NAM JUNE PAIK: THE MIAMI YEARS

Nam June Paik (b. 1932, Seoul, Korea; d. 2006, Miami Beach) was a pioneer in using electronic images and digitized compositions as creative expression, and is often referred to as the “father of video art.” Coining the term “electronic superhighway” in 1974, Paik envisioned the transformative power of electronic media to network and connect people from every part of the globe. His progressive ideas, experimental working methods and playful works demonstrated an acute awareness of the rising power of digital media—not only in contemporary art but also the future of social networks and our enmeshment in technology today.

Organized around The Bass’ acquisition of Paik’s TV Cello (2003), Nam June Paik: The Miami Years introduces visitors to the artist’s important connection to Miami while offering a look at his extraordinarily innovative art practice and optimistic aim to humanize technology. In fact, Paik kept an apartment on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach from 1988 until his death in 2006. He sought refuge in the warm climate of South Florida, its leisurely pace offering an escape from the intensities of New York City. The Miami atmosphere lent itself to a different kind of creative focus, one where Paik’s ideas for new artworks could incubate to be later realized in his New York studio.

Paik’s public presence in South Florida, however, was anything but behind the scenes. In the 1980s, his videos were screened at such programs as Miami Waves and the Alliance Film/Video Project. In 1983, Paik visited Broward Community College to present a selection of his videos. His work was shown at The Bass in 1987 in Video Transformations, alongside such figures as Laurie Anderson, David Byrne and Bill Viola. In 1994, a solo exhibition, Electronic Super Highway, was presented at the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, with a companion show of modestly scaled video works at Barbara Gillman Gallery on Miami Beach’s Lincoln Road, introducing Paik to an even wider local audience. That same year, his work could be seen in the group exhibition Home Video Redefined: Media, Sculpture and Domesticity at the Center of Contemporary Art in North Miami. And the list goes on.

Indeed, Paik was very present on the Miami arts scene. He made relationships and was a regular at such Miami Beach restaurants as The Strand on Washington Avenue. Paik was honored at a fundraising event for The Bass in 1999, with an introduction and remarks by John Hanhardt, the noted curator of film and media arts at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, which would present a phenomenally popular Paik retrospective exhibition the following year. The 1999 edition of Art Miami bestowed its International Distinguished Artist Award on Paik for his pioneering and forward-thinking use of video and television to explore the relationship between art and information. And in 2001, Paik was the honoree at the 27th Annual Miami Beach Festival of the Arts, with a festival poster designed by the artist and an exhibition of his work at North Shore Community Center.

But it was his time in Florida in the late 1980s—working on two large-scale, site-specific projects for Miami International Airport—that led Paik to purchase his South Beach condo. These sculptural installations by the artist were unveiled to the public in 1990. While navigating the airport, many thousands of travelers would encounter Paik’s TV screens and their mesmerizing flows of South Florida imagery, combined with the artist’s unique form of “electronic painting”—an altogether dynamic cacophony flashing before their eyes.

Nam June Paik: The Miami Years examines the history of these public artworks, with a deeper look at the artist’s advanced philosophy towards technology and its relationship to the body. Paik’s pioneering art practice holds an enduring global power to excite audiences and fellow artists, and continues to influence developments in art, popular culture and technology today.

Jon Huffman, Street view looking towards Nam June Paik’s Miami Beach apartment, 2002. Photograph, 4 x 6 in. Collection of Jon Huffman.

Nam June Paik trained as a classical pianist in Seoul until his family left Korea at the outbreak of the Korean War, traveling first to Hong Kong and finally settling in Tokyo in 1950. Paik enrolled at the University of Tokyo where he studied music composition, art history and aesthetics. He would later move to Munich, studying with noted composers, before going on to Cologne to work with audio electronics in the studios of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting) in 1958.

That year he attended the International Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt, where he met the American avant-garde composer John Cage (1912–1992), a pivotal first encounter with this lifelong friend and collaborator. Paik soon began incorporating objects and mixing live and prerecorded sounds into his experimental compositions—what he called “Action Music.” His goal for these theatrical disturbances: to shock his audiences into a more receptive state of awareness.

While in Germany, Paik met George Maciunas (1931–1978), founder of Fluxus—an international group of artists, designers, composers and poets who engaged in experimental performances focused on the creative process rather than a final artistic product. In 1964, Paik moved to New York City where he performed at a Fluxus Orchestra concert at Carnegie Hall. That year he met the Juilliard-trained cellist Charlotte Moorman (1933–1991), founder and organizer of the New York Avant Garde Festival. Moorman would collaborate with Paik on numerous sensational performances where the artist would explore his interests in humanizing technology by applying electronic sculptures to Moorman’s body in various stages of undress—including TV Bra for Living Sculpture (1969), TV Glasses (1971) and TV Bed (1972)—creating a kind of hybrid human-instrument-machine.

