

TRAVELING AT THE SPEED OF PAIK

An artist-researcher visits the Nam June Paik Art Center

by

Jamie Allen

RESEARCH ACCORDING TO WIM WENDERS

Nam June Paik visited Japan in 1985, in preparation for *Bye Bye Kipling*, his second work for satellite, fusing live broadcasts from Seoul, Tokyo and New York. In this same year, German film director Wim Wenders went to Tokyo. Wenders's trip resulted in his nebulous homage to 1950s film director Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo-Ga*. Of the trip, Wenders commented:

*It was in no way a pilgrimage. I was curious as to whether I still could track down something from this time, whether there was still anything left of this work. Images perhaps, or even people... Or whether so much would have changed in Tokyo in the twenty years since Ozu's death that nothing would be left to find.*¹

Tokyo-Ga, the resulting Wim Wenders film, contains only a few scenes that actually focus on Ozu, the director. Instead the work is a filmic scrapbook of a search for 'pure images'² and recorded



Three Elements, Nam June Paik in Collaboration with Norman Ballard, 1997–2000. Installation Process at Guggenheim Museum, New York, Photo Courtesy of Raphaele Shirley. © Raphaele Shirley. Used with Permission.

encounters Wenders himself had with the culture of Tokyo and the medium of moving images.

And so, mid-way through the 1980s, two projects of corresponding motivation, but different formulation emerge. Nam June Paik, a then 53-year-old Korean-born media artist based between New York City and Dusseldorf, attempts to fuse the cultures of East and West through telepresence, satellite linkage. Wim Wenders, a then 40-year-old European director, visits Japan for the first time and attempts a more personal amalgam of cultures through the images he encounters there. Both projects present the promise not of completion, but instead suggest a voyage, an exploration. Traveling (electronically or otherwise), becomes a means of folding in expanses, dissolving otherness, and rendering the exotic familiar.

Fifteen years later, I got the chance to spend a summer in Seoul, inspired somewhat by these precarious and precocious expeditions. I travelled to Korea to develop new artworks of my own, and to research the work and contemporary relevance of art-and-technology's patron saint, Nam June Paik.³ Just as we see through the intimate-yet-distant images of Wenders's *Tokyo-Ga*, my encounters and documents of Korea acknowledge the wondrous impossibility of ever capturing or encapsulating absolutely the work of any artist, or any culture. Addressing the life of someone like Paik, and its complex resonances with Korean culture, I hope only to derive impressions, fleeting understandings, and insights as an artist, researcher, technologist and 외국인 – outside(외)-country-(국)-person(인).

My own trip to Korea was in no way a pilgrimage, but my regard for Paik is no less than the great admiration Wenders felt for Ozu's work. I have an enduring sense that better understanding Paik's

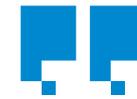
experiences and reception as an artist-technologist, and as one of the world's first technologically globalized and globalizing creative figures, could go some distance toward understanding the conditions of contemporary art-and-technology practices and discourse. Although I count myself among Paik's legion fandom, it is partially the contested nature of Paik's legacy that adds to his sustained intrigue. Can we call Paik a 'Korean artist,' as he spent a relatively short periods of his artistic development and career in the country of his birth? As inspired as he was by both John Cage and Mark Rothko, should Paik's creative lineage be traced to his avant-garde composerly and musical roots, or better seen through the art-historical lens of the Expressionists? Do Paik's later, 'post-video' works develop the same kind of rigorous potentialities and critical engagement with technological culture that his earlier works do? ⁴

THIS SAVAGE LASER

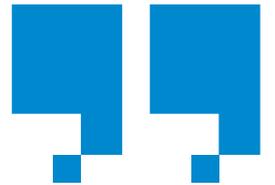
Paik's more physically imposing later-career pieces, his large sculptures and installed works seem to best evoke Paik's sense of the simultaneous force and finesse that technologies, properly examined, express. Kim Nam-Soo, former Chief Curator of the Nam June Paik Art Center (NJPAC) and one of Korea's most highly respected Paik researchers, expressed this tendency to me as Paik's "savage thinking." ⁵ The phrase seems a fitting distillation of Paik's particular

talent for conveying a resonance between the novel and socially-progressive character of the electric and electronic technologies of his day, alongside their deeply anachronistic, or 'savage,' naturalness. Paik's "savage thinking" is not 'primitive,' but it is unapologetic, undomesticated and provocatively populist in execution. Nam-Soo's interest points towards the East-meets-West politics of Paik's activities. Perhaps what was at stake for Paik was a confrontation of East and West, in which symbols of Western Art are confronted, and often destroyed, by an intrusive Asiatic insurrection. Nam-Soo sites incendiary declarations of "Yellow Peril! C'est moi," and his affirmations of "Genghis Khan the artist," as evidence of a confrontational aspect to Paik's projects. ⁶

