

The 80th Anniversary of Broadcasting
KBS Special Exhibition

Nam June Paik Rhapsody in Video

1. Preface : The Purpose of the Exhibition

Nam June Paik Rhapsody in Video is a KBS special exhibition organized in celebration of its 80th Anniversary of Broadcasting that also honors the now deceased artist. As suggested by the title of the exhibition *Rhapsody*, this exhibition is mainly composed of Paik's multi-monitor works of the 90s that display the spectacular splendor and poetic fantasy. Along with the 10m long *Turtle* (1993) made of 166 television sets, about 30 medium to large-size video works are exhibited. In total, 500 or more TV monitors play a fantastic and heroic video rhapsody with ever-changing video images.

Paik's rhapsody shares the aesthetics of an ethnic and folk epic poem. Although he was a true cosmopolitan artist throughout his lifetime, Paik remained connected to his Korean background and oriental sentiments, thus his works draw an analogy to an ethnic colored rhapsody. Furthermore, the musical title of the exhibition alludes to the musical background of Paik in his youth. Before pioneering the genre of video art, he was deeply moved by Schönberg and used to compose various avant-garde action music pieces. Additionally, the title of the exhibition in Korean alphabet is homonymous with two different sets of Chinese characters (狂詩 and 光時) conveying a pun of a double meaning: former characters indicate ecstatic rhapsody while the latter characters describe light and time, thus indicating the genre of video art: the art of light and time.

Along with the multi-monitor works from the 1990s, another important axis of works that forms the conceptual base of the exhibition is the satellite trilogy of *Good morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986) and *Wrap around the World* (1988). The satellite works synthesize television broadcasting, video art and performance. The trilogy was a multimedia festival that brought art, entertainment, music and sports together into a historic broadcasting project that connected the whole world through satellite. KBS participated as one of the main broadcaster in this monumental project to start its official collaboration with Paik. In this context, it is all the more natural and meaningful that KBS has invited Nam June Paik in celebration of its 80th Anniversary of broadcasting.

2. Vertical space design and Presentation of multiple view points

The exhibition focuses on Paik's works from 1984 to 2001, the golden age of the artist's career and differentiates itself from previous retrospective exhibitions of the artist. The common features underlying the satellite trilogy of the 80s and the multi-monitor works of the 90s are the trans-genre complexity and the spectacular sight of grandeur. With these works, the venue is transformed into a fantastic media Disneyland that generates a visually dizzy extravaganza.

The venue is originally a KBS Hall lobby area, not a regular art gallery premise. It is a very unusual site: one spacious high hall with a balcony balustrade on the 2nd level and a slanted glass ceiling on one side. It was a challenge to transform this open lobby space into an adequate venue for an art exhibition but the unusual space also provided the opportunity to design a site-specific exhibition. By intervening in a neutral space and activating it, one can present the place itself as a work of art. Through the site-specific presentation that transforms the spatial disadvantage into an advantage, the exhibition not only proposes a new paradigm to break away from the white cube by suggesting a new "extended museum" exhibiting culture, but also maximizes the spectacular effect of the works on view.

Taking the characteristics of the space into full consideration, vertical division method was used instead of partitioning, guiding the audience to view an organically unified landscape. In place of horizontal division with partitions, a vertical two-level structure is connected in a natural circulatory manner: the 1st floor is a gradually rising ramp that leads to the 2nd floor by temporarily installed stairs on the right and the pathway ends at the bottom of the spiral stairs on the left. For the audience, the balcony balustrade of the upper level and the stairs are observation platforms enabling multiple view

points that stimulate diverse spatial experiences.

Through this itinerary that spans from the first floor ramp to the spiral stairs, the viewers can perceive the matrix of time and space that a single viewpoint cannot provide. If viewing a typical white cube exhibition requires vision alone, an exhibition specifically designed into a space demands multiple viewpoints that call upon the body to view the show as well as the eye. The corporeal perception enables phenomenologic interaction between the viewer and the object. Synesthetic chaos and macro/micro crisscrossing effect are created not only by the constantly moving video images but also by the viewer shifting his view point. The moment where the corporeal interaction of the viewer comes into harmony with the works, Nam June Paik's philosophy of participation and communication in art is fulfilled.

