

# Nam June Paik

SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM,  
WASHINGTON, DC

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**THE CATALOGUE** for “Nam June Paik: Global Visionary” opens by comparing the artist with Picasso, claiming that because of his prescience and influence, the former is to the second half of the twentieth century what the latter is to the first half. If retrospective exhibitions alone are any indicator of the accuracy of this claim, it rings true. While he was alive, Paik had four major museum retrospectives in the US and abroad and helped plan an art center outside Seoul dedicated to his work, which opened after his death in 2006. Since then, there have been several more museum exhibitions in Europe, followed by this one, curated by John G. Hanhardt, who helmed two of the artist’s previous surveys, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2000, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1982. Yet this bounty of exhibitions also raises the question, Why another? The Smithsonian’s justification is its recent acquisition of a large chunk of Paik’s archives in conjunction with a greater push to build a new-media-art collection. Consisting of seven large truckloads of material that Paik accumulated since the early 1950s, these archives are particularly exciting because they finally open Paik’s work to much-needed new scholarship. With this show, the Smithsonian successfully began the process of exhibiting these materials, complementing them with a relevant selection of sculptures and installations, which, while including many works shown previously, nevertheless contains a few surprises even for those already familiar with the artist’s oeuvre.

Despite touching on the whole of Paik’s forty-some-year career, the exhibition is small and focused, displaying only sixty-seven works and presenting them in a well-designed layout that homes in on related thematic clusters. At its center is a single darkened gallery, where the sprawling *TV Garden*, 1974/2000, takes center stage. The piece’s

vast scatter of monitors, engulfed in a mass of living greenery arrayed on the gallery floor, plays excerpts from his single-channel video *Global Groove*, 1973 (made in collaboration with John Godfrey). The purposefully banal *Moon Projection with E Moon and Birds*, 1996, screens behind it on a freestanding wall. That work’s pseudo-romantic, artificially constructed images of gulls hovering in front of a full moon add a playfully eerie note of reverie to the garden’s faux-jungle effect. Nearby, a particularly lively corner juxtaposes three variations of the color-video abstraction *TV Crown*, 1965/1999, with the black-and-white video portrait “My Best Video” *Dieter Roth*, 1966/1991. The crowns’ spinning, effervescent tori look like halos for the heavenly kingdom of the television age. Their neo-Byzantine splendor contrasts with the static that nearly occludes the degraded footage of Roth reading his poetry, a tribute to that artist’s own half-rotten works.

Another cluster features various early, proto-Minimalist works by Paik. His well-known *Zen for TV*, 1963–82, which comprises a monitor displaying a single, Barnett Newman-esque zip, is located near his earlier and lesser-known *Media Sandwich*, 1961–64, a grid of seventeen readymades. The top two rows contain old phonograph records from the ’30s, the lower two rows copies of the German electronics magazines *Funkschau* and *Funk-Technik* from the ’60s. To the grid’s bottom left, a small rotogravure of a German town made in 1832 punctuates the piece, constituting the third layer of this accreted genealogical “sandwich” of media formats. Created while Paik was living in Germany, this work reveals the artist to be a media archaeologist long before Friedrich Kittler, with a keen eye for the history of media forms, their transformation over time, and the machinic detritus of information technologies. Paik’s abiding interest in technological flotsam is also evident in a display on the opposite side of the room, where items from the archives are packed in a floor-to-ceiling *Wunderkammer*. These include radios, television sets, and numerous other electronic gadgets Paik used in his work, mixed with various objects he collected, as well as a selection of paper materials, such as a notebook, programs, exhibition catalogues, postcards, and letters, assembled in an adjacent vitrine.

Hidden among this ephemera is documentation for several of Paik’s international television pieces, raising the

specter of the most important and least addressed aspect of Paik’s work: his role as a “global visionary.” I agree with the organizers that the moniker fits, inasmuch as the artist addressed issues related to the planetwide impact of new technologies long before most other postwar artists were even beginning to conceive of such shifts, and he continued to do so throughout his career. This is emphasized here with relatively late work, such as the aforementioned *Global Groove*, a piece that realized his earlier notion of using video as a tool for cross-cultural education; *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, 1984, a live, multinational television broadcast that linked the US, France, Germany, and South Korea; and the remarkable *Chinese Memory*, 2005, a sculptural installation—made just before his death—that intertwines his peripatetic autobiography with larger currents of transnational cultural exchange.

## *TV Crown’s spinning, effervescent tori look like halos for the heavenly kingdom of the television age.*

But aside from these examples and despite the show’s title, little on view directly addresses the subject. A copy of his report “Expanded Education for the Paperless Society” from 1968 is in the vitrine, but other major work Paik did on globalization, such as *Guadalcanal Requiem*, 1977/1979, and *You Can’t Lick Stamps in China*, 1978, is not featured strongly enough. In the case of the former, there is considerable archival material that could have been displayed. In the case of the latter, only archival material is displayed and not the video itself. Admittedly, the lack of more such work is due in part to the fact that the artist mainly addressed globalization in media that are difficult to present in a gallery exhibition—namely, his still underacknowledged writing and his long-form work for broadcast television. The museum has made an attempt to begin considering these. Nevertheless, a fuller assessment of Paik as a global visionary remains to be seen. The acquisition of his archives by the Smithsonian will significantly aid such future explorations and help determine whether or not Paik’s work will retain its influential charge. □

“Nam June Paik: Global Visionary” is on view through Aug. 11, 2013.

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From left: View of “Nam June Paik: Global Visionary,” 2012–13. Foreground: *TV Garden*, 1974/2000. Background: Selected objects from the Nam June Paik Archive. Nam June Paik, *TV Crown* (detail), 1965/1999, manipulated television set, 54 x 26 x 22”. Nam June Paik, *Media Sandwich*, 1961–64, phonograph records, magazines, rotogravure print on paper, dimensions variable.

