

15. [Introduction] Cybernated Art

One tendency of video art, since its beginning, has been to be cybernetic, to be interactive, to be new media. Another tendency has been to create an always-already history. Both can be seen in the work of Nam June Paik, who is considered the first video artist.

Paik was among the first to use televisions in art, altering them as John Cage had altered pianos. Paik used one of the first Sony portable video cameras to create video art of Fluxus performances and the Pope's visit to New York. When showing this, he distributed a leaflet asserting "the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas." He integrated video with live performance in unusual and provocative ways—such as his *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* collaboration with Charlotte Moorman (part of a series for which they were arrested on indecency charges several times), and his *Robot K-456* collaboration with Shuya Abe (with whom he also pioneered video synthesis). He coined the term "information superhighway" and created novel satellite broadcast artworks. He also wrote the manifesto reprinted below, which provides a cybernetic/Buddhist context for his work, and a connection with the documents from E.A.T. (◊14), Roy Ascott (◊10), and Norbert Wiener (◊04) in this volume. While Paik has not been a leader in the interactive installations (as opposed to performances) now associated with new media video, the work of interactive video pioneers such as Bill Viola (◊31), Grahame Weinbren, and Lynn Hershman (◊44) (as well, perhaps, as Myron Krueger, ◊25) can be seen as lying in a cybernetic video direction he defined—as can the video/robotic performance work of artists ranging from Mark Pauline of Survival Research Labs to Adrienne Wortzel.

Of course, the canonization of Paik cannot now be invoked without a mention of how Paik's place in video art history was nearly co-produced with the pieces that now make up that history, in a process that reveals our culture as much as it reveals the nature of video art. Even Viola, who later in video art's trajectory seemed to take up the mantle of centrality that had previously been Paik's, remembers in "History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime" that, "In 1974 people were already talking about a video history, and had been for a few years. I remember sitting in a Chinese restaurant in New York on a cold February evening with some friends ... Someone started talking about video history: 'Video may be the only art form ever to have a history before it had a history.' Video was being invented and simultaneously so were its myths and culture heroes ..." (123). Martha Rosler pulls no punches regarding the culturally-loaded elements from which Paik's myth is composed:

The elements of the myth thus include an Eastern visitor from a country [Korea] ravaged by war (our war) who was inoculated by the leading U.S. avant-garde master [John Cage] while in technology heaven (Germany), who, once in the States repeatedly violated the central shrine, TV, and then goes to face the representative of God on earth, capturing his image to bring to the avant-garde, and who then went out from it to pull together the two ends of the American cultural spectrum by symbolically incorporating the consciousness industry into the methods and ideas of the cultural apparatus—always with foundation, government, museum, broadcast, and other institutional support.

And—oh yes!—he is a man. The hero stands up for masculine mastery and bows to patriarchy, if only in representation. The thread of his work includes the fetishization of a female body as an instrument that plays itself, and the complementary thread of homage to other famous male artist-magicians or seers (quintessentially, Cage). (45)

This picture is, of course, incomplete. For example, in Paik's work with Moorman (who played the cello nearly nude) he also presented a piece in which men presented their dancing penises through a curtain (though it is true that this male fetishization didn't get written as prominently into video art's history). Yet this incompleteness should not cause us to leave Rosler's point aside, or fail to consider

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Documentation of interactive video works by Weinbren and Hershman appears on the CD.

A non-robotic early Web artwork by Adrienne Wortzel—"The Electronic Chronicles"—appears on the CD.

more closely our own roles in mythology construction. We need not look far for an example. In creating *The New Media Reader* the dangers of mythologizing manifested themselves constantly. The importance of figures such as Ted Nelson should certainly be recognized, but it is also important to note that even Nelson does not feel that he invented hypertext or new media—considering instead that he discovered something already present, but undefined, unexplored. The Web particularly seems to demand a too-early history of “great men.” Yet the ideas influencing new media are so varied that it is difficult enough to determine important influences from decades ago. Rather than obsessively seek to name one handful of important names for a world-wide system still in its youth, it seems more appropriate to support and expand the possibilities for its diversity.

—NWF

Further Reading

Hanhardt, John G., with Jon Ippolito. *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*. Guggenheim Museum exhibition catalog. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000.

Kac, Eduardo. “Origin and Development of Robotic Art.” *Digital Reflections: The Dialogue of Art and Technology*, special issue on Electronic Art, ed. Johanna Drucker, *Art Journal* 56(3):60-67. New York: CAA, 1997.

Rosler, Martha. “Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment.” *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, 30–50. Ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer. New York: Aperture/BAVC, 1990.

Viola, Bill. “History, 10 Years, and the Dreamtime.” *Video: A Retrospective, 1974–1984*, 18-23. Ed. Kathy Rae Huffman. Long Beach, Calif.: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984. Reprinted in Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 121-135. Ed. Robert Violette. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

Original Publication: From *Manifestos*, p. 24. Great Bear Pamphlets. New York: Something Else Press, 1966.

Cybernated Art

Nam June Paik

⌘ Cybernated art is very important, but art for cybernated life is more important, and the latter need not be cybernated.

(Maybe George Brecht's simplissimo is the most adequate.)

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⌘ But if Pasteur (⊗) and Robespierre are right that we can resist poison only through certain built-in poison, then some specific frustrations, caused by cybernated life, require accordingly cybernated shock and catharsis. My everyday work with video tape and the cathode-ray tube convinces me of this.

✱ Cybernetics, the science of pure relations, or relationship itself, has its origin in karma. Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "Media is message" was formulated by Norbert Wiener in 1948 as "The signal, where the message is sent, plays equally important role as the signal, where message is not sent."

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

⊕ Newton's physics is the mechanics of power and the unconciliatory two-party system, in which the strong win over the weak. But in the 1920's a German genius put a tiny third-party (grid) between these two mighty poles (cathode and anode) in a vacuum tube, thus enabling the weak to win over the strong for the first time in human history. It might be a Buddhistic "third way," but anyway this German invention led to cybernetics, which came to the world in the last war to shoot down German planes from the English sky.

The Buddhists also say

Karma is samsara

Relationship is metempsychosis

We are in open circuits

