea of video as an electronic signal, a stream of electrons that can be rigorously analysed before it becomes an image. This starting point inaugurated a long and systematic investigation into the ontology of the video image through its manipulation as a signal. The British video artist David Larcher,

has also used cutting edge editing systems to push image processing to a level of complexity where an implicit critique of the idea that digital media can “do anything” comes into focus: without limits or limitations, it becomes impossible to make meaningful art. Paik’s earliest black and white video works, mostly multi-monitor installations, but also single screen pieces, are as austere and quiet as his later work is garish and full-on. They have a purity of purpose that aligns them more closely to the Vasulka’s investigations (coincidentally, the Vasulkas also documented the music and art scene in New York at the same time as Paik, and, less surprisingly, their footage also appears in some of Paik’s own works). Paik’s *Magnet TV* (1965) is simply a TV set with a moving image playing. Sitting on top of the TV is a large magnet that distorts the image into a complex parabola. Paravideo pieces such as *Candle TV* (1975) in which a lit candle sits inside an empty TV case, are also worthy of mention, as are installations like *Participation TV* (1963) in which a microphone records spectator noise and feeds it into the TV as a video signal. This conversion of audio into video anticipates the more recent work of artists like Malcolm LeGrice who has written about the way digital media can be outputted in any form, be it visual, auditory or printed matter.

Paik’s output was protean, from early investigations into the medium, interactive and participatory pieces, documentaries, collage and multi monitor installations in which the images that formed part of an early ontological investigation are churned into large-scale pattern pieces. The linking thread is with the iconic image, from the Moon to the Beatles and beyond. The work is more joyously celebratory than analytical of the culture within which it is situated, and that accounts for its exuberance and intensely playful visual strength. In its breathless documentation of the New York avant-garde art scene it forms a video counterpart to the 16mm diary films of Jonas Mekas. However, and especially when seen in bulk, the work too often sacrifices critical enquiry to endless, repetitive riffing that verges on the decorative. In contrast to the earlier work, the constant reworking of existing footage in later pieces points to a creative-critical

stasis, that Paik attempts to overcome by sheer momentum of kinetic complexity. In this respect it compares unfavorably to the more analytical, and for this writer, more rewarding activities of Steina and Woody Vasulka and others.