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# NAM JUNE PAIK

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FAMILY OF ROBOT

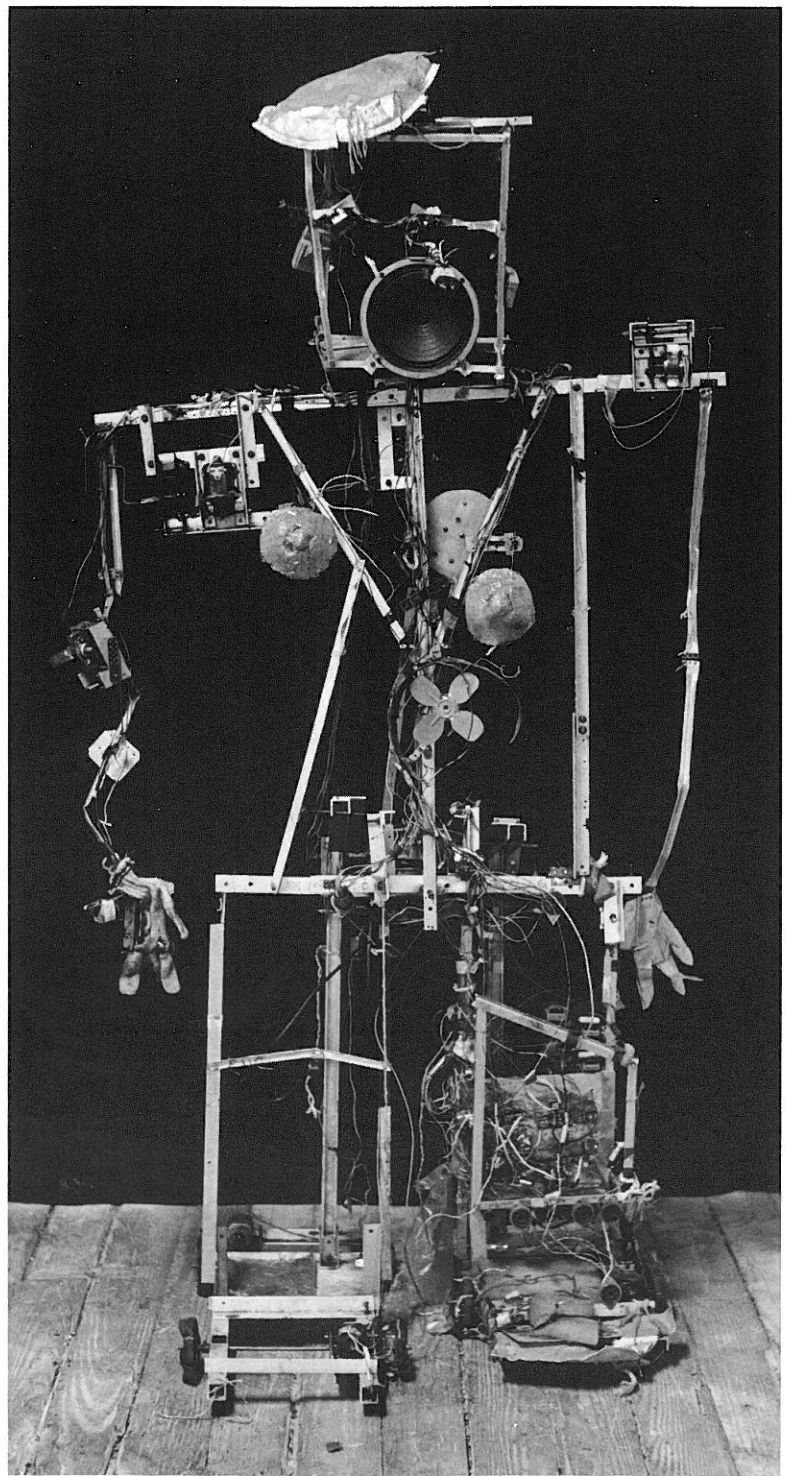


**Carl Solway Gallery**

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Chicago International Art Exposition  
Booth 6-125, Telephone (312) 670-5718