As mentioned earlier, the 1st floor is configured in a gradual slope and the works are exhibited in the raised or depressed areas around the slope. Here, the viewer's pathway connecting the exhibited works is conceptualized as a "route," implying the metaphor of the "Electronic Superhighway" that Paik manifested. The "route" becomes a stage where the art work and the spectator coexist, and creates an inter-subjective narrative. The viewer goes beyond his usual role of a passive onlooker and assumes a dynamic role, participating actively to playing of the rhapsodic melody.

Great western masters in art history such as Cezanne, Picasso, Duchamp and Cage brought forth new concepts of multiple view points, collage, ready-made, action, body and kineticism in order to solve the problem of representation in painting, in pursuit of presentational reality. In line with these concepts, Paik's video art conveys an epistemic meaning intended to achieve communicative art in everyday life through moving video images. The presentation of the exhibition that maximizes the audience participation and intervention accentuates such idea.

3. Nam June Paik's Video Art Seen Through the Exhibited Works: Part I

The highlight of the show is the huge electronic *Turtle* (1993) lying on its stomach on the left side of the center hall. Along with a rabbit, a turtle is a symbolic motif that appears repeatedly in Paik's works. Whereas the rabbit simplifies Eurasian horsemen's dynamism and strength to survive, a turtle is a mythical creature well-known to Koreans with a national symbolism of longevity, immortality and fertility. Here, the thematic meaning has less impact on the viewer than the unusual scale of the work, which measure at 10m. The viewer enters into a fantasy world while experiencing a strange mixture of familiarity and estrangement: familiar with the animal and its symbolisms but unfamiliar with its exaggerated size. Made of 166 television sets, *Turtle* is one of the main works of the exhibition that reflects the combination of nature and technology and Asian thought and Western civilization central in Paik's aesthetics. The meaning of longevity is even more poignant now with the artist passed away and his monumental *Turtle* remaining. One also cannot help but recall the famous aphorism: art is long, life is short.

The striking vertical counterpart of *Turtle* is *Tower* (2001), which is displayed near the entrance. Standing at 5m, *Tower* is a monumental media tower made of empty antique television cabinets and twenty neon tube lights. Along with *The More the Better* (1988, National Museum of Contemporary Art) and *Transmission Tower*, (2003, Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation) the piece embodies Paik's participation TV philosophy and his desire for communication and mutual understanding. Although inspired by the structure and shape of the traditional Korean tower, the images included are of the World Trade Center in New York and other clips from around the world. The light emitted from twenty neon tubes encourages the viewer to contemplate on the speed of information society and the notion of a global village.

Neptune, on the right side of *Turtle*, illustrates the universal ideal of video, "participation and communication," which can also be found in *Tower*. This particular piece lets the viewer see Paik's limitless imagination and creativity that goes beyond the global communication and extends to the universe. The piece is one of the planet series along with *Sun*, *Mercury*, and *Jupiter*. By presenting the dynamic energy of the natural world through circular mandala, Paik unfolds the cosmological vision of the future the new technology would bring. Through the space images emitted from sixteen monitors, the viewer can understand the message of "Electronic Super Highway" of the artist who set his ultimate goal of participation TV as communication among stars.

To the right from the entrance and in front of the stairs is a video sculpture that takes the shape of a

weeping willow tree with television sets and suspended wires. The piece *More Log-in Less Logging* was shown in the German pavilion of Venice Biennale in 1993. Paik plays on the pun of the word “log,” which means “to start” in computer language and wood in everyday language to, create this piece with the message of “if you log-in, you save the wood used to produce paper.” Through this work, Paik once again emphasizes his famous remark on how the Braun tube would replace paper.

