

# Information Overload

From theory to design; the makings of a container for media art

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While conventional visual art and even live performance art has been shown regularly in museums and galleries since the 1960's, the more avant-garde art movements brought about an ongoing discussion on the separation of "real world" and "art world". This departure from accepted artist mediums of oil, pastel and gouache presented frequent concern for museums. Art forms such as photography, film, and later video challenged the notion that realism was not art, proving that representation of the real world did require a level of skill and knowledge. It is a known fact that Nam June Paik is one of the grandfathers of video art, having broken new ground for the contemporary arts. As a leading Fluxus artist, his contribution to the movement highlighted the media artist's isolation from the art institutions, calling for a new definition of the function of the museum and a new way of exhibiting art. Often referred to as anti-art, it has always been paradoxical for this movement to be embraced by the museum.

Herein lies the challenge for the design of a new museum honoring the contributions of Nam June Paik. The architecture that is created to house these digital social historians and predictors should not only be stable and grounded, it should also emulate the fluidity of the energy that stimulates the art and the artists. Although the forms of the works remain constant in many cases, it is their content that is constantly morphing. It could then be thought that the architecture, the vessel for art, must then remain constant in order to provide a

framework for the changeability of the art. In order to benefit the design process it is crucial to decipher the intensions of the artist and their works in order to condense them into a set of design criteria that will ultimately be physically manifested in the conceptual proposal for the Nam June Paik museum. This museum not only serving as a repository for his work and future activities, it will simultaneously promote the province of Kyonggi, Korea as an international center of culture and arts.

Born in Korea, Paik began his career as a composer and musician at the University of Tokyo. His first experimentation with video form in 1959 came about after the speedy evolution of his musical repertoire. The restricting parameters of traditional instruments had led Paik to electronic music, which too became banal as it saturated the music industry worldwide. This propelled him into the unknown world of media art. Becoming a part of the avant-garde group known as the Fluxus movement, alongside other artists such as John Cage and Yoko Ono, he aimed to dissolve the conventional forms of art and force the interpreter to reconsider the role of the art and artist as well as the boundaries of artistic discipline. The following is the Fluxus manifesto as written by one of the leading Fluxus artists;

*Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, 'intellectual', professional and commercialized culture, purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, purge the world of 'europanism'.*

*Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art, promote living art, anti-art, promote non-art reality to be grasped by all peoples, critics, dilettantes and professionals.*

*Fuse the cadres of cultural, social and political revolutionaries into united front and action. (George Maciunas 1963)*

Paik felt strongly about the movement's artistic intensions as well as social position. In the spirit of Fluxus the spectator is free to form his own idea about Fluxus, just like Fluxus artists had their own entirely different views about their work. (Jenkins, 2)

Known for his witty media sculptures and installations, Paik often expresses a desire to humanize technology. Originally drawn to video as a convenient way to record his actions, he soon was seduced by the inherent charms and imperfections of the electronic image. Through statements like "television has attacked us for a lifetime-now we strike back" (Joselit, 76) he identifies technology with human behavior. This reaction to the dominant invention of the postwar period set the tone for many artist investigations into technology. Artist became more adventurous with the new medium while discovering the liberating potential of digital technology to engage the viewer and promote viewer interaction. Not only does Paik include his own personality into his works, he also includes how his opinions on global subject matter, using art as a tool to understand and comment on the transformations of the world. In his installation Eagle Eye, the changing dynamics of American society was Paik's inspiration. Through an assemblage of computers, keyboards and projectors, he represents the various members of an eagle. The earth, solar eclipse and American missiles are examples of the imagery integrate in the work.

The invention of the motion picture film in the early 1890's was the first of many light-based technologies to come. With the invention of the television, moving images could be truly 'live'. Using a television camera images are recorded as small dots of grey, white and black light and are broadcasted through the air as electronic signals. This signal is received by an antenna and re-constituted on a television monitor as an image. By experimenting with different components of this process, Paik has achieved some extraordinary results. Using such tools as magnets to distort the television signals (*as in his piece Magnet TV 1965*) and processes like feedback Paik continued to transform images and perpetually reinvent the television. "I thought I could change TV with one screwdriver" (Jana, 1) This first assault on the TV set itself soon shifted from the TV set to TV time, through the development of technologies like the Paik-Abe Synthesizer, which he developed with the help of the engineer Shuya Abe. This device was a true catalyst for Paik's work, as it carried the distortion process one step further, refining the images to what can best be described as pure movement and electrical energy. By capturing commercial breaks and accelerating them to the point of implosion, Paik assembles a series of images disturbing enough to compete with the television programming. "Paik sees television as both a set of institutions and a language that is probably the most widely spoken in the world. Holding these two dimensions together, insisting both on their pleasure and their emptiness, their ideological violence and their vertiginous potential, will be Nam June Paik's legacy." (Joselit,78)

Although we continue to refer to Paik as the technological wizard, it should also be noted that his most impressive installations are often the most basic ones. The viewer recognizes their simplicity and can come to realize the workings of the piece. His piece *One candle*, did just that. The initial visual is of gently undulating washes of red, blue and yellow sequentially shown in three locations. With some investigation, one realizes that the dancing primary colours are being projected from a burning candle that is being recorded in "real time" by a small home-video camera.