NAM JUNE PAIK, *ROBOT K-456*, 1964  
Photo: Peter Moore, © 1965

## The First Twenty-First Century Disaster

In 1964 Nam June Paik, then 32 years old, decided to visit America, learn about its culture firsthand, and meet with Fluxus artists he had encountered in Europe — George Maciunas and Dick Higgins. What had originally been planned as a six-month stay in New York became permanent. This began an extraordinary period of creativity which included his meeting with Charlotte Moorman, and many performances and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

After being in New York for two months, Paik anticipated in the "Second Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival" at Judson Hall, organized by Charlotte Moorman, a classical cellist by training and noted interpreter of avant-garde music. At the opening of the festival Paik performed, for the first time, *Robot Opera* with Charlotte Moorman and *Robot K-456* which he brought with him from Japan and which played an audiotape of John F. Kennedy's 1961 Inaugural Address. During the summer of 1965 Paik and Moorman traveled to Europe and performed in many cities including Reykjavik, Paris, Cologne, Frankfurt, Aachen and at the Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal in a twenty-four hour event which featured Paik's *Robot K-456*. The Galerie Rene Block organized a "Sixth Soiree" in which *Robot Opera* was performed with Moorman at various sites in Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

*Robot-K456*, constructed by Paik in Japan, with the assistance of electronic engineer, Shuya Abe, was a 20 channel radio controlled robot that walked, talked, waved its arms, and excreted beans. Fashioned out of an array of spare parts and found objects the Robot took the shape of a person and was guided by remote control on stage and through the streets by Paik.

Just as Paik fashioned a human shape out of inanimate bits and pieces of metal and wire, so he has taken television apart and created visual metaphors out of its materials. Paik removes television from its customary setting and transfers it to another one — on the ceiling, amid plants on the floor, or as a cello, a bed, or a cross. Paik's strategies establish new ways of viewing television both as an object and as a medium in terms of what we normally see on television and how we relate to it.<sup>3</sup>

In 1982, during the Paik retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum *Robot K-456* was walking on Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, when it was tragically struck by an automobile. Ironically this event (staged) was reported on television news by two major networks. Paik, when viewing a videotape of the accident said, "This is the first 21st century disaster."

1. John G. Hanhardt, *Nam June Paik*, exhibition catalogue (New York, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), p. 27.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 93.



## Family of Robot

Nam June Paik has always been fascinated with antiques, be it antique Buddhas, antique scrolls, or, as described in a 1967 letter to John Cage, "electronic antique art". Now he has created the *Family of Robot* (descendants of *Robot K-456*), a group of sculptures using a didactic history of vintage television sets as his materials. These new works include three generations of family members — *Grandmother* and *Grandfather*, *Mother* and *Father*, *Aunt* and *Uncle*, and three *Children*. Accompanying these figures are three large architectural sculptures entitled *Connection*, *Passage*, and *Monument*. These architectural works become both time and space metaphors for the man-made environments in which we live.

In each sculpture, Paik has removed from the antique televisions the old electronic equipment and replaced it with new television hardware activated by one or more video cassette players. New video tapes, using state-of-the-art technology have been produced by Paik for the robot family and the architectural environments. The images that appear in the male and female figures are drawn from the worldwide diversity of man's cultural and ethnic families. The architectural sculptures show images of man as builder — from primitive structures to skyscrapers.

