

‘Exposition of music, Electronic television’ —Nam June Paik’s Debut Show in 1963

During the past half century, the rapid development of technology has kept to reframe the territory of art and change the way we perceive the world. The father of video art, Nam June Paik, not only transformed the consuming object—TV—into an artistic medium, which made us see it in a new way, but also established a new genre of aesthetics—video art, whose profound influence on visual culture still be reverberate nowadays. Following the pace of the interview team of ARIRANG TV¹ in Paik’s studio in New York, it could be easily recognized two words on his last uncompleted painting—Parnas and Wuppertal—which identify his first solo exhibition ‘*Exposition of music, Electronic television*’ held in Gallery Parnass, Wuppertal (Germany) in 1963. Accordingly, it is not hard to find out how meaningful the debut show is for Paik. Therefore, this essay would like to investigate Paik’s thoughts as a groundbreaker and discuss the ‘curating strategies’ he used to demonstrate his art through this exhibition.

1. Paik’s Music : freedom of participation, space-time art

Although Paik had been trained as a classical pianist in Tokyo, he was deeply impressed by avant-garde music in Japan. Thus, he applied for the two-year program of composition in University of Music Freiburg in 1957 which is the turning point of his artist career. His mentor, Wolfgang Fortner, found the creativity and the ambition of this outstanding student, so he wrote the recommendation letter to Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln (WDR), the German public-broadcasting institution based in Cologne. That is all the stories started—all kind of electronic devices for producing sounds in WDR studio inspired Paik to apply the same procedure to television.

Before he went to Cologne, he already had had the idea to use television in a composition, he even wrote a letter to discuss with John Cage and visited Karl Otto Götz, the professor at the Academy in Düsseldorf whose essay addressed the theories and concepts of computer-assisted painting and electronic image generation. But at the end, Paik didn’t compose any indeterminate music nor graphic music in the debut show. He said : ” If the interpreter rehearse even only once, the degree and the character of the indeterminacy become the same as in classical, if not baroque, if not renaissance, if not medieval music.”² From Paik’s point of view, any rehearsal is the prostitution of the freedom—the ‘real’ music performance will be not real anymore. Besides, he also indicated the limitation of the audience who only have two choices of the concert—to hear or not to hear.

¹ See ‘Arirang Special(Ep.312) Nam June Paik’s Art and Revolution 1 _ Full Episode’ on ARIRANG TV channel on youtube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0E2v_rbY7s (2016/1/22)

² Nam June, P (2009). “Forward: About the Exposition of Music” p.6, Catalogue of Exhibition ‘Nam June Paik—Music for All Senses’ in MUMOK, AT: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

Paik opposed all forms of authorial performance practice which is just a strip of time for the audience. Instead, he did 'action music' in Cologne, the most famous piece '*One for Violin*' (1962) demonstrated his idea well—'composer as performer'. The authenticity of music is assured, 'nothing lost translation'. He also appreciated Yoko ONO's '*Audience Piece*' and La Monte Young's '*Composition 6*'. Because the experience of the audience is 'the listen as performative'. Paik talked about his attitude during an interview : "I really stopped doing action music in 1961, after Stockhausen's *Originale*. I wanted to concentrated on object making—televisions and so on.[...] I think the influence of La Monte Young and George Brecht is very strong in this piece, stronger than John Cage."³ For Paik, 'how to deal with time' is the primary question for a musician, thus his great concern was to regenerate music and its 'ontological form'.

Inspired by Mallarme's concept of 'total work of art', the elimination of the borders and the negation of the differences between poetry, music, and dance, Paik initiated his idea of 'space-music' on the draft of '*Symphony for 20 rooms*' in 1961. He believed that free time must require more than two vectors and two vectors constitute the room (space). Hence, he proposed that the space is the indispensable 'better-half' of the sound. Not only integrated the space into music composition, Paik also appealed to the participation of the audience. He exposed music and said: "As the next step toward more indeterminacy, I want to let the audience act and play by itself." These two vectors to construct the 'ideal music' of Paik are the space and the sound, but also the composer/performer and the audience/participant. Therefore, he realized this proposal which in Maciunas' word— 'a concept of a space-time art'—in his first exhibition two years later.