The interconnection of habitats and organisms, ecology, is a consistent metaphor in Paik's work. He transfers his various studies of systematic interrelationships into video form, some more literal than others. The human body is a circulatory system that he often manipulates through the use video, through literal interpretations like his robot constructions, and more abstract pieces like *Megatron 1995* which seem to correlate with the viewer's nervous system. Other works like *video fish 1975* and *TV garden* were more straightforward analogies between the natural and the electronic. The fish tank and the potted plant both representing artificial products, and like the video signal itself, they are mangled through superimposed projections and recordings. Reading one through the other, his relationship between nature and technology suggest certain malleabilities and impurities that he successfully conveys through his art. The flickering nature of his electronic images and the very workings of his installations cater to his desire for fluidity and cyclical patterns, highlighting the active electrical circuit that is the essence of the work.

His largest-ever solo exhibition "The Worlds of Nam June Paik" displayed a lifetime of work in a manner which engaged even the architecture of New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in a cyclone of lights, flashes and pulses. "Spectators ascended and descended the ramps, and sometimes cast their own shadows across the translucent screens inserted between floors. They became performers echoing the perpetual motion of innovative dancers. In other words, to enter was to be embraced by it in a way different from the polite and distanced form of viewing typically presumed (and even enforced) by museums" (Joselit,73). Reactions to such an exhibition have shed light on the role of the museum and the impact that the architecture has on the work at hand. With this in mind, ideas for the Nam June Paik museum proposal begin to take form.

Rather than providing an austere space to house Paik's work, a decision is made to elaborate on his metaphors. The proposed design is to harness the major qualities of Paik's work by employing the interpreted devices used in his pieces. Making use of similar tools like contrast, irony and distortion the result is a building of juxtaposition. The technology and media, which remains Paik's topic of choice, are conceived in the design through layers of meaning and consequence that are inherent with the site. Boundaries blur and solidify to create a fluid form that reflects the movement and progression of Paik's older and current works. Building 'anchors' are created to ground the more dynamic areas, while other areas are set in motion providing a poetic environment to hold the works. With floor plates and ceilings that interconnect, rise and fall, the fluid procession allows the individual to meander this interior/exterior landscape taking

a unique path every time. The exterior spaces run into the interior spaces and vice versa, blurring the boundaries between the natural and the man-made. The design reads as a natural element woven into the site. It attempts to relate to the existing landform, without denying its imposition on the natural conditions.

In its basic form, the plan consists of a several ribbons that run along the hillside, terminating in an orchestrated composition of forms peeling upwards from the ground and others diving into it. In theory the ribbons are extensions of the landscape consisting of accessible planted roofs and media screens for exterior walls. The anticipated nightscape would be of the land coming to life, bursting at the seams with a “technological overload”. Orienting the most dynamic composition towards the city, the museum has an alluring presence and promotes the site as a new cultural center. The randomness of the ribbons, inspired by the undulating landscape itself, create the interconnecting moments supporting the interior and exterior circulation systems and allow the program spaces to meld into one another. As the form travels up the hillside, the geometry becomes more elaborate, giving way to the nature of the program (multipurpose hall, changing exhibition). The somewhat random nature of the building, both in form and in experience mirrors the unpredictable qualities of Paik’s work.

Presented with an extensively forested site, the topography and site conditions reinforced the location of the two main axes, which in turn have become the spine of the building. The first axis follows the contours of the natural landscape and carries the exhibition spaces, while the second is set

against the natural grain of the landscape, as a sort of distribution axes. These vectors intersect at the main anchor of the building being the replica studio, reinforcing the interpretation of the space as the seed and origin of the gallery works. With a main entrance located on the upper level and a secondary entrance at the lower, the building becomes a link in the site's pedestrian circuit connecting the existing museum and park facilities. Other such circuits as the vehicular traffic routes also infiltrate the building at the lower level, accessing the loading and storage facilities, reinforcing the fluid manner in which the circulation is articulated. With the building harnessing several circuits, it activates a network of superimposed paths and views.

Natural lighting of the exhibit spaces is limited and controlled by clerestory windows and artificial lighting. Most exhibit spaces are positioned away from direct sunlight as the nature of Paik's work suggests a space where light is monitored. However the program distribution along the cross axes, such as the lobby and cafe, are in the public realm and favor natural light. This portion of the building is mostly glazed, providing the user with an extensive view of the parklands and the valley below. The sensitivity of the Korean community in regards to its natural resources has further driven the concept of the green rolling hills lifting from the terrain. The building is able to simultaneously camouflage into the mountain respecting the natural beauty of the site, and explode over the hillside as a prominent icon. As Paik's work continues to question and examine the media's role in society, the building interrogates its own built form and questions the role of the museum as a container for media art.



First through electronic music, and then through media art, whatever the media Paik continues to integrate his past, and his genuine sensitivity for his surroundings into his work. On the most basic levels of analysis, Paik uses the assigned social connotations of images, whether conscious or unconscious, as stimulus. Materializing his concepts through a dichotomy of primitive sensations and technological advances, he offers a piece of humanity to our multi-media driven environments. The art of Name June Paik shows us how we will look back at ourselves when the past is revisited and gives us a glimpse of how the future sees us.

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