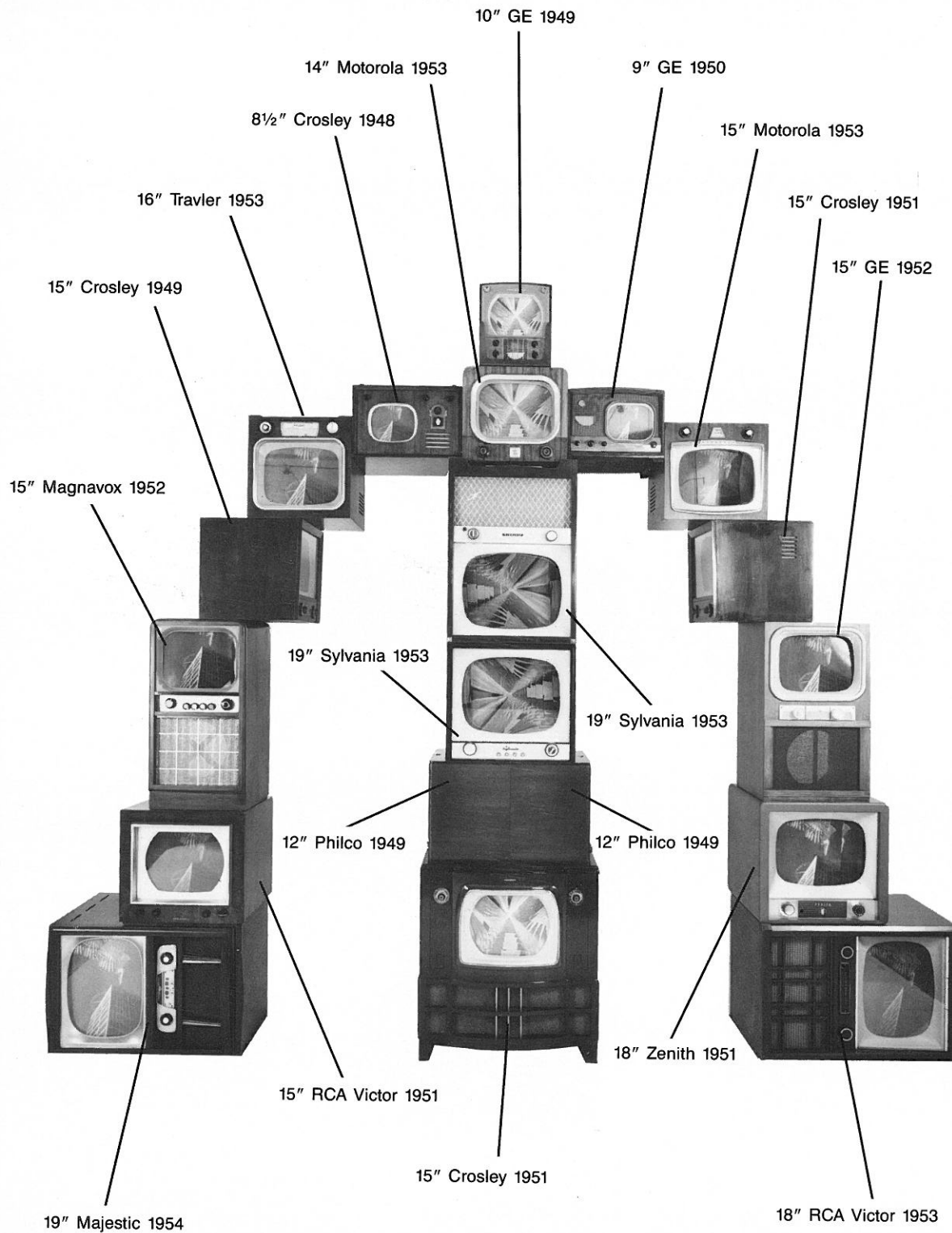
As in much of Paik's work, where aspects of East and West, and ancient and modern, confront each other, the new works similarly interpose these traditions. The contrast in generation between the eastern stylization of the grandparents, and the more western stylized parents, is emphasized in the "head" forms of these figures. *Grandmother* and *Grandfather* have bodies constructed of 1940's television with a 1930's radio "head". This older generation is thinking about the past perhaps with a greater understanding of history. By contrast *Mother* and *Father*, also with 1940's television bodies, have a late 1950's television "head". Their thinking is focused on the future.

