

"I am a communication artist"

Interview with Nam June Paik

by Tilman Baumgaertel

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[Nam June Paik has been labeled the "father of video art." What is much less known is that he was not only the creator of the much-abused term "telecommunication superhighway," but also among the first to use telecommunication satellites for artistic exchange. His satellite performances "Good Morning Mr Orwell," "Wrap around the world" and "Good- bye Kipling" brought together artists such as David Bowie, Laurie Anderson, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Charlotte Moorman and others to perform together. These pieces can be seen as early examples of net art. The following interview was conducted by telephone. Nam June Paik was reached in Florida, where he spends the winter away from his home in New York City.]

Tilman Baumgaertel: Your art has a lot to do with the abuse of technology. With "Participation TV" the viewers can warp the image, with your video synthesizer it was possible to manipulate moving images...

Nam June Paik: Yes. The video synthesizer was actually somehow the beginning of the Internet....

TB: Oh. Why?

NJP: Because you were able to create media content for yourself, like you can do on the Internet now. It is very important to make media yourself. Now with PC and Internet we have a better chance of doing something. Now people are talking about a hybrid, half computer and half TV, that can receive many hundred TV stations. If that happens I will soon be able to buy my own TV station licence and broadcast my video art from some super computer through that station every day.

TB: You coined the term "information superhighway." Do you think that you got the right credit for it?

NJP: Yes, I think I got enough credit. I used the term in a study I wrote for the Rockefeller Foundation in 1974. I thought: if you create a highway, then people are going to invent cars. That's dialectics. If you create electronic highways, something has to happen.

TB: But what gave you this idea?

NJP: I knew that something along that line would happen. I did a lot of electronic music in Cologne in 1958 and '59 for the WDR, and because I spend so much time

at that radio station I was very familiar with that kind of telecommunication technology.

TB: And now? Do you use the computer yourself? Do you surf the Internet?

NJP: I have a small site on the World Wide Web. But I am 68 now, and my eyes have become bad in the last three years. I can't read the small letters on the screen. And I never learned to type. I think we need moving pictures on the Internet that are larger, of good quality and in real-time. Now we have very small moving pictures that take 15 minutes to download. I think when optic fibre goes around the world we will have moving pictures very soon, and then the Internet will be more exciting.

TB: But even without big images people use the Internet to communicate...

NJP: I think the Internet is very exciting, because you can collaborate with other people all over the world. It is almost like a string quartet- -four people playing together. We can do this kind of thing on the Internet. And from contact new things can emerge.

I think that the internet will finally bring the revolution in China. And when there is a revolution in China, it will also happen in North Korea. Internet is a great hope for all people in the countries that are still communist. China cannot live without computers and Internet. Everybody in China will want a computer and Internet access, and then they will want to have freedom. So George Orwell was wrong after all, when he wrote "1984." He didn't foresee the Internet.

TB: A lot of your former students are working with the Internet now...

NJP: Yes, that's good. I think that the Internet is a very important medium for the arts. There is a whole new video art on the Internet. The different art forms are merging: video and literature, graphics and music. The Internet makes a new kind of art possible--net art.

TB: Are you interested in creating art on the Internet?

NJP: No, I am old now. I am happy that I have done something at all. But I don't have to do everything in the world, and maybe then it is not even good. If you are too perfect, god gets angry at you. I have to be modest.

TB: In the '80s you were among the first artists to use satellites for worldwide performances. Today this seems like an early example of net art...

NJP: That was a very big success. I was working with a lot of stars, like David Bowie and Peter Gabriel. It was exciting. Organizing it was the hard part. At that time were the Olympics in Korea, so some money was available from the Korean broadcasting system, so we were able to do it. And we had friends at all the other TV stations, like Manfred Eichel at WDR. All these contacts helped me a lot.

TB: But why use satellites in the first place for an art broadcast?

NJP: Satellites were used in the applied art, but not for high art. I wanted to use it for high art, and see as an artist what I could do with it. I wanted to create high art with new materials. I wanted to work with the temporal element of the popular arts, the rhythm which is so important in video art. Also, satellites were used by the military, and I wanted to use them for pacifistic purposes: performances, dance, music, video art...

TB: Do you think that this kind of global communication can help pacifistic purposes?

NJP: Yes. Satellites can be made into a tool for world peace, like in situations in Rwanda or Yugoslavia. Through the satellite this kind of conflict becomes a world affair, and gets a lot of sympathy from the people all around the world. So it can stop the war.

TB: Your first satellite piece "Good morning Mr Orwell" was announced as "Art for 10 million people," because that was the potential number of viewers for this show. Was it important to you to reach as many people as possible with your art?

NJP: Yes, I want to be popular. I am a communication artist, so I have to communicate with my audience.

TB: I understand you work with laser now?

NJP: Yes, we want to make a laser cathedral for John Cage at the P.S. 1 in Queens. I want it to look like Notre Dame, and we can perform John Cage's music there and broadcast it via satellite.

In 2012 is the hundredth birthday of John Cage, and I would like to rent the Carnegie Hall and to make a big festival for him. John Cage was in Germany very often. I want to have one German group in Cologne, and I want to participate via Satellite in New York. And maybe there can be other participants in Berlin or Seoul or Moscow.

TB: What attracted you to work with laser?

NJP: Laser has a kind of new mystique, a psychological effect on the viewer. After my stroke I feel that one part of me is already in another kind of world. Laser has a connection to a more spiritual world. It is kind of a continuation of the video art, but the good thing about it is that you cannot show it on TV.

http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/paik/index.html