2. Paik's Space : ox head, TV sets, pianos

The exhibition took place in Galerie Parnass, a private gallery of architect Rolf Jährling. Paik wanted to utilize the atmosphere of the late nineteenth century villa which spoke of the material security and bourgeois value, for his exhibition. He did not simply display his artworks inside, but turn all the paintings's face to the wall, in order to maintain the ambience of the middle-class taste and the pleasure of 'transgression of taboo' at the same time. "Besides, the reverse sides of some of those pictures were pretty interesting." said by Manfred Montwé, the photographer of the exhibition.⁴

The most obvious proof was shown at the entrance—a bloody ox's head. It might be reminiscent of the Viennese Activists, but this genuinely provocative item was more related to the shamanism, the ancestral ritual that Paik encountered in Korea. Every October, his mother organized the feast and hanged an ox's head over the door. He said: "To get high legally, you need a little shock, so I used a visual shock." The ox's head was not just a visual shock, besides, if we put it with the

³ Justin, H (1989). "Interview in a Stalin Restaurant—Nam June Paik in conversation with Justin Hoffman" p.87-88, Catalogue of Exhibition 'Nam June Paik—Music for All Senses' in MUMOK, AT: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

⁴ At that moment, Montwé also worked at *Décollage*, the magazine which was published by Wolf Vostell from 1960-1969. Retrieved from <http://wolfvostellwerke1960erjahre.blogspot.com.es>

exhibition poster (Figure 1)⁵ together, we can surmise the intention of Paik. The poster was made of *Kyunghyang Daily*, the newspaper shipped from Korea, covered by the silkscreen with the exhibition information in English. According to IM San, the professor of Dongduk Women's University in Seoul, both of them disclosed Paik's attempt to combine the cultural consciousness of the East and the West.

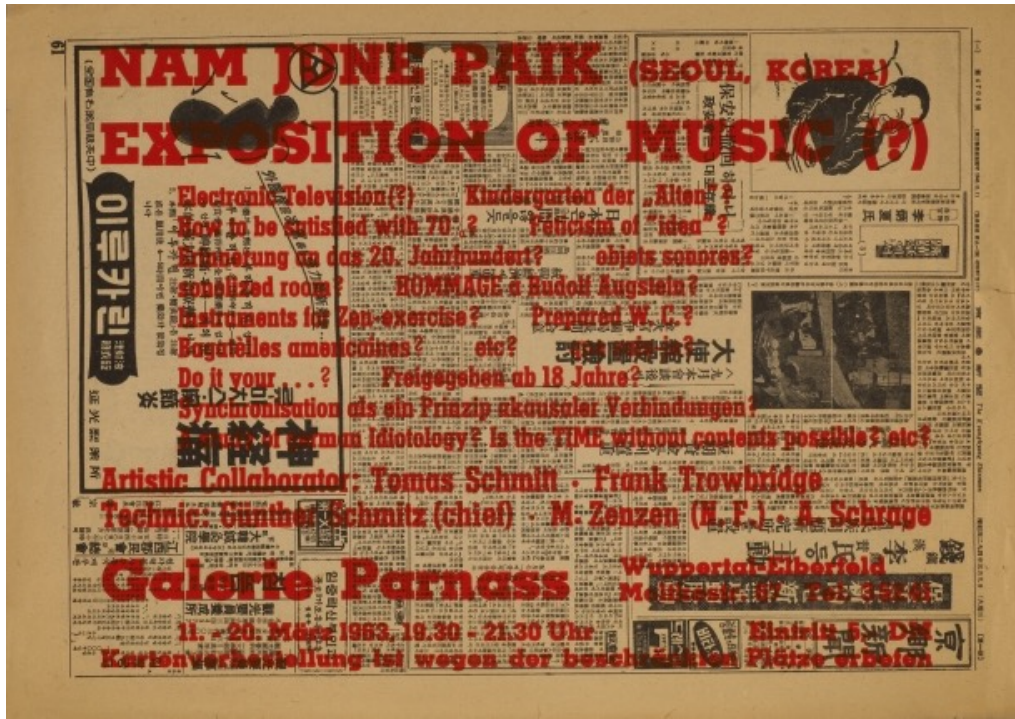


Figure 1. One poster of "Exposition of Music.Electronic Television", 1963

Although the ox's head was taken by the police three days later, the exhibition kept going. Generally speaking, Paik put his sound installations in the basement, TV sets and prepared pianos on the ground floor, and separate rooms of the upper floor were arranged as the *Symphony for 20 rooms* showed.