The *Children* in *Family of Robot* (not illustrated) are fabricated from later model televisions, primarily 1950's and 1960's sets. The first child is constructed from all Bakelite television sets, the first commercially produced plastic material. The second child is fabricated with all metal television sets, and the youngest child is built with even more recent television components. The children's "heads" are two decades more advanced than their bodies, in contrast to their parents and grandparents who are a decade ahead or behind in their vision.

The forms in the architectural sculptures suggest the man-made structures that traditionally have joined mankind together. *Connection* could be viewed as "home", the family unit residence; *Monument* might be seen as the gathering place for the larger community, Temple, Church, Town Hall meeting place; and *Passage* might be thought of as a bridge, the linkage of cultures to one another. The phenomenon of this century is that television has created the potential for another forum in bringing humanity together.

Have we become a culture of television robots transfixed to sitcoms and experiencing life through a commercially produced artificial reality? Or is it possible that through the medium of television all of mankind can communicate with each other to further universal understanding. This is the issue that Nam June Paik poses through his world-wide satellite broadcasts and in this new body of work.





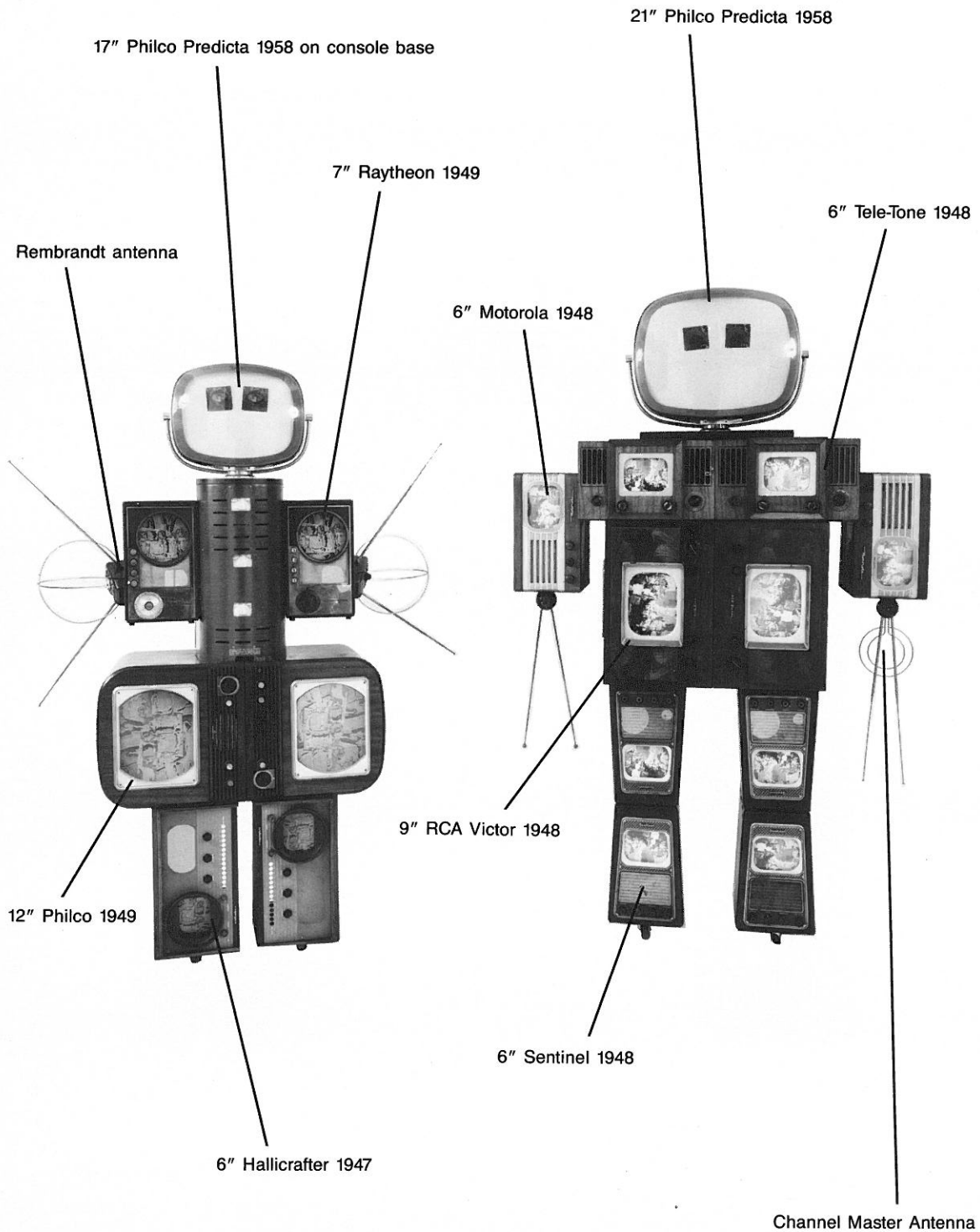
## MONUMENT

The 19 vintage television cabinets are refitted with 21 new color television sets: seven 10" Quasar sets (WP2145X), nine 14" Quasar sets (WP3915YW), and five 20" Quasar sets (WT6245YW).

Two 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette players (AG1000) activate two 30-minute Paik video tapes.

Power requirement: three 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 145" high 17 1/2" wide 22" deep



## MOTHER

The 7 vintage television cabinets are refitted with 11 new television sets: five 4" Sony sets (FD40A), four 7" color Quasar sets (UP1762UJ), and two 14" color Quasar sets (WP3915YW).

One 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette player (AG1000) activates a 30-minute Paik video tape.

Power requirement: two 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 80" high 60 1/2" wide 21" deep

## FATHER

The 11 vintage television cabinets are refitted with 12 new television sets: two 4" Sony sets (FD40A), eight 7" color Quasar sets (UP1762UJ), and two 10" color Quasar sets (WP2145X).

One 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette player (AG1000) activates a 30-minute Paik video tape.

Power requirement: two 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 89 1/2" high 54 3/4" wide 20 1/2" deep