The expression of Paik's oeuvre in these terms, as a kind of Eastern invasion, linked to archaic Eurasian anthro-historical precedents, is the most compelling direct advocacy for the import of Paik's Korean background that I was exposed to while in Korea. Otherwise, open-arm championing of Paik's Korean-ness seems countered by at least two arguments in his native land. The first, which we might call the 'Mainstream Contemporary Art' demurrer, is equivalent to the sensibilities that have come to see Paik written out of other discussions of 'serious' mainstream contemporary art. That is, certain monocultures of mainstream, traditional and modernist art, through exclusion raise doubts regarding the legitimacy and earnestness of a playful and technology-centered artistic practice (perhaps reminiscent of present-day arguments about the 'legitimacy' of, for example, Net Art practices). Paik, ever the contradictory Fluxus artist and proponent of popular and down-to-earth art, is not easy to include into the artistic canon in Korea or elsewhere; in fact, very few of the established reference books on 'Korean Art' found at the National Library in Seoul include any reference to Paik. Paik was aware and proud of



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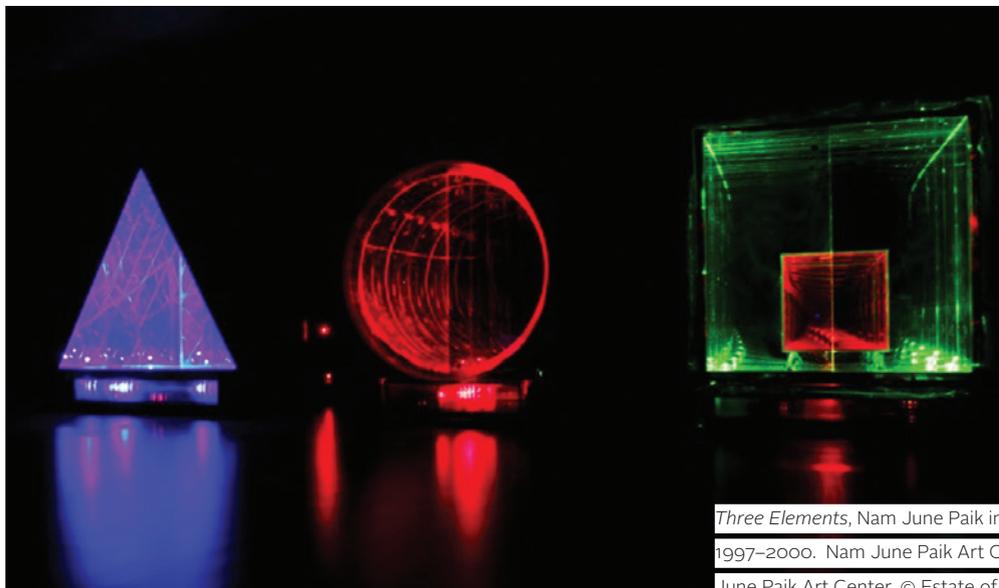


this contrarian streak, and spoke often of his shabby clothing acting as a kind of 'armour,' protecting him against the snobbism and vanity of the mainstream art world. Paik self-differentiated from contemporaries such as Andy Warhol with a number such tactics. ⁷

The second antipathy to easily ascribing Paik the moniker of 'Korean artist' is much more nuanced. We might call this argument the 'National Identity' issue. Firstly, it relates to Paik's family's flight to Japan shortly before the Korean war. His father, a wealthy industrialist, had colluded to some degree with the invading Japanese to ensure the family could leave the divided country safely. Furthermore, many artists I spoke with in present-day Korea felt Paik's later involvement with an unpopular military government (both prior and leading up to the politically charged and historic 1988 Olympics) also call into question any empathy he may have had with the Korean people. It often seems that there is quite a bit unfavorable to say about Paik's official links to Korea, with his early years marred by his family's trade dealings with the Japanese, and his later untimely association with

the heavy-handed, militaristic Chun Doo-hwan government. This savage, perhaps, has no time or mind for politics.