TV Cello (1971) is seminal among this group of works. Composed of three stacked acrylic boxes enclosing CRT television sets, Paik’s video-sculptural interpretation of a cello had strings, which Moorman would bow and pluck to make sounds. During her performances, the TV sets showed footage from closed-circuit video of the very performance taking place in real time, as well as previously recorded video and live feed from local television broadcasts. The audio created by Moorman’s performance, played back through a synthesizer, would act upon and distort the video footage. Paik made some ten versions of TV Cello over a thirty-year period.

While the early “TV Cellos” were intended to be performed by Charlotte Moorman, Paik considered later versions to be independent sculptural works. This 2003 sculpture is now part of The Bass permanent collection. Paik always embraced the use of contemporaneous technology—like the liquid crystal display (LCD) monitor, which became available in the early 1990s—representing his ongoing interest in adapting innovations and the most up-to-date electronics for his artworks. The monitors are installed inside Plexiglas boxes tagged by the artist with acrylic paint and marker, with screens showing image-processed videos of Moorman’s earlier performances.

This silent film documentation shows Charlotte Moorman in her first performance with Paik’s TV Cello at the Bonino Gallery in New York in 1971.

Video still from Nam June Paik, TV Cello, 2003.
THE ROBOT

By the mid-1980s, Paik returned to the sculptural form of the robot he had explored years earlier in a work called Robot K-456 (1964)—a human figure composed of scavenged metals and electronics named after a concerto by Mozart. In 1986, Paik introduced Family of Robot, a series of nearly life-sized anthropomorphic sculptures depicting a sort of generational timeline of incremental advancements in communication technologies, symbolized by the organization of the nuclear family—each member comprised of household electronics such as radios and televisions playing works by Paik.

Paik would continue using the robot motif from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, making portrait references to such artists as John Cage (1912–1992) and Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) or pop culture and political figures. Beginning with K-456, these explorations evolved into a portrayal of the human as fully fused with technology—a prescient vision that, in many startling ways, has come to pass today with technology fully integrated into almost every aspect of our daily lives.

Bakelite Robot, 2002
The versatile synthetic material called Bakelite—an early twentieth-century innovation with glossy, heat-resistant surfaces—lends a futuristic character to Paik’s life-sized sculptures fashioned from plastic radios and televisions. This fusion of technological innovation with the brand name of a once-ubiquitous consumer product coincides with Paik’s optimistic view of technology as a means for humanity to access and share both art and popular culture. Those utopian ideals have routinely manifested in the portrayal of the robot as a mechanized laborer, corresponding with the sci-fi fantasy of mechanical beings replacing the societal need for human labor—thus allowing time for leisure and togetherness.

Lucy, 1992
Lucy is unique among Paik’s sculptures that seek to humanize technology. Rather than a life-sized figure, like Bakelite Robot, this work is a larger-than-life portrait “bust.” The composition is cobbled together from televisions, circuit boards, and other found electronic parts, much like his robot sculptures from the 1960s. The title refers to “Lucy” (Australopithecus afarensis), our early human ancestor. This is evident in the anthropological imagery in the video footage by Paik presented on five television monitors incorporated in the work, along with capacitors, resistors and LaserDiscs that serve as accessories and electrical cords as wiry hair.

Internet Dweller, 1994
If Bakelite Robot and Lucy are Paik’s rough equivalents to the human figure, Internet Dweller further obscures the differences between technology and humans. This squat form, composed of three vintage television sets, suggests a torso, two arms and a head—the last composed of nothing more than a light fixture. While the Internet was officially born in 1983, the year 1994 (the date of this work) is momentous in the life of communication technologies since it witnessed the public launch of the World Wide Web—the internet as we know it today. In yet another prophetic reflection on the melding of human nature with technology, the artist’s use of the term “dweller” corresponds with the fusion of screens and everyday life today, a paradoxical power of technology to both unite and separate humanity.

Nam June Paik, Bakelite Robot, 2002. Single-channel video installation with five 5.6 in. LCD monitors and two 4 in. LCD monitors, electric lights and oil marker. 50 × 54 ¼ × 7 ½ in. Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate.