Aforementioned works are important video sculptures that take a crucial part in Paik’s video art. The sculptural quality of the monitors and moving images are joined together to provide this video genre with a new aesthetic quality and to function as a sculpture that contains light, a moving sculpture. Through the immaterialized video effect, the monitor’s heavy materiality is animated into a living being and transforms the viewer’s sensory system. Electronic light maximizes its effect of immaterializing in the multi-monitor video wall type works with multiple images that appear simultaneously. Video wall is a moving mural or a luminous sculpture with multiple combination and disruption of the macro and the micro video images simultaneously emitting light. This grand spectacle of fractal provides the viewer with a new sensory experience. As Paik asserted, the Braun tube art takes the place of art on a canvas and blossoms into the video mural type works such as *M200* and *W3*.

M 200 (1991) is a massive video wall that measures 9.6 m by 3.3 m, displayed on the wall facing the exit. This massive video mural is transformed into an intangible light that eventually turns the whole gallery into an immaterial space when 94 TV monitors start broadcasting images of Mozart, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, etc. On the other hand, *W3* (1994), which is attached to the wall next to the installed stairs that goes up the 2nd floor, does not possess a definite form of a mural but has a liberal, frameless composition. As if referring to the web-based culture of an information society, this linear video wall made of 64 TV monitors forms a web-like zigzag pattern across the dimly lit wall. This freestyle video wall was one of the most important works he presented in the “Electronic Superhighway” exhibition. The exhibition took place 20 years after Paik applied for a grant with the project plan of the same title at the Rockefeller Foundation. The piece also holds an importance in that it exemplifies Paik’s ideal of audience participation in art.

The robot series also takes a significant part in Paik’s video sculpture. Through the robot series, which is a postmodern parody of the portrait of modern human as well as an artistic eulogy to artificial intelligence, the artist reasserts his declaration of humanizing technology and creates a new kind of modern myth akin to that of Steven Spielberg. *Joseph Beuys* (1990) is one of the series of robots made of various electronic parts Paik created to humorously represent historical figures or his fellow artists. This particular piece represents the German avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys, who maintained an exceptionally close relationship with Paik through their shared interest in Eurasian culture and Shamanism. Paik makes the identity of the robot clear by providing it with Beuys’ characteristic felt hat as well as related video images.

Video Scooter is a video sculpture personified into a character, made of a life-size scooter and twenty television sets that broadcast images of roads. This piece can be seen as a video version of Paik’s early music performance with a live rooster and a motorcycle on stage and provides an insight into the development of Paik’s video art that evolved from electronic music to electronic vision.

In the dark surplus space below the stairs leading to the 2nd floor, *Cave TV with Candle* is exhibited. This piece is a continuation as well as a revision of his meditative early work *Candle TV* that reflects Zen Buddhism. Unlike the earlier version that puts one candle in an empty television frame, *Cave TV with Candle* uses several candles as if to illustrate the aesthetics of “the more the better.” The piece reflects the multi-monitor spectacle of the 90s but at the same time inherits Asian sensibilities through its choice of motif and poetic sensibility. One can recognize Paik’s effort to nullify the Western technology and electronic power in his retro-gesture to use candlelight instead of the electronic light of a television. At the same time, the manual labor of the person in charge of turning on the candles and the aesthetic strategy for maximizing the viewer’s psychological intervention reflects Paik’s desire for interactivity and participation TV.

4. **Nam June Paik’s Video Art** Seen Through the Exhibited Works: **Part II**

On the 2nd floor, *One Candle* (1988) greets the viewers first. This single channel video projection is another revision of *Candle TV* where six RGB projectors project images of a candle. The color images of projected candles are juxtaposed with the actual candle to imbue the surroundings with fantastic light. The juxtaposition of meditative and minimal candlelight and maximal projected images seem to

visualize the trait of today's image world that blurs the line between reality and illusion. Paik illustrates the effect of postmodern simulation through the increase and repetition of the projected images. At the same time, he attempts to find the origin of video art as the art of lights from non-Western source before the technology civilization, by juxtaposing modern electronic images and a pre-modern candle.

After *One Candle* and past the corridor appears the main exhibition area of the upper level. Furnishing the front part of this area is *TV Bed*, which consists of an antique bed frame and eighteen television sets. It is Paik's 1991 re-creation of the original he created in 1972. This video sculpture was intended for his erotica partner Charlotte Moorman to rest in. It is also a performance piece that allowed Moorman to play the cello while lying on it. The usage of an object of daily life as a motif suggests that Paik is interested in topics such as eroticism and sexuality, which resonates with his philosophy of life art that connects art and everyday life. The eroticism in his works has formal characteristic and aesthetic meaning in that it intensifies the communicability of his works by presenting them in new and daring ways that shock the audience.