Never just dazzling us with aesthetics, never just using a medium, and never just technical wizardry, Paik's work and life hold in relief our timeless preoccupation with symbolic presentation and representation. His project shows an understanding of the constraints, fragility and possibility of our most advanced material complexes (i.e. what we have come to know as 'technology'), while reminding us that these technologies are a very porous veneer between our own desires, appetites, sexualities, impulses and habitations. If savage, Paik was for the most part astutely so. He is the most original of electronic barbarians, making and pillaging the Global Village as one of its first true inhabitants. The resulting plunder, offered up to the art world and the world-at-large, enframes the strict contradictions of modern media and technics: simplistic-complexity, naive-brilliance, and brutal-sophistication. We are all, in some sense, savage thinkers: ceaselessly shaping and doing our thinking with and through prolif-



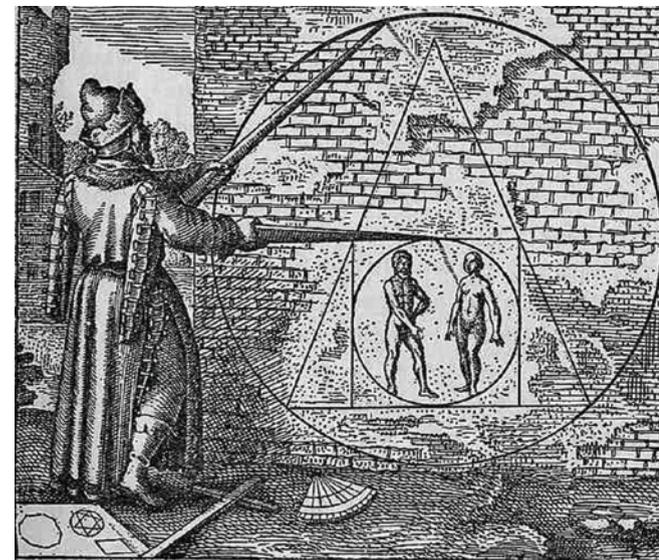
Three Elements, Nam June Paik in Collaboration with Norman Ballard, 1997–2000. Nam June Paik Art Center Collection. Photo Courtesy of Nam June Paik Art Center. © Estate of Nam June Paik. Used with Permission.

erate savage machinery. It is with Paik's later works of refined and deliberate savagery that he turns to the perennial, possibly ultimate, symbol of technological speed and mastery: L.A.S.E.R.

GESTURES OF MATERIAL AND MEANING

Paik's work can be thought of as a kind of portal, linking contemporary technologies and a deeply historicized, hence mythologized, view of human civilization. There is one particular sculptural-installation work in the NJPAC collection that resonates well with such a conception. The work is a later-career laser sculpture titled *Three Elements*. It was created with the help of Norman Ballard and other Paik studio employees for the Guggenheim's 2000 retrospective: *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*. *Three Elements*, often referred to and thus almost always shown as a single work, is actually three separate pieces built between 1997 and 2000: *Square*, *Circle* and *Triangle*. It is interesting to note that a fourth element was planned in addition to these three: a large internally-mirrored laser cube that never made it out of Paik's Greene Street studio. The final triumvi-

rate of objects we now know as *Three Elements* comprises standing-height, internally reflective mirrored box forms (the front face made of two-way mirror so that viewers see an infinite-reflection created within). Each enclosure, through a small aperture, allows the entry of a colored laser light, projecting into an oscillating prism driven by a servo motor of carefully chosen speed. The visibility of the laser beam is helped by the incorporation of a fogging apparatus, originally a contraption composed of cigarette burners, a timer and a custom 'smoke powder' to avoid accumulation of oily residues from typical theatrical smoke-machine fluids. During later refurbishment, this assembly was replaced by newer, less unctuous theatrical fog distributors. The work has not been shown widely since its first public showing. *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* toured to three locations (New York 2000, Seoul 2000, Bilbao 2001), and subsequently the piece was purchased by the NJPAC in 2002, refurbished for display, and included in the NJPAC shows *Now Jump!* (2008–2009) and *Seamless Stupa* (2010–2011).