In the exhibition, there were sixteenth 'imaginary rooms' can be enter in any order. For example, Paik placed a live hen in one room, and blocked out the other room completely to reserve for parallel reading from detective stories, texts by Charles Montaigne, the Book of Revelation, and so on. The audience might enter one room covered with different national flags and erotic underwear, or in other rooms, they can push lots of materials such as: stone, wood or metal, to enjoy the acoustic and tactile experiences. According to Paik's plan, half of rooms would have contained tape recordings playing various sound collage.

Experimental installations with obscure titles were full of the building. 'A Study of German Idiology' was next to a published review on the glass wall leading to the main hall; 'Erinnerung an

⁵ See the 'Collection Online' on MOMUK website. Retrieved from <https://www.mumok.at/en/plakat-zur-ausstellung-exposition-musicelectronic-television-galerie-parnass-wuppertal-1963>

das 20. Jahrhundert ' (*Mementos of the 20th Century*) reputedly refers to the newspapers reporting the death of Marilyn Monroe. The balloon of 'How to be satisfied with 70%' might conceivably be associated with Maciunas's 'Solo for Balloons'. The interpretations of each artworks were open-ended, these instruments even transformed into undefined objects with new functions. For example, Paik used the parachute from Maciunas not for flying but for served as a projection screen in the garden. And the 'Kuba TV' did not play images but be connected to the tape recorder that fed in music.

In terms of TV sets, Paik himself declared that he wanted to create an installation situated between architecture and music, in which the music became quieter and the space became more mobile. (Neuburger, 2009) He exhibited twelve TV sets, displaying different distorted images instead of conventional television program. In art critic Calvin Tomkins's words, to see 'odd, distorted shapes floated unfixed through field of electronic static', visitors were confronted with a variety of interventions on the regular evening TV program. American scholar David Joselit identifies this ensemble device settings as an alternative television network which aimed to reeducate visitors' perception. Since ARD⁶ was the only existing broadcasting company and aired predominately educational program at 1960s, Joselit's observation indeed provided us an important viewpoint. He indicated that " In contrast to the standard structure of the network as a centralized source of information that is uniformly broadcast to a multitude of individual receivers, Paik customized a microcosmic network in which each TV receiver would decode the signal in its own way." (as cited in Neuburger, 2009)

Besides TV sets, Paik's pianos were the other vital instrument to express his artistic statement. He prepared three pianos, the first one was called 'Klavier K' which was inspired by Arthur K pcke's 'Shut Book'. Therefore, this piano had blocked keys as K pcke glued the book to make it unreadable. Even the visitor tried to play *Klavier K*, there was no string inside the piano for hammer to hit. The second piano allowed the visitor to play with the feet, namely, as walk over it. During the exhibition, as the technical assistant of Paik, Tomas Schmit described that the third piano was a vehicle for a pretty total spectacle, which was covered / draped / struck / nailed / pinned / decorated with all manner of things / devices / items (optical, acoustical, and others). Apparently, Paik deconstructed the definition of piano thoroughly. Like Montw  summarized that "The surprise was that the traditional function of the piano had been broaden, transforming them into comprehensive sound objects. [...] Visitors were able to play all these devices, which were connected to a keyboard via electronically contacts."⁷ For instance, if a visitor pressed a key of the piano, an electric switch might be turned on or off. If the visitor pressed another key, he / she might hear the sound flowing from a transistor radio. To keep pressing the other keys of the piano, the visitors may see a hot-air fan just starting up, and so on.

⁶ Full name : Arbeitsgemeinschaft der  ffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland – Consortium of public broadcasters in Germany.

⁷ Susan, N (2008). "Recollections on the *Exposition of Music*—Manfred Montw  in conversation with Susan Neuburger" p.97-104, Catalogue of Exhibition 'Nam June Paik—Music for All Senses' in MUMOK, AT: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther K nig.

3. Unexpected Reactions : artist , audience

In fact, there was another piano in the venue which became a ‘improvised performance’ beyond Paik’s control—Joseph Beuys attacked it with an axe. The piano was antique and supposed to return back to the piano factory after the exhibition. Susan Neuburger argued that Beuys was reacting to Paik’s action music rather than the exhibition. This is consistent with the analysis of IM San, he indicated that Beuys paid homage to Paik through this unplanned action.⁸ Fortunately, Paik commented, ‘I liked it.’ Beuys also called the ‘Paik thing’ an ‘historic act’.

