

## **Nam June Paik – An Idea Asserts Itself**

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The historic development of the video movement in visual arts has its roots in Western Germany. Between 1958 and 1965, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik and, to a certain extent, Otto Piene did experimental work with electronics as an audiovisual medium and they also included television sets into their artistic "happenings". Something decisive happened when the South Korean Nam June Paik moved to New York. In Cologne, Paik was a student of Karl Heinz Stockhausen who, at that time, was in charge of an electronic studio within WDR. When being a Rockefeller-scholar in New York, Paik "encountered" the first portable video equipment that the Japanese Sony Corporation had marketed in 1965. Paik used this equipment to propagate "Do-it-yourself television". In cooperation with the Japanese computer engineer Shuya Abe, Paik constructed the so-called "Paik/Abe-Synthesizer" that was to initiate the "aesthetization" of American television.

In San Francisco, in 1967, the Rockefeller Foundation produced "KQED Experimental Television Project" that was to lead to the foundation of the "National Center for Experiments in Television" in 1969. This first TV laboratory in the USA was followed by WGBH-TV-Boston and, in 1972, the WNET CHANNEL 13/TV LAB ("Channel 13") in New York City. In the course of this development, American avantgarde artists from film, theatre, ballet, music and visual arts were suddenly confronted with this new medium by fellowships and work commissions from established TV laboratories. Since 1969, Merce Cunningham (choreography) and John Cage (music) have been cooperating with Billy Kluver (electronics) and Stan Vanderbeek (film and video projections), realizing the "inter-media dance piece, Ariations V". In 1969, Nam June Paik produced his "electronic Opera No. 1" and the German Otto Piene (since 1974 Director of MIT/Massachusetts Institute of Technology) created "Electronic Light Ballet". Also in 1969, Allan Kaprow, the "father of the happening", organized in Massachusetts a TV-happening entitled "Hello": five video cameras, 27 television monitors and four different locations constituted the "material" for "random" encounters between people who were able to communicate via screen.

The so-called "video underground" developed practically at the same time (in 1971, Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation issued the first major publication for video underground, "GuerillaTelevision"): One of the underground producers, Eric Siegel, developed his "Processing Chrominance Synthesizer" (PCS) in 1968, allowing – in contrast to the Paik/Abe-System -- the manipulation of black-and-white video tapes in colour without video camera, entirely via screen. Then, in 1970, Siegel constructed the "Electronic Video Synthesizer" (EVS), a computer equipment with which one could produce abstract, mainly geometrical forms or figures. The only known European counterpart exists in Italy, where Giamm Colombo produced constructive image elements with an electronic "wobbler" (Graz/Austria, Trigon 1973).

Rudi Stern (son of a Viennese emigrant family), co-founder of the first New York group of video producers, settled, in autumn 1969, in SO-HO (South of Houston Street), at that time Manhattan's artists quarter, under the group name "Global Village". Stern and his former partner, John Reilly, did not work long in the field of the experimental synthesizer. As early as 1973, he presented tapes of so-called documentary videos produced for the government of Bangla Desh (family planning) and for the State of New York (drug prevention and re-socialization). Communication in the service of the public, homosexuality, radical feminism, Women's Liberation, re-socialization, drug prevention, environment pollution and relevant citizens' actions were the topics in which numerous other groups were involved, such as "Survival Arts Media" (Gutstadt/Fuller), "Video Freex" or "Telethon"(Adler/Margolies)in

California, "Peoples Video Theatre" and Dimitri Deveyatkin's The Kitchen. In 1972, "the world's largest television studio" produced the group "Top Value Television" (T VTV), a "Documentation Democratic National Convention" in Miami Beach, awarded with the Prize of "National Cable Television Association" for political journalism. All these groups used the "new low-cost portable TV sets" for reacting to social processes. Much of their work has found its professional expression in present-day forms of telecommunications.

Nam June Paik's first exhibition, "Electronic TV" took place in Wuppertal, at "Galerie Parnass" in 1963. Paik's video piece "Selling of New York", 1972, a video collage (probably the first "video clip") of WNET/Channel 13 with Russell Connor as media-uncle "sells" the curiosities of New York City: "New York police is stronger than the Danish army" and TV moderator Connor is practically omnipresent: at the hairdresser's and in the bed of a couple making love. The Paik/Abe-Synthesizer transforms the skyline of Manhattan into the Red Square in Moscow – accompanied by music from "Rhapsody in Blue".

Paik's burning piano in "Global Grove", a relict of a media happening wrapped up in electronic fading effects of a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert, has become a symbol of emergence and intrusion of the electronic world. The destruction of man-made music turns into the electronic blaze of a new media sensuality. It seems easy to understand why Paik's work manifests itself as the mid-eighties' central "figuration" of the video movement. Up to now Paik has never failed in any of his "fluxus"-like media actions to express the permeations and super-positions of the realities of our electronic everyday life in a poetic language - sometimes full of witticism and irony.