THE MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT COMMISSIONS

Commissioned in 1985 by the Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust and dedicated on November 29, 1990, two site-specific artworks by Paik—TV Miami and TV Wing—welcomed visitors to Miami International Airport (MIA). Paik’s works were the result of a county effort to rethink its processes for acquiring public art. In this new approach, curators were invited to visit the airport as part of an advisory committee responsible for making recommendations to the Trust’s board. Rather than selecting existing artworks for sites throughout the airport facility, a panel of four curators recommended the appointment of four artists to serve as consultants.

The artists were charged with crafting an artistic master plan for the airport, which would include presenting their own work and art by others. The plan considered the airport’s total environment, encompassing the transient nature of any airport, as well as MIA as an introduction to South Florida. As the curator panel advised, the artistic plan should consider the overall effect the airport atmosphere would have on visitors’ perceptions—from sight and sound to lived embodied experiences, including MIA’s relationship to its site—physically, symbolically and historically. Artists David Antin, Robert Irwin, Max Neuhaus and Nam June Paik were invited to work with airport planners and architects to develop site-specific artworks based on sound, videotaped images, spatial interventions and other computer and electronic technology.

The proposals by Antin and Neuhaus included attempted leaps in technology that made it impossible to realize their projects. Irwin’s ambitious plan to radically intervene in the physical structure of the airport—from landscaping and parking lots to seats in waiting areas and locations of airport entrances—was similarly too extensive to realize. However, Irwin was able to realize a temporary work, what was referred to as a “demonstration project,” for an outdoor area plagued with pollution from idling buses and automobiles collecting arriving passengers. Irwin illuminated a pedestrian walkway with green fluorescent tubes installed overhead, parallel to the white stripes of the crosswalk below, creating a hazy atmosphere of green-light-tinged vehicle exhaust. Nam June Paik’s sculptural installations TV Miami and TV Wing were, in fact, the only actual works that resulted from this experimental collaborative process.
TV Miami and TV Wing, 1990

TV Miami was installed in front of the Customs exit doors in the “Greeters’ Lobby” of Concourse E, on the airport’s lower level. Placed into a recessed area previously used by car rental agencies, TV Miami used 76 television monitors—set in Plexiglas boxes and stacked inside wooden forms arranged 18 feet across—to spell out M-I-A-M-I in block letters. TV Wing, located in the third-level connector space to Concourse B, was composed of nearly 100 monitors assembled in a biplane-shaped frame spanning 30 feet outlined with fluorescent tubes, and punctuated by a central propeller. In both works, the screens showed scenes of South Florida—palm trees, flamingos, bathers at the beach, traffic jams, Buddhist temples and sailboats—combined with Paik’s unique form of “electronic painting.” The cacophony flashing before travelers’ eyes showed existing footage sourced from the archives of the local CBS-affiliate Channel 4 along with new footage of South Florida shot by Paik. All of it was edited and synchronized into a continuous stream of moving images.

While Paik’s other sculptures during these years explored the fusion of the human body with technology, these works—TV Miami in particular—offered another kind of portrait: Miami as a place, a dynamic city captured in moving images from news media and other documentary footage embedded into the physical structure of the city’s name—M-I-A-M-I. The architectonic letters themselves served as analogues of the high-rises that would transform the city’s urban profile, the images projecting vivid symbols of the global cultures that now comprise our expanding population.
**Exhibition Checklist**

Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut
TV Cello Premiere, 1971
16 mm film (on video), color, silent, 7:25 min.
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Nam June Paik
TV Cello, 2003
Single-channel video (color, sound), LCD monitors, CRT monitor, acrylic paint, Plexiglas, metal, wood, rubber cables, solid-state media player, remote, power amplifier, converter, power amp and speakers.

Nam June Paik Estate

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Peter Moore
Charlotte Moorman wearing
Nam June Paik's "TV Bra for Living Sculpture," 1969
Gelatin silver print
9 ¼ × 9 ½ in.
Collection of The Bass

Peter Moore
Nam June Paik, 1967
Gelatin silver print
6 × 9 in.
Collection of The Bass

Peter Moore
Gelatin silver print
9 × 6 in.
Collection of The Bass

Nam June Paik
Internet Dweller, 1994
Vintage TV sets with light fixtures 52 × 50 × 24 in.
Courtesy of Art Bridges

Nam June Paik
Lucy, 1982
Aluminum frame, neon, oil paint, electrical wires, five TV sets, LaserDiscs, circuit boards, keyboards, typewriter, plastic, metal and electrical elements 63 × 61 × 30 ¾ in.
Collection of Cathy Vedov