However, it was difficult for the audience to understand what these ‘strange artworks’ signified. As Montwé remembered, a few visitors went into the room displaying the whole TV sets, but overall, the room with TV sets was quiet while the basement with record shashlik was popular. The later is Paik’s installation, *Random Access*, which contains a tape wall and double record shashlik. Paik described it as a ‘city map and abstract painting, sight and sound and action.’ In addition, Susan Neuburger concluded that this piece was an indeterminacy access to store memory, constructed as the form of mapping music, an archive or a library. No matter the visitors understood the artistic idea or not, at least they can choose the records they like and change the music in the room freely.

Not only the audience, but even the art critics were unable to understand Paik as well. Some critic commented the exhibition as ‘Kindergarten der Alten’ (Kindergarden for the Old People), and some described the experience as follow : ‘ Surprised by the sound of siren you’d expect in a square, I unwittingly blurted out, “This is chaos.” ’⁹ Most of them only focused on the ox’s head with howls of derision and made biting remarks about the exhibition. Art historian Wulf Herzogenrath noted that people at 1960s still considered television as an entertainment or an information medium, so it was hard to imagine TV could be associated with culture or be part of art, even for avant-garde critics.¹⁰ Paik was disappointed that the ox head was more shocking than his TV sets when he wrote the postscript of the exhibition in 1964. Analysis by curator Manuela Ammer suggested that although half of rooms equipped with tape recorder playing sound collage, ‘While the score does not call for TV sets, television was nevertheless and indirect component of the symphony.’¹¹ To sum up, the social context and the floppy connection between sound and television made Paik’s exhibition incapable of being an overnight sensation at 1963.

⁸ See footnote 1.

⁹ From the report of Kolner Stadt-Anzeiger, March 16 1963. See ‘Arirang Special(Ep.312) Nam June Paik’s Art and Revolution 1 _ Full Episode’ on ARIRANG TV channel on youtube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0E2v_rbY7s (2016/1/22)

¹⁰ See footnote 1.

¹¹ Manuela, A (2009). “In engineering there is always the other—The Other” p.63-76, Catalogue of Exhibition ‘Nam June Paik—Music for All Senses’ in MUMOK, AT: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

4. Paik's Philosophy : Zen, Freud

Not only demonstrated his exploration of expressive possibilities on cross-media, he also brought his origin, Asian philosophy into the Western Europe. When he had the conversation with Justin Hoffman in 1989, he mentioned that Freud's last work «*A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*» had great influence on him. Paik said : ' Ultimately, there are only two things in the world. One is Eros, that's construction, you know; the other is destruction, death. There is something similar in Asian thought. In China, it's called yin and yang.' ¹² Paik' third piano, the total spectacle one, can be cited as a good example. You can find there were woman's bra, eggs referring to the sex-driven motif ; while the incomplete mannequins, broken clock which were tied by wire entanglement suggesting the other force, the dead wish.

His Zen boxes presented the thought of ying-yang more deeply. He wanted to demonstrate two negation of Zen as 'The absolute IS the relative' and 'The relative IS the absolute'. *Zen for Head* expressed Paik's idea of overcoming dualism which could be related to Sartre and existentialism. Although there were two televisions broken due to the transportation, Paik still decided to use them and named as '*Zen TV*'. The series of Zen objects not only represented the dialectic meanings of Zen but also the inclusive feature of Zen, which permits variation on the same work.

Susan Neuburger identified that Paik's *Zen for walking* can be seen as a silent variation of La Monte Young's *To be a single event*. In this work, Paik demonstrated the spirits of Zen—an indifferent attitude—he could replace the violin with a spoon, wheels of a toy car or anything. Because the essence of Zen is not the form of the object but experiencing 'the present'—time. Jean Pierre Wilhem, the most important mentor of Fluxus movement, interpreted the relationship between Zen and Paik's works well. He said: " Zen as the experiencing the present moment ; Zen as an experiments; Zen as not holding tight, not choosing, not acting — this lead to an ephemeral status of the artwork for Paik." (as cited in Neuburger, 2009)

