

Brief History of Art and design

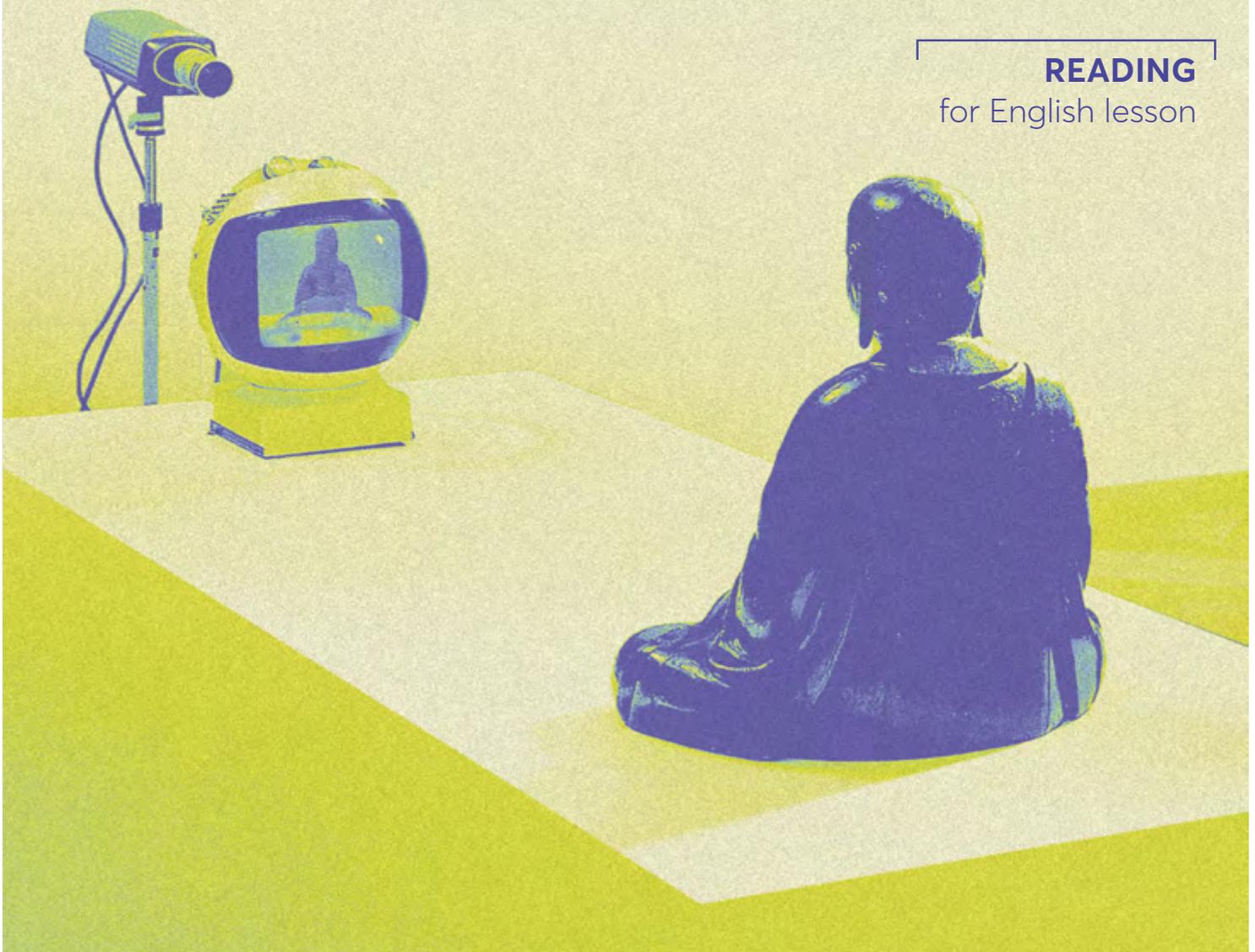
20th-21st century

09 NEW MEDIA ART

(1990–NOWADAYS)

READING

for English lesson



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LIEPĀJAS MŪZIKAS,
MĀKSLAS un DIZAINA
VIDUSSKOLA



SUPŠ:UH



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READING

HOW NAM JUNE PAIK'S PAST SHAPED HIS VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

*The digital artist was attuned to the rhythms of a changing world.
A new documentary shows his struggles to navigate it.*

By Hua Hsu
March 29, 2023



The artist Nam June Paik is often described as a prophet of the digital age. A pioneer of video art who was born in Korea and spent most of his career in the United States, Paik seemed to recognize the corrosive possibilities that technology might play on our sense of self, community, and faith. His most famous works are infused with sly humour and a frenetic, madcap energy: a Buddha regarding itself in a monitor, a synthesizer that allowed people to manipulate images on a screen to psychedelic effect, robotic totems made up of about a dozen stacked TV monitors.