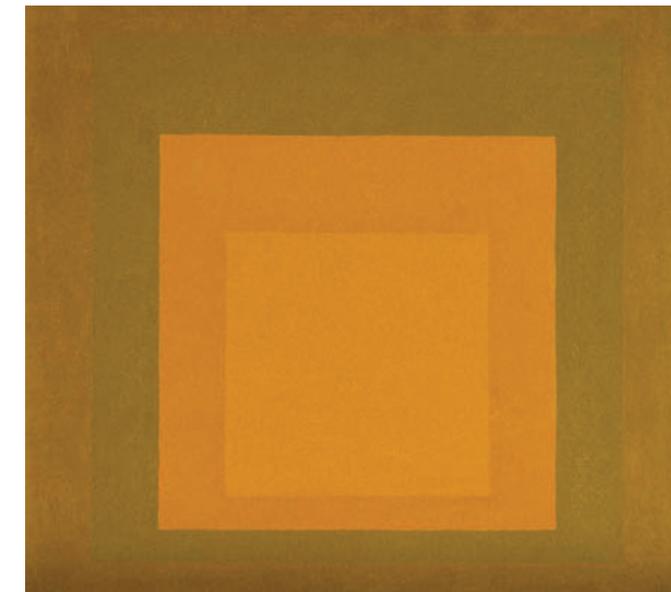


Emblem 21 from *Atalanta Fugiens*, Michael Maier, 1618. Public domain.

Following my own visits to the NJPAC in 2011, I was fortunate enough to engage NYC-based artist Raphaele Shirley in discussion about *Three Elements*. Raphaele has been as generous as she is articulate, and openly discussed her role and the role of others cooperating to fabricate this installation with Paik at his studios. Many specifics I have come to know about Paik's laser work, and much of what is written herein about *Three Elements*, was relayed to me through Raphaele. She has shed light on what is quite an enigmatic set of Paik works, marked for some by what seems a late, hasty turn to toward yet another 'new media' as substrate for his investigations and experiments. Comparatively little has been written about these later laser works, and they are not exhibited as often as the works for *Experimental Television*, or earlier Fluxus and compositional works. The most available English-language writings on the laser works comprise a few technology-focused trade publications on these pieces, and *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* catalog's brief notes on the works. We should be thankful that we have people like Raphaele Shirley with whom we can still discuss *Three Elements*. She herself joined Nam June Paik's New York studio in 1997, specifi-

cally to aid with the development of his laser sculptures, and worked with him, Norman Ballard, Jon Huffman and Blair Thurman until 2002.

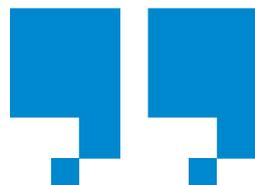
With Paik's laser pieces he moves from moving image to the photon. We begin with the inscription of meaning, and wind up with a meaning of inscription. It is true that the aesthetics of laser light have become mired in a slew of highly commercial and perhaps less thought-provoking forms, for some relegating it to the dustbin of technologies available for us in the Fine Arts (along with other 'futuristic' techniques like stereograms and holograms which flourished and floundered through the 1980s). Arguably, Paik succeeds with *Three Elements* in transcending this 'laser light show' impulse by using the



Homage to the Square: Apparition, Josef Albers, 1959. Oil on Masonite, 47 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches (120.6 x 120.6 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 61.1590. © The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, 2013. Used with permission.



With Paik's laser pieces he moves from moving image to the photon. We begin with the inscription of meaning, and wind up with a meaning of inscription.



technology to foreground its own chief material properties, among them the ability to represent color with technical accuracy down to a few wavelengths, and to rebound near-endlessly within an internally reflective volume.