The other important Fluxus member, George Brecht's viewpoint also supported the philosophical connection between the East culture and the West world. He understood Dada as a 'return to an almost Buddhist religion of indifference' which legitimizes the association between Dada and Zen. (Neuburger, 2009) With this insight to see the whole exhibition, it is not difficult to understand why Paik devoted himself to create a 'synthesis of art' that aims at eliminating the many little genre pigeonholes in art. For Paik, Zen is anti-frontier and the 'variety without being two' which resists all manner of dualistic thought. Therefore, there is no separation between exterior and interior, subject and object, or artwork and observer—the entire space should suffuse with music, be the indivisible part of music ; while the passive audience should actively participate in the art ambience, has the freedom to interact even to intervene in the artworks. Otherwise, it is just a strip of time.

¹² See footnote 3.

5. Historical Value : what is its influence in 1963 and now?

Go back to 1963, how can we interpret the exhibition? Put it differently, we all know Paik opens the new genre of art—video art, but how can he achieve that through distorted TV programs and unusual pianos? To begin with, I would like to examine the meanings of distortions. In addition to the observation of Joselit, Ammer points out that ‘ The distorted images can be read as metaphors of the distortion of facts and the falsification of reality by government-run television networks.’ Hence, if Paik combated the restricted freedom in a concert hall—to hear or not, the educational television programs, aired by the only existing broadcaster ARD, provided the audience the confined freedom as well—to see or not. Therefore, the distorted images of TV sets not only showed Paik’s criticism toward the reality but also unveiled ‘the potential of television as a counter-culture leading medium that could be exempt form the obligation to observe the conventional narrative and traditional artistic authorship’ (Ammer, 2009).

Next, the prepared pianos demonstrated Paik’s artistic statement— the ‘liveness’ of the audience. Paik did not worship classical music nor the ‘indeterminate music’, because the end of result are the same—a time flow of only direction. As in our life, any music goes in this way would be destined later or sooner to the certain death with one-way time. From Ammer’s point of view, it surely legitimates Paik’s declaration of freedom—calling for the ‘liveness’ of the audience that invites them to participate in and co-create the art scenes, rejecting the one-way flow of time which refers to all forms of author-centrism performance practice. Let’s take a look at the poster of ‘Exposition of music, Electronic television’ again (Figure 2). The first sight of this poster is the first few letters which were enlarged and constitute another new word—EXPEL. We can surmise that was exactly what Paik wanted to say—Ossified thinkings should be removed.

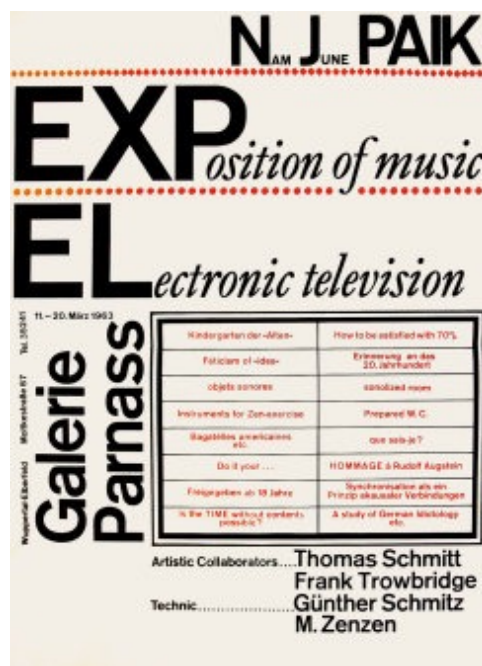


Figure 2. The other poster of "Exposition of Music.Electronic Television",1963

The influence of Paik's TV sets was profound. Some of these sets allowed visitors to modified the images by twisting various knobs, while some featured foot switch and microphones which enabled visitors to generate impulses to change the output of the televisions. Paik not only justified the crucial part of the participation of the audience, but also formulated an explicit aesthetics of manipulating images and sounds through the very medium—television.

