Nam June Paik

George Fifield, curator

Paik and the Electronic Superhighway

Nam June Paik was fascinated with the electronic medium of his time in a way that other artists who did not see it as a potential art form, weren’t. He grabbed onto television and realized that what he wanted was, to make television as manipulable as artists who used paint on a canvas. And he came up with a number of ways to do that including the Paik-Abe synthesizer, and he would manipulate the video signal. This manipulation of our electronic media is critical and central to Nam June’s art practice, and in fact he even foresaw the invention of the internet. He called it the “electronic superhighway.” And once in 1972, Nam June said, “In the future, all artists will have their own television station.” And of course what else is a webpage, but our own television station? So it absolutely came true to pass.

George Fifield, curator

Requiem as a Prototype

This is a prototype for a much larger work by Nam June called 32 Cars for the 20th Century Play Mozart’s Requiem Quietly. And that piece has 32 different cars all from the 20th century, and all painted silver, like this piece, but the cars are filled with junk radios and junk television sets and over the whole scene it’s playing Mozart’s Requiem. The idea behind that piece is this incredible transition from an industrial society that made automobiles to an electronic society, and how radio, television, and the internet finally are now the dominant industries of America, whereas before
it was the industrial automobile and things like that. The great majesty of this piece is Mozart’s *Requiem* being played for the 20th century as we transfer out of the 20th century into the electronic 21st century. This prototype differs in some important ways. One of which it has video. It doesn’t have the junk TVs, it has these monitors in the windows, and they’re playing a variety of very explosive, colorful, very fun video. They’re sort of typical Nam June videos: fast, trippy, with multiple images from people, most of whom are Nam June’s friends. I think John Cage is in there, Joseph Beuys is in there. All these people like that.

**Fred Barzyk, former WGBH director**

**Paik at WGBH**

Paik’s first major work at WGBH was *Medium is the Medium*, which was a half hour show which involved an image of Richard Nixon, a lady in bikini and pasties dancing, hippies flown in to New York by Nam June, and strange images. The next set of experiments, we brought them into the studio, and just showed him all of the various things that the TV camera could do when unleashed from doing perfectly realistic pictures. That he considered one of his most important moments because we increased his visual vocabulary by tons. The next thing that Nam June found was that doing television shows was expensive because you have so many people and everything has to be paid for. He had to come up with something to make it really cheap, so he invented the video synthesizer. These were black and white little security cameras that he strung up. He had about four or five of them, and they were fed into a special synthesizer which would add color to it. So he, in effect, created his own little studio, and so Nam June went on the air building this from beginning to end, and it went on for three and half hours and he blew out WGBH’s transmitter because the chroma level was too high coming out of the synthesizer. So did the engineers like us? No. Did Paik like us? Oh yeah!

**Fred Barzyk, former WGBH director**

**Paik’s Influence on Video Art**

Nam June’s most valuable contribution to the whole movement, the video art movement, is the fact that he was a great proselytizer. He would write memos, and he would, he had one of the most unbelievable adverse books you’ve ever seen. And he would send people postcards and notes, and he would keep up the dialogue about how exciting all of these television possibilities could be, moving quickly into the video art world. And so Nam June was acting as a kind of an ombudsman between the art world and the video artist. He was always kind of the guy in-between, and always trying to be not ego-driven but to try to be very supportive of everybody else.

**Mystery Family Tour**

You are looking at a sculpture by Nam June Paik called *Requiem for the 20th Century*. Listen and look carefully to learn what this piece is all about. When you look at this sculpture, what do you see? Do you recognize anything or anyone on the television screens? How is this car different from cars you see on the road today? This piece is made out of a real car, a 1936 Chrysler Airflow Sedan. All of the
contents of the car were taken out including the cushions, seat belts, and steering wheel. The windows were fitted with TV monitors. The speakers, wires, and videos are inside the car. I’ve never seen a car with videos playing in the windows before! Why do you think the artist put music and videos into such an old car? Nam June hopes that you will think about what has been invented in the last one hundred years, like cars, televisions, and computers. He also hopes you will think about what might be invented in the next 100 years. What would you like to see created in the future?