Perhaps more pointedly, Paik's laser works might suggest an underdeveloped or inconsistent artistic direction, late in the life of a rampantly multimedia artist. Above much else, the Western art world craves a consistency of narrative that describes what an artist does in terms of an undeviating, singular investigation. Although it is likely that "consistency isn't really a human trait,"⁹ there is unfortunately much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through Paik's oeuvre is not difficult to posit. John Hanhardt, Paik's most public supporter and confederate, has written that his use of laser as medium "embodies and describes the power of energy; it is a light that displays and transforms notions of space and time, precisely the issues he radically altered through video and television."¹⁰ In addition, Paik's collaborators speak of the fertile meditateness with

which he explored the technologies and possibilities of each medium he approached. His investigations were never solely topological, as he was "terribly curious about the functionings" of the mediums he employed.¹¹ The understanding he sought was intimate, unhurried and often life-long. An early interest in lasers as information transmission,¹² becomes an understanding of its capability to represent video imagery,¹³ leading later to a kind of photonic art: laser as laser, light being light. The overall arc is one of gradual and methodical apprehension of a technology and media, originally intended for communication, representation and inscription. Paik here devises and establishes what is a contemporary, and consummate, gesture of art-and-technology: taking that which at first seems ultimately symbolic and representative, and discovering it as (once again) fundamental, and properly material. With each successive Paik work for laser light, he splays out a gamut of possible indexical densities in a trajectory indeed consistent with the one he imposed upon music, television and video. His works *Zen for TV* and *Zen for Film* similarly collapse representative mediums onto themselves, leaving nothing but the bare, dimensional physicality intact. Paik was fond of para-

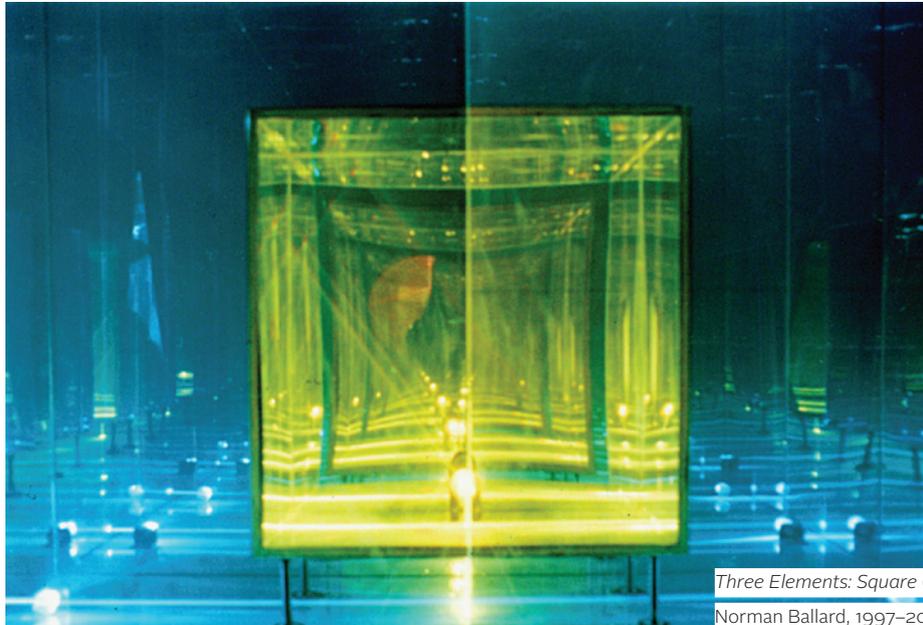
phrasing Norbert Wiener to describe the spectral embodiment of meaning in media apparatus, "The signal, where the message is sent, plays an equally important role as the signal, where the message is not sent."¹⁴ With Paik's laser pieces he moves from moving image to the photon. We begin with the inscription of meaning, and wind up with a meaning of inscription: *Laser Video, Sweet and Sublime, Jacob's Ladder, Olympic Water-Screen, Laser Cone, Three Elements*.