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Nam June Paik
Bakelite Robot, 2002
Single-channel video installation with five 5.6 in. LCD monitors and two 4 in. LCD monitors, electric lights and oil marker 50 × 54 ¼ × 7 ½ in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June's Apt kitchen telephone Miami, 2004
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June's Apartment in Miami, 1984
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June and John Hanhardt Miami, 1998
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June Paik and Barbara Wise Miami, 1998
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June and Stephen Vitiello Miami, 1998
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
View of Nam June's Miami Apt, 2004
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Jon Hoffman
Nam June's Apartment in Miami, 2004
Photograph, 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Jon Hoffman

Nam June Paik
Oil pastel on newspaper 22 ½ × 15 in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Nam June Paik
Korean Times, 2001
Oil pastel on newspaper 15 ¼ × 22 ¼ in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Nam June Paik
Acrylic paint and oil pastel on newspaper 11 × 13 ½ in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Nam June Paik
Oil pastel on newspaper 13 ¼ × 22 in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Nam June Paik
Festival of the Arts, 2001
Postcard 4 ½ × 6 in.
Courtesy of Nam June Paik Estate

Nam June Paik
TV Wing (Nam June Paik), Miami International Airport installation, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Miami-Dade Aviation Department

Nam June Paik
TV Wing (Nam June Paik), Miami International Airport installation, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Miami-Dade Aviation Department

Nam June Paik
TV Wing (Nam June Paik), Miami International Airport installation, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Miami-Dade Aviation Department

Nam June Paik
TV Wing (Nam June Paik), Miami International Airport installation, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Collection of Miami-Dade Aviation Department

Nam June Paik
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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“Artwork Dedicated at Miami International Airport,” Miami Herald, December 31, 1989
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Letter to Steve Davidson, Louis Wolfson Media History Center, from Mary Hoeveler, Art in Public Places, July 25, 1988
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Letter to Nam June Paik from Mary Hoeveler, Art in Public Places, August 4, 1988
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Letter from Mary Hoeveler, Art in Public Places, August 4, 1988
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Press Release, Metro-Dade Center, Metropolitan Dade County, Florida, November 15, 1990
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Page from People magazine, October 6, 1986
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Exhibition Checklist

Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik's studio with notes and installation instructions in black marker, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik's studio with notes and installation instructions in black marker, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik's studio with notes and installation instructions in black marker, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Nam June Paik
Miami International Airport annotated construction blueprint for TV Wing, 1990
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik's studio with notes and installation instructions in black marker, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

Nam June Paik's studio with notes and installation instructions in black marker, undated
Color photograph 4 × 6 in.
Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, Public Art Collection

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Nam June Paik
"Miami" sketches reproduced in 1988 Milan Triennale booklet Miami-Dade Public Library System, Special Collections & Archives

"Wing: A Witty Sculpture," Miami Herald, December 9, 1990
Miami-Dade Public Library System, Special Collections & Archives

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Bryan Smith
Nam June Paik, in Miami FL, 1990
Color photograph
Courtesy of the artist


Nam June Paik
Selected Exhibitions and Screenings in South Florida

1982 8th Annual Ithaca Video Festival, Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale

1984 Miami Waves film festival, organized by Tigertail Productions, Miami-Dade Community College, Miami

1985 Florida Keys Art Expo, Lucky Street Gallery, Key West

1986 1983 Whitney Biennial Video Exhibition, Lucky Street Gallery, Key West

1987 Video Transformations, The Bass, Miami Beach

1989 Kino Bizzaro! film festival, organized by The Alliance Film/Video Project, curated by Bruce Posner, with support from the Miami-Dade Public Library, Miami

1990 TV Miami, International Visitors Arrival Area, Miami International Airport

1992 Stars in Florida, Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale

American Art Today: Surface Tension, The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami

1993 Photoplay: Works from the Chase Manhattan Collection, organized by Manuel E. González and Lisa Phillips, Center for the Fine Arts, Miami

1994 Nam June Paik: Videos, Multiples, and Paintings, Barbara Gillman Gallery, Miami Beach

Home Video Redefined: Media, Sculpture and Domesticity, Center of Contemporary Art North Miami

Electronic Super Highway, Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale

1995 Art Miami

1996 Critiques of Pure Abstraction, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami

1997 Art Miami

1999 "A Private Evening with Nam June Paik," fundraiser for The Bass, Miami Beach

Art Miami

2001 27th Annual Miami Beach Festival of the Arts

2003 Imagine: Selections from the Permanent Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami

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Art Bridges
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