Video types, installations, environments and actions sketch out the concepts of video art: screen cut-out (3:4), authenticity (the image corresponds to immediate reality), time (simultaneousness, time-delay in relation to real-time), combinations of several video recorders, video cameras and monitors (closed circuits, video performances) and an unlimited variety of feed-back effects have found practical applications in group dynamics and group therapeutic processes (e.g. sensitivity training).

From today's point of view, an even greater attraction of the so-called New Media for art is to be seen in their new language possibilities. It is not so much a question of Humboldt's definition of the term language as the "formative organ of thought" but of the "magic use" of language or language symbols obtaining a new dimension. In all cultures, language as an expression of representation symbols is subject to certain "protective regulations".

Transgressing those taboos "violates" the basic cultural conditions and produces new language contents. Language form and language de-formation change familiar reality. In the auto-polaroid of the American Lucas Samara, for example, a foot and a hand stand on the floor, side by side, as if they were two feet – the hand imitates the foot. Thereby, hand and foot become interchangeable media language symbols of the term "to stand".

"The so-called reality is the result of communication", says the sociologist Paul Watzlawick, which means, applied to video reality "the production" of new realities. The New York artist Peter Campus illustrated this in his video type "Three Transitions" (1973, five minutes): He "transgresses" the familiar experience of reality by "hybridizing" realities through the installation of one video camera each in two (reality) spaces. With a knife, Campus cuts into the canvas separating the two spaces. He opens the slit (in Lucio Fontana's canvas) with his hands and steps through it into the second space. The fading of the two realities produces the electronic reality of a man who slits open his own body, pulls it apart with his hands and finally steps through himself. The experiences of inside and outside, of time and space have become variables of at least a fourth dimension.

Speaking about the language, the meta-language has turned into a process that cannot only be reproduced but also produced. The iconography of the television image is decisively defined

by the metaphysical emergence of media realities out of electronic symbols. However, this phenomenon of simultaneous production and reproduction remains hidden to the majority of television consumers. That is why these essential differences to film in most cases go unnoticed by the audience.

In his video demonstration "TV Tod" (Cologne, 1975), the media artist Richard Kriesche from Graz dealt with this truth of television reality: the audience sees the artist as announcer on the screen. He reports on a "true event" that had happened the year before (1974) in a US television station. A female announcer read the latest news and when she had finished, she said that she would now shoot herself. She grabbed a pistol, drew the trigger and fell down dead. "The broadcast was interrupted for a moment", Kriesche continues to tell, "an announcer entered and said that for unknown reasons a newscaster had shot herself". In the meantime, Kriesche has sat down beside an apparent listener and hears (still visible on the screen for the viewers in Cologne) his own recorded text: "In television, the chain leads from presence to reality and on to truth. In television, the presence combines – as when looking into a mirror- reality with this truth. The television image is true by its own virtue and not by virtue of the contents that are being transferred. True by its own virtue means that the video image is the first image in history to synchronize the image of the world to the world clock." While the last words of the recorded text are spoken, the listener sitting next to Kriesche suddenly releases the safety catch of a pistol, aims and shoots at the screen. The tape recording continues to run. The audience sees and hears the shot as well as the described process on the screen. The scene itself happened "live" in one of the neighbouring rooms. The audience was able to see the reproduction of the shot screen as well as the actually destroyed TV set.

In October 1974, the art producing group "pool" (founded in Graz by the author and by Richard Kriesche in the framework of Forum Stadtpark and existing from 1968 to 1976), together with ORF (Hans Preiner) produced "The Austrian Tapes" with the New York media artist Douglas Davis. Regrettably, this concept was never realized (because one did not want to "risk the consequences" of a broadcast like that, Hans Preiner's idea was merely introduced within one of the "Impulse" broadcasts). The work comprises three tapes, with a duration of five minutes each. They were to interrupt the daily evening program of television at the beginning of every full hour: David touches the screen with his hands from the inside and requests the viewer to put his hands (from the outside) on the screen, to "touch" him. On the second tape, this request to touch refers to the eyes and to the cheek (face): the third tape requests the viewer to bare the upper part of his body and to touch the artist's media-body with his chest and again with his naked back.

More than ten years later, when process art had to succumb to the audience's "hunger for images" (although the so-called New Painting would be hardly conceivable without the development of video art), the situation on the hard and software market and marketing strategies of sound-carrier firms for their video clips have brought about a certain renaissance of video art. Paik's idea has continued and was broadened by the fascinating language symbols of computer electronics. Simultaneous to the foreseeable end of "wild" painting and the re-discovered "magic use" of symbols also in the classical fields of visual arts, a world of imagination unfolds, breaking with all taboos of traditional concepts of art. Maybe this will bring back old Marcuse's idea of a new sensitivity ("Die neue Sensibilität", 1969), of a new consciousness, of a "re-construction" of reality requiring a new language.