Ammer provides in-depth analysis of the significant change of television. She said: "Paik convert television into a self-referential form when he turned figurative images into abstractions, visualized the cathode tube ...[...]and reduced the television image to luminous dots and nuance of pure light." In the exhibition setting, almost all the TV sets were arranged on the floor which was lower than the eye level of human beings, playing its images one after another which underscored the self-referential nature of this technology medium. In fact, Paik's vision was to build a device that would allow him to translate variety of sources (including live camera images, tape sounds, etc) into 'an infinite number of patterns and configurations whose colors, contrasts, and brightness could be controlled by means of a mixing board.' (Ammer, 2009) This dream was not realized until he met Japanese television technician Shuya Abe in 1969. Their collaborated work, *Video-Synthesizer*, allowed Paik to edit the images of the television in real-time was a crucial advance which applied to the live broadcasts afterwards.

Scholar Raymond William highlighted the 'flow' as the fundamental category of television experience in 1974. According to his definition of 'flow', it refers to the replacement of linear programming, thus television viewers would experience flow 'including finding it difficult to turn off their sets and 'gliding from one show to the next'.(as cited in Ammer, 2009) Before William pointed out this observation, Paik had already predicted that the device would find its way into private rooms. In 1973, he said : "In size, it will smaller and smaller, until it can be part of the home and used there like we use watercolor sets today." In my opinion, their remarks revealed a striking similarities between television and smartphone we used nowadays. The device—smartphone—indeed becomes smaller, lighter, and mobile. Following the collapse of 'grand narrative' of mass media, everyone can simply generate his/her own opinions / pictures / sound creations via the Internet to contribute to the global village.

Furthermore, the ubiquitous connections of social media make every individual account as a TV set, which allows your friends, family, even worldwide strangers to see what's going on you and make comments. Why I say there are similarities of watching TV and watching social media ? The reasons can be examined in two perspectives. In one hand, using William's term— it is hard to get rid of 'gliding from one show to another', because the flow of social media is live, real-time and two-way interaction, which verifies Paik's vision in the other hand.

6. Reflection on curation & the indeterminacy

At the end, I would like to address two things, one is about the role of museum, the other is the indeterminacy of technology. When Manfred Montwé had the interview in 2008 with Susan Neuburger who is the head of collection of MOMUK, he was quite exciting to see Paik's piano which is preserved in the museum. However, he expressed his letdown at the end of the interview, he said: "The visitors to the exhibition were able to discover astounding new ways of using these objects. There was so much confusion! That's why I was so disappointed to see your piano in the museum. It doesn't have the vitality that the pianos in the exhibition had when people explored them with their fingers."

Montwé's words pointed out the dilemma of preservation of 'great artworks'. MUMOK indeed produced a documentary of showing how the Paik's piano operates and how it sounds like.¹³ And they also arranged a live performance for the exhibition 'Nam June Paik—Music for all Senses' in 2009, which included several staff members wearing professional suits to perform, whereas the audience sit on the chairs and kept quite.¹⁴ When the team who planned to build the Nam June Paik Art Center in Korea, they had the conversation with the artist. Paik expressed his wish that this center become 'the House where the Spirit of Nam June Paik lives on.'¹⁵ Therefore, when this new institute opened in 2008, they devoted themselves to curate permanent / temporary exhibitions and arrange educational program including workshops, seminar, event and so on. I didn't have chance to visit both institutions, so it would be hard and unfair to judge each side. Nevertheless, through the documentary and the catalogue from MOMUK, it undeniably exposes the issue of sanctifying the objects but losing the spirits. How to come closer to the soul of artists and what kind of exhibition strategies can convey the essence of artworks the most are the uneasy topics yet worthy to negotiate through whole curatorial practices.

Finally, Paik said 'My TVs are more the artist than I am.' that divulged the very nature of technology art—the indeterminacy. As Ammer indicated that 'The impossibility of control—became the ultimate incentive for Paik's art and the foundation for divorcing electronic television from electronic music.' The latter still has the fixed, determined tendency on its ontological form (music piece); conversely, the former—the device which can generate the visual and the audio by users—has infinite possibilities to co-create our culture. 'EXPosition of music, ELectionic television' is just a small step for Nam June Paik, but a giant leap for the art world and popular culture, especially in nowadays the pervasive technology time.

¹³ Paik's piano, in the collection of MUMOK, Vienna. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XcoJEBXm90>, 2011

¹⁴ See the video 'Nam June Paik Performance im Mumok' filmed by one visitor, Friedrich Hardegg. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfYFFLi3ZJU>

¹⁵ See the 'About us' on Nam June Paik Art Center's website. Retrieved from <https://njpac-en.ggcf.kr/mission-mi>