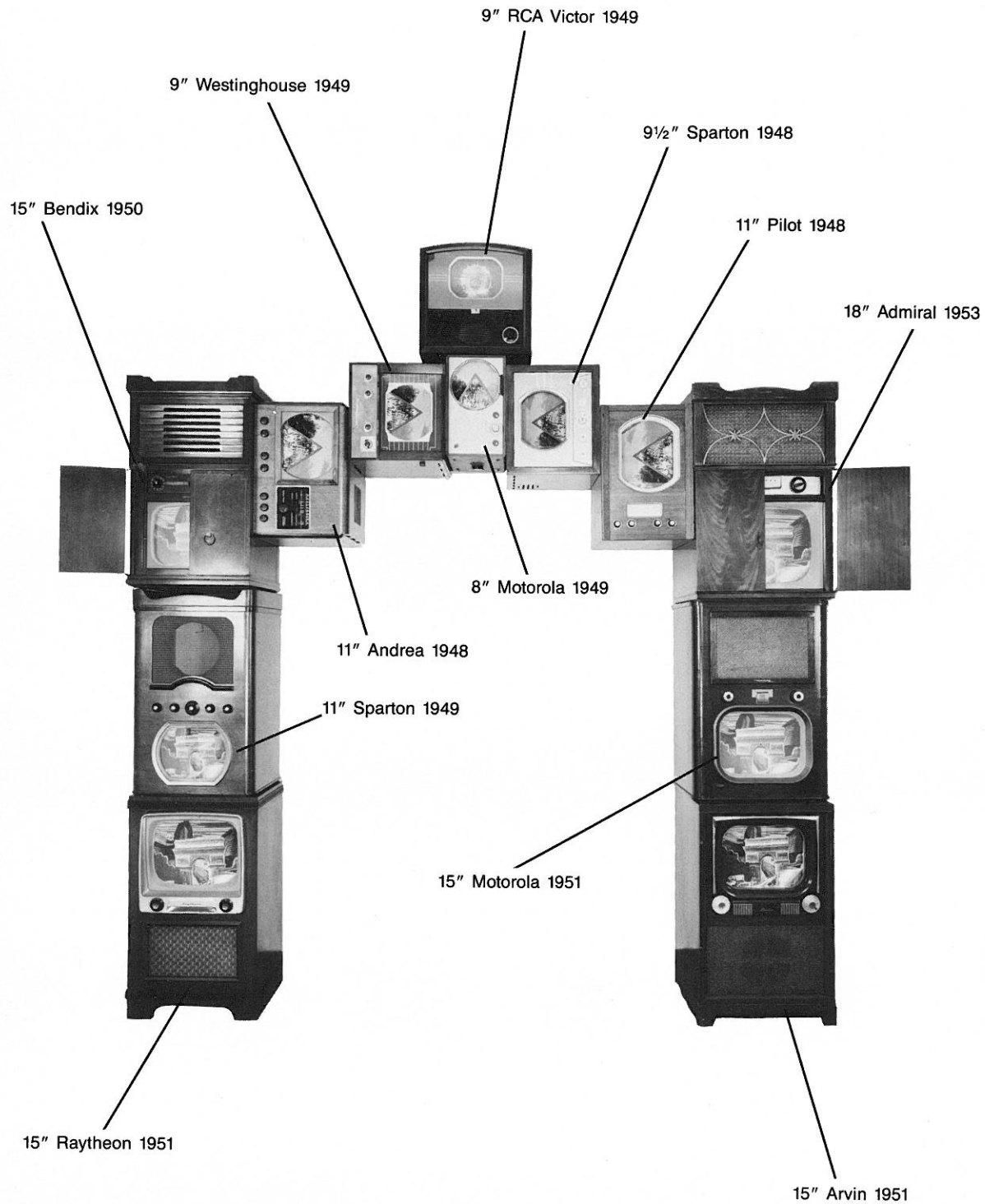
## CONNECTION

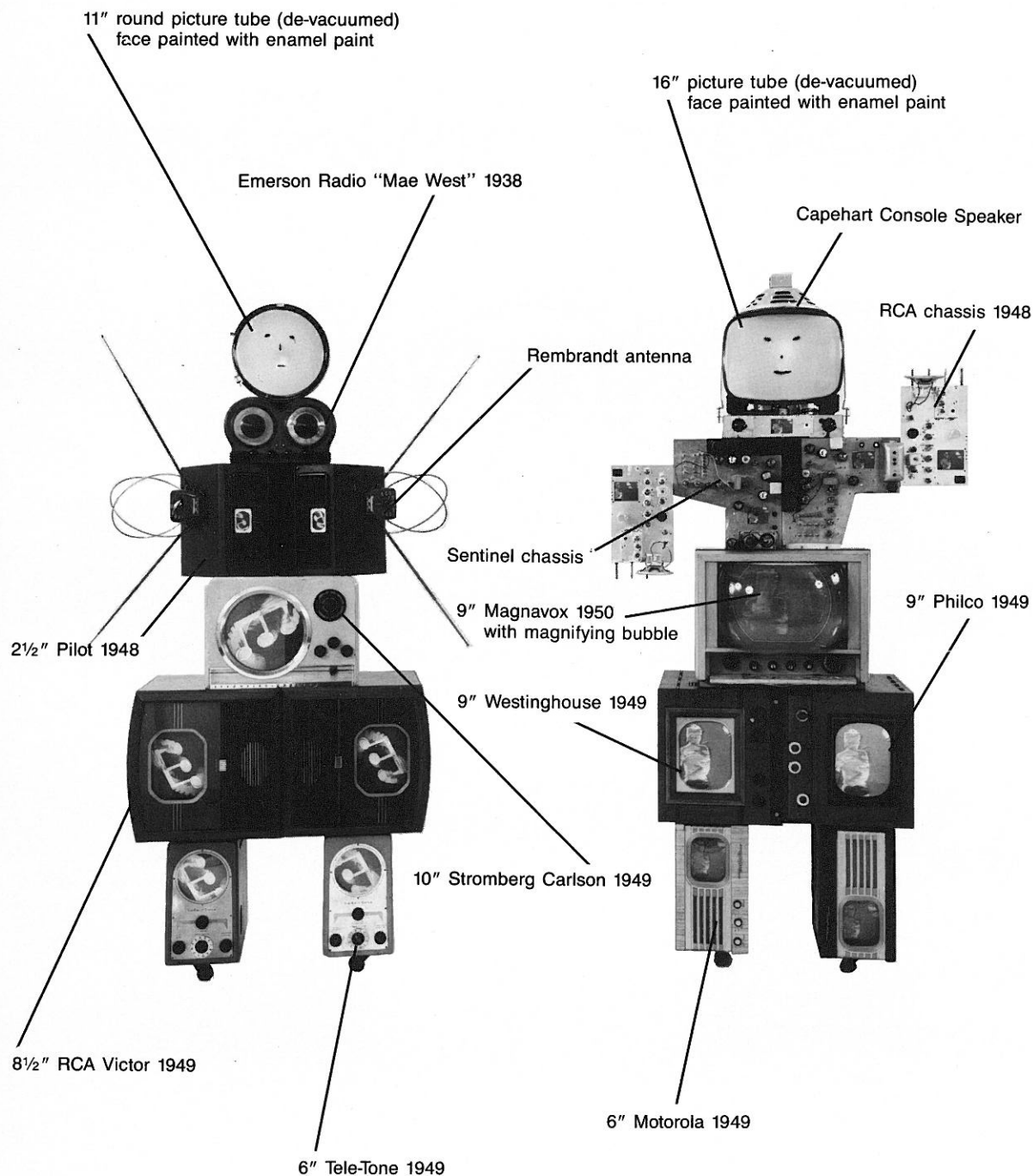
The 12 vintage television cabinets are refitted with 14 new color television sets: one 7" Quasar set (UP1762UJ), seven 10" Quasar sets (WP2145X), and six 14" Quasar sets (WP3915YW).

Two ½" VHS Panasonic video cassette players (AG1000) activate two 30-minute Paik video tapes.

Power requirement: three 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 133" high 139" wide 21¾" deep





## AUNT

The 7 vintage television sets are refitted with 7 new television sets. Two 2" Sony sets (FD20A), two 7" color Quasar sets (UP1762UJ), and three 10" color Quasar sets (WP2145X).

One 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette player (AG1000) activates a 30-minute Paik video tape.

Power requirement: two 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 86 1/2" high 52" wide 21 1/2" deep

## UNCLE

The 5 vintage television cabinets and 4 vintage chasses are refitted with 10 new television sets: five 2" Sony sets (FD20A), two 7" color Quasar sets (UP1762UJ), and three 10" color Quasar sets (WP2145X).

One 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette player activates a 30-minute Paik video tape.

Power requirement: two 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 89 1/2" high 45" wide 25" deep