Behind the *TV Bed* is a video viewing room where the audience can watch Paik's satellite trilogy. Paik's satellite trilogy epitomizes his video art in the 80s and consists of *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984), *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986) and *Wrap Around the World* (1988). *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* was the first to be broadcasted of the Nam June Paik space opera. Aired on the New Year's Day in 1984 around the world including Seoul (through KBS), Tokyo, LA, San Francisco, Berlin and Hamburg, it encompasses live broadcasting of variety of performances in New York and Paris crisscrossed with recorded tape from Cologne. The piece included performances by his fellow avant-garde artists Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Joseph Beuys and Laurie Anderson as well as rock stars and fashion designers. Every single aspect of this space project went through Paik's hands from organizing and casting to directing. As if to disprove George Orwell's negative and pessimistic prediction on the media, Paik uses television as a global communication device for the world to state his optimistic view.

The other two works were also planned and organized based on the same concept and format, but they differ from the first in that they both were created with the idea of arts Olympics in mind. *Bye Bye Kipling* was made in celebration of the Asian Games hosted by Korea in 1986, and *Wrap Around the World* was made to celebrate the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Like sports, art can spread to larger public to be a catalyst to the merging of the East and the West and transcend politics to unite all boundaries and separation. *Bye Bye Kipling* was created in response to Kipling's famous remark that "East and West, never the twain shall meet." The video emphasizes the inevitable encounter of the East and the West by overlapping the scene of marathon race along the Han river with Philip Glass' music and having artists and celebrities from around the world meet each other by using split screen.

The third and last of the trilogy *Wrap Around the World* was carried out as a festival that united not only the East and the West but also two opposing ideologies. This global festival included many artists from communist cities such as Beijing and Leningrad as well as Asian, European and American artists. Unlike its two precedents, *Wrap Around the World* had a narrative; artists from all over the world are gathered to dissuade Dr. Mobius from destroying the Earth and create *Wrap Around the World* to change his mind. The narrative works as a metaphor for the message of the satellite network project that connects the whole world.

Beuys/Vox is displayed near the spiral stairs coming down. This piece was created to commemorate Paik's friendship with Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) that started in 1961, and includes small objects, prints and other media that could be created in editions. As a leading figure of German avant-garde art and a close friend of Paik, Beuys played an important part in consolidating Paik's position in international art world along with John Cage. During World War II, he was stationed in Crimea and was rescued by the local Tatars when his plane crashed. This experience made a lasting impression in his mind and Beuys focused on the motifs related to life and energy such as felt, clothe, wax, oil and sled to create mystical and expressive works since then. His interest in Shamanism and his close relationship with Paik also has its roots in the admiration of the non-Western culture that stemmed from such life and death experience. After Beuys' death, Paik performed *The Shaman-Rite (Goot in Korean) for Beuys* in 1988 in Gallery Hyundai in Seoul in memory of Beuys. The group of works used as props for the *goot* dedicated to Beuys was collected and titled *Beuys/Vox* meaning "the voice of Beuys." (*Vox* means voice in German).

Down the spiral stairs on the left side of the gallery is *In-flux house* (1993), which is a cross between a

video sculpture and a video wall. A kind of a media center, this video architecture with a roof made of 52 television sets draws our attention to the wide-ranging invasion of media that reaches from the Time Square in New York City to a common suburban household. At the same time, it presents the vision of futuristic lifestyle of an information society. *In-flux house* is based on *Home Entertainment Centers* of early 1950s, which was made of radio and television set and inherits the Fluxus movement. As the title suggests, varieties of images from Fluxus performances appear on the screen in an entertaining mixture.

Along with these works, there are *TV Tulip* that decorates the entrance on the 1st floor, two *Video Chandeliers* hanging from the ceiling, and *Hanging Gardens of the Semiramis*. These works join the melody of *Video in Rhapsody* played by the multi-monitor electronic lighting that resonates in the fantastic world inside the exhibition hall.