ELEMENTS OF THREE ELEMENTS

Three Elements confers succinctly the result of a set of interests Paik seems to have often charted in parallel: the twined histories of technology and art. Our human project is, in the broadest sense, essentially technological. The grammar of shape Paik uses for *Three Elements* are a set of fundamental shapes with links to the roots of both occidental and oriental understandings of the natural world. A Japanese interpretation of the symbols is as elemental pure form, "earth fits into the square, fire burns in a triangle and water tends to roundness."¹⁵ Depictions of these three occur as links to cosmology in Shinto teachings (square, circle and triangle representing the Sun, Moon and Star gods respectively). The oldest scriptures in Korea, the *Chun Bu Kyung* (4000 BC), describe the ancient order of heaven, earth and human. These depictions have found their way into Taekwondo symbology as the circle, square and triangle folds of the *Dobok* uniform of these martial artists. The triangle, circle and square are likewise central to the notation customs of alchemy, a practice which underpins Western science and mathematics up to the present day (Isaac Newton was decidedly an alchemist in practice and in philosophy).¹⁶ Alchemists used the recursive image of a circle-within-a-square-within-a-triangle-within-a-circle to represent the coveted philosopher's stone, a non-existent substance that could turn base metals into gold. Inscribing this order generations later, Paik references both the radical genesis of the quite 'magical' technology of laser light. In line with Paik's irreverence and derisiveness here is perhaps also a jab at the often over-stated rhetorical promise of 'cutting edge' technologies and their promise to materialise 'gold' from other, less tangible technological 'base metals.'

We know that Paik was a keen student of art theory and history. His thinking shows a distinct familiarity with the language of engineering and cybernetics, interwoven throughout by references to cultures of visual literacy, naturalism, aesthetics and beauty. He had a keen interest and concern for the novelty of techniques available to his chosen field of art. Paik rooted much of what he did in the visual culture of the mid-20th century gallery and museum. *Three Elements* is no exception, and these interests are marked both by sensibilities around coloration, and by an homage Paik intended with the work. Paik once said that, despite the visual arts' concern with formal and spatial arrangements, "in nature color is a function of time."¹⁷ The colors in *Three Elements* are pure wavelengths, both frozen in time but rebounding, oscillating and folding: a gentle infinity.¹⁸ Paik also wrote of this dual, reverberative way in which we "GRASP the Eternity. To stop at the consummated or sterile Zero-point is a classical method to grasp the eternity. To perceive SIMULTANEOUSLY the parallel flows of many independent movements is another classical way for it."¹⁹

In an often unnoticed detail for the *Square* sculpture, Paik references a German-born American painter's own homage to that particular geometry. In the early 1950s, Joseph Albers began a series entitled *Homage to the Square*, which, over the span of twenty-five years, would eventually comprise over 1,000 artworks. Albers used a technical, mathematically devised template to explore the infinite possibilities of what he termed 'simultaneous contrast,' or the relative perception of adjacent colors. Paik's third element, the square, is an homage to an homage; a laser Albers. Placing a red laser in a smaller mirrored box within the larger, squared green laser reflections, Paik uses highly specific wavelengths to create what Albers created by applying unmixed paint pigments straight from the tube with a palette knife. We are presented with what is physically or technically a highly specified assemblage, at once scientifically objective, and so all the more telling of our subjectivity and experience.



Three Elements: Square (detail), Nam June Paik in Collaboration with Norman Ballard, 1997–2000. Installation at Guggenheim Museum, New York, Photo Courtesy of Raphaele Shirley. © Raphaele Shirley, 2000. Used with Permission.

A JOURNEY UNINTERRUPTED

In 1978, Paik gave a talk following discussions with both John Cage and Merce Cunningham for the Time and Space Concepts in Music and Visual Art discussion at the Pleiades Gallery in New York City.²⁰ Paik, with characteristic impudent reverence, prefaced his own talk by saying, “profound things have been spoken, so I will now speak something vulgar.” *Three Elements*, with its acknowledgement of the mythological, somewhat unenlightened origins of our most refined, sophisticated artistic and technological achievements, is in many ways a sculptural analog of such sentiments. Paik was terribly curious about, and exceptionally aware of, the technological condition of mankind and the creative potentials and limitations suggested by this. He was conscious of the grave importance of media representations and of re-presenting their physical substrates. But his connection to these histories, these high-minded crucial issues, was never somber and seldom serene. Instead, he navigated these topics as the brazen savage, the frenetic invader, and in the process provided an