## PASSAGE

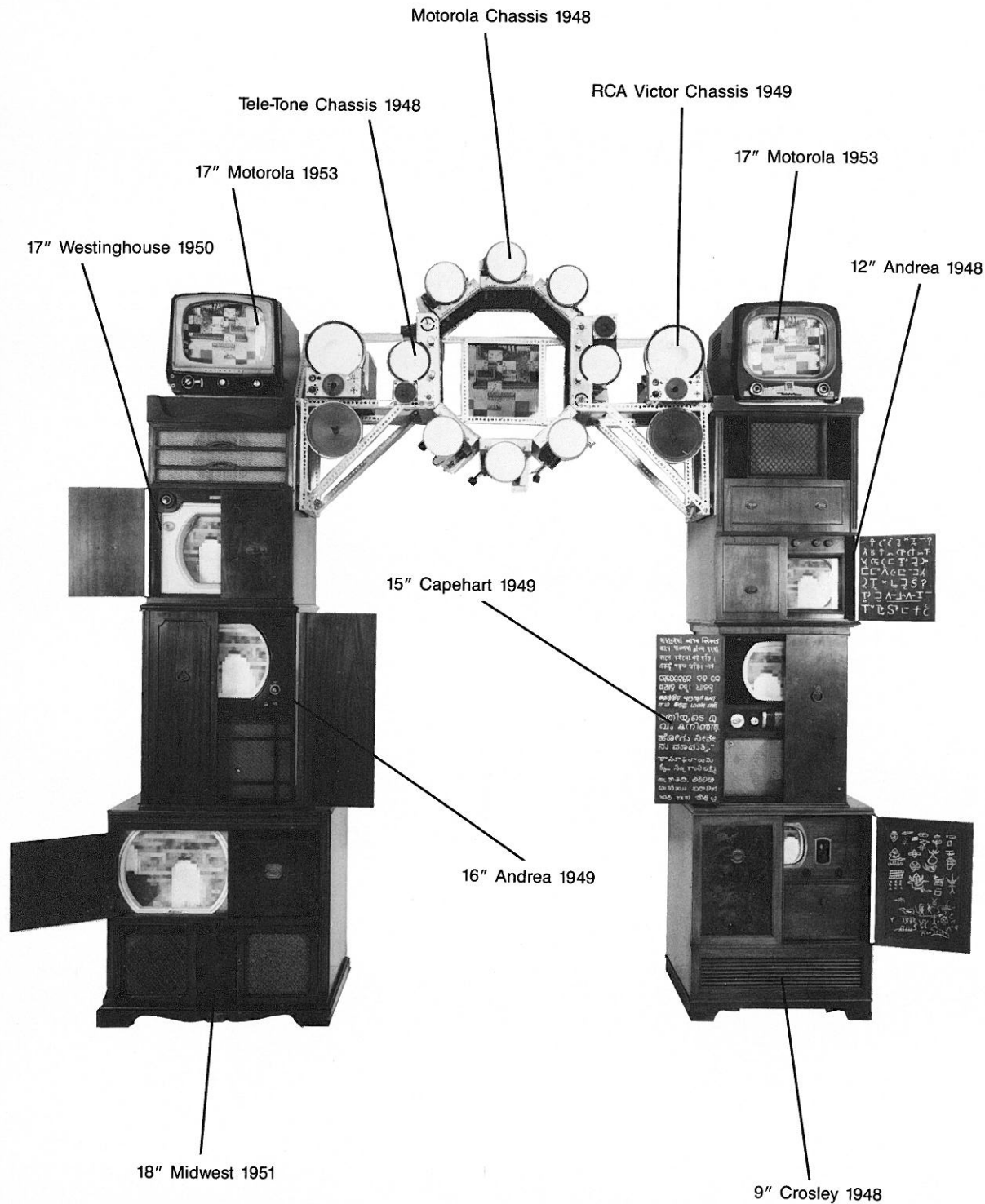
The 8 vintage television cabinets are refitted with 13 new color television sets: six 10" Quasar sets (WP2145X), four 14" Quasar sets (WP3915YW), one 16" Quasar set (TT4278YW), and two 20" Quasar sets (WT6245WY).

Two 1/2" VHS Panasonic video cassette players (AG1000) activate two 30-minute Paik video tapes.

Power requirement: three 15 amp circuits

Dimensions: 137" high 164" wide 24" deep

Door interiors are painted with ancient writing: prehistoric rock engravings, hieroglyphics, cuneiform, Sanskrit, Indian scripts, Syro-Hittite, early Greek, and others. (Right column completed, left column in-progress).



## Acknowledgements

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