5. Nam June Paik's Postmodern Vision

Nam June Paik's postmodern vision is visualized through this exhibition that maximizes the baroque style spectacle, the aesthetics of "the more the better," and mystical mannerism. As a postmodern visionary, Paik pioneered multimedia genre such as happening, video, and performance video as well as practicing his pluralistic aesthetics through his nomadic working style. He moved from action music to happening to video to broaden his ground in terms of the medium he used and the genre he worked in. Within the video art, Paik established himself as a versatile artist who covers every possible genre in video art by going from sculpture, installation and performance of the 70s to the satellite projects in the 80s. Moreover, with his tireless curiosity in the media, he opened a new chapter in video art, a post-video, by shifting the gear from analog to digital video and incorporating laser.

Stylistically as well, Paik attempted to change at every possible turn. He moved from simple aesthetics of action music and Fluxus to multilayered composite aesthetics of American style happening, and from minimalistic meditative video works to baroque style multi-monitor spectacle. At the same time he freed himself from style through the aesthetics of duality that mixes two opposites of minimalism and maximalism. Furthermore, he established his signature style through the strategy of reproduction that layers or divides the same image or utilizes the same image over and over again.

Such stylistic compositeness and aesthetic duality reflect his dual identity as a diasporic artist. For Paik, home country represents irreparable loss and absence as well as the desire to go back. The duality of loss and desire, absence and return explains Paik's dual identity as a cosmopolitan artist with hybrid aesthetics. He combined the Western cutting-edge with the Eastern classics to put the Western virtue in a relative light and obtains the dual virtue of both the East and the West. Paik's claim to humanize technology through video art or his concept of "participation TV" that transforms the one-way communication of television into an interactive two-way one can be understood in the same vein.

The perpetual theme of Paik's works that encompasses action music, Fluxus happenings and television works of the 50s and 60s, video sculpture and installation of the 70s, satellite works of the 80s and multi-monitor works of the 90s, is communication and participation. Paik's artistic insight about this theme was already apparent in the "Electronic Super Highway" proposal he submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1974. He envisioned that electric communication network, satellite, coaxial cable, laser light, and optical fiber would connect the whole world, and the eventual challenge would be to connect the Earth with other planets or stars with other stars. His insight preceded "information super highway" project of former vice president Al Gore by twenty years. Paik's satellite trilogy of 1984 through 1988 was the aesthetic embodiment of his "Electronic Super Highway" concept of 1974 and a foreshadowing of his postmodern vision of the 90s represented by multi-monitor works.

6. Conclusion: Desired Effect

As I have mentioned before, this exhibition is not a retrospective that spans the whole career of the artist but mainly consists of Paik's multi-monitor works of the 90s. These works were created in a highly prolific period in Paik's career but were underestimated as manneristic in comparison to his earlier meditative pieces based on Zen Buddhism. I hope this exhibition provides the opportunity to shed a

new light to reevaluate Paik's multi-monitor works of the 90s.

I believe this exhibition will reestablish Paik's place in the history of modern art as well as introducing him to a wider Korean public. I especially hope Paik's avant-garde and creative power that shocked and changed the reality and the world comes through his works to be felt again. The works in the exhibition are famous works widely known through many catalogs and most of them are loaned from collectors in Europe and United States to be exhibited for the first time in Korea. Moreover, this exhibition uses the alternative space of KBS Media Art Hall instead of regular gallery or museum to enhance accessibility. I hope this exhibition helps establishing a new "extended museum" culture that takes a step toward the audience.

This exhibition was organized by KBS as part of the celebration of the 80th anniversary of broadcasting and holds an importance as an opportunity to reevaluate Paik's works in the 90s. At the same time, it suggests a futuristic vision of a broadcasting media by emphasizing the relationship between Paik and KBS that began with *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* in 1984. I would like to express my most sincere thanks to the staff at KBS and MYART who made this exhibition possible.

Artistic Director, Kim Hong-Hee (Director, Gyeonggido Museum of Art)