archetype for what both art and technology might seek to become: a journey of derisive discovery into our technological situation, and its base materials, fusing high and low culture, subject and object, East and West. As with any journey, it is in traveling that we come to know ourselves and our understandings as always somewhat fragmented, incomplete, wanting. But may we voyage as Paik did, curiously and inclined towards the deep interconnections between person, world, past and present often made more prominent though the technological. May we travel at the speed of Paik. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Wim Wenders, “Tokyo-ga,” Wim Wenders’ official Web site, http://www.wim-wenders.com/movies/movies_spec/tokyoga/tokyoga.htm (accessed November 1, 2011).
2. The film presents a scene where Wenders meets up with fellow visitor Wernor Herzog on the viewing platform of Tokyo Tower. Their discussion is around a lack of “pure images” in both cinema and urban settings. Herzog suggests that such images may need to be found in outer space, where Wenders is content to find such purity on the streets of Tokyo.
3. Research work, performances and other artistic activities in Korea were generously supported by the Korea Foundation, and the hospitality of both the Nam June Paik Art Center (NJPAC) and the Seoul Art Space_Mullae.
4. This last point was underscored for me during a guided tour of Paik’s 2010/2011 retrospective at Tate Liverpool, UK. The tour-guide, in his no-nonsense Liverpoolian accent, shared with me his intuition that Paik’s later Buddha, robot and laser works were part of the artist’s “just making money period.”
5. Nam Soo Kim, personal interview and discussion with the author, Seoul Art Space_Mullae, Seoul, Korea (July 2011).
6. Youngchul Lee and Namsu Kim, “Nam June Paik, Perfect Crime and the Construction of the Tele-topia Empire,” *Nam June Paik Art Center*, http://njp.kr/root/html_kor/seminar/pdf/20090903Retying%20Gordian%20Knots_intro.pdf (accessed September 3, 2010).
7. L’Arch De Nam June Paik. Film. Directed by Jean Paul Fargier. FRANCE: Paris: Ed. Art Press (1989).
8. David Lytle, “Lasers Shine in ‘Postvideo’ Era at Nam June Paik’s Guggenheim Show,” *The Laserist*, 2000, http://www.laserist.org/Laserist/Back_issues_Summer2000.html (accessed June 22, 2012).
9. Harold and Maude. Film. Directed by Hal Ashby. USA: Paramount Pictures (1971).
10. J. Hanhardt, “The Worlds of Nam June Paik,” Guggenheim Museum (July 2003).
11. Raphaele Shirley, personal email communication with the author, November 2011.
12. Nam June Paik, “Expanded Education for the Paperless society,” in *Radical Software* 1, no. 1 (1970): 7-8, http://www.radicalsoftware.org/volume1nr1/pdf/VOLUME1NR1_arto2.pdf (accessed June 10, 2012). Paik describes laser communication as a way of transmitting video imagery instantaneously around the globe.
13. Paik’s collaborations with Horst Bauman, a German laser artist, for “Laser Video” at the Städtische Kunst-halle, Düsseldorf in 1980.
14. Nam June Paik, “Video Synthesizer Plus,” in *Radical Software* 1, no. 2 (1970): 25, www.radicalsoftware.org/volume1nr2/pdf/VOLUME1NR2_0027.pdf. (accessed July 1, 2012). Paik refers here to Wiener’s 1948 work *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Paris: Hermann & Cie, 1948).
15. Louise Boudonnat and Harumi Kushizaki, *Traces of the Brush: The Art of Japanese Calligraphy* (Paris: Seuil Publishing, 2002).
16. Michael White, *Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).
17. L’Arch De Nam June Paik. Film. Directed by Jean Paul Fargier. FRANCE: Paris. Ed. Art Press (1989).
18. In his article, “Artists on Science: Scientists on Art,” in *Nature* 434, 308-309 (March 17, 2005), Martin Kemp likens Paik’s investigations to those of physicist and scientists. Kemp writes: “The Korean artist, Nam June Paik, has reached out into cosmic realms of infinity through the endless rebounds of lasers on basic geometrical figures. His modelling of light in space has clear affinities with physicists’ and astronomers’ imaginative visualizations of space-time.”
19. Nam June Paik, *Afterlude to the EXPOSITION OF EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION*, Galerie Parnass, reprinted in *Nam June Paik: Videa 'n' Videology, 1959-1973*, ed. Judson Rosebush (Everson Museum of Art, 1974).
20. Time and Space Concepts in Music and Visual Art. Film document. Pleiades Gallery, New York City, 1978, available on UbuWeb Film, http://www.ubu.com/film/cunningham_time.html (accessed July 10, 2012).