Far from dystopian, Paik's work aimed to inspire a resistance to mass media as unidirectional; he wanted us, as audience members, and as citizens of the electronic age, to take back some measure of control. "I use technology in order to hate it properly," he once said—a sentiment that feels more resonant today than it did in the twentieth century, when Paik, who died in 2006, was most active.

In the new documentary "Nam June Paik: Moon Is the Oldest TV," the filmmaker Amanda Kim attempts to tell a more intimate version of the artist's story, presenting him not just as someone who understood the horizonless tumult of the digital revolution but as a nomad in search of belonging, too. Paik was born into an affluent family in Seoul in 1932. The youngest of five children, he received an élite education, steeped in the Western canon, training as a classical pianist. Still, because of the Japanese occupation of Korea, he was subject to imperial rule, which sought to prohibit Koreans from speaking their native language. As a child, he recalled teachers holding regular meetings of "repentance" to see if any students would confess to speaking Korean. "When you count in a foreign language," Paik observed, "you have to concentrate so hard. You don't have time to think about yourself."

He rebelled against his father by becoming a leftist, at a time when the consequences for opposition were severe. During the Korean War, the family was exiled and moved to Japan. In 1956, after studying aesthetics at the University of Tokyo, Paik moved to Munich to continue his studies in music history. He was already hip to the avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg, whose experimentations in atonality suggested liberated, almost confrontational new possibilities for classical music. In Germany, Paik was further radicalized after attending an early performance of John Cage and David Tudor. Cage wanted to introduce "chance" to performance and composition, to remove any vestiges of personal taste or preference. He believed that every sound was equally beautiful. At first, Paik was baffled by Cage and Tudor's performance, which was noisy and anarchic. It seemed deeply unserious. By the end of the concert, Paik remembers, "I was a completely different man." He introduced himself to Cage afterward, and the two maintained a decades-long friendship. "He gave me the courage to be free," Paik later explained, "license to kill."

The first half of "Moon Is the Oldest TV" offers a leisurely exploration of Paik's family history and formation as a young artist. Kim's focus on Paik's youth presents a bracing context for the work that would come. Stock footage from the Japanese occupation or Nazi Germany features people listening to radios, which comes to feel resonant as Paik grows up and reflects on his early life. For Paik, authoritarian rule involved the one-way transmission of ideas, which explains his fascination

with broadcast media. "Television is a dictatorial medium," Paik argued. "When the superiors say something to the inferior, they can just listen and answer 'Yes.' . . . I think talking back is what democracy means." Some thirty minutes into the documentary, we have only a vague sense of how Paik's ideas about media, politics, and control might bear fruit. But we have come to grasp his inspirations and the bemused kind of wonder he radiates. We see the artist toggle from serious contemplation to pure, childlike glee with a manic, Adam Sandler-esque intensity.

When he was invited to stage his first solo show, at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1963, Paik had just begun experimenting with televisions. As a part of Fluxus, the global art movement that sought to destabilize relationships between performer and audience, Paik wanted to give attendees the opportunity to experiment with televisions rather than just sit passively in front of them. He set up magnets and pedals to disturb the signal of his TV boxes, creating manipulated, ghostly images. (Critics found the work shallow and confusing.) The following year, he moved to New York, where he quickly fell in with the downtown arts scene. He found others who shared his fascination with the Sony Portapak, released in 1965, one of the first handheld video-recording cameras available to consumers. He came to think of his practice as an attempt "to talk back to

In 1974, he came up with one of his most iconic works—and, according to the film, the one that finally guaranteed him a degree of financial security: "TV Buddha," an installation featuring a statue of a Buddha watching itself on television. Throughout the seventies and eighties, Kim depicts Paik as a cross between the media theorist Marshall McLuhan and a mischievous, Warhol-like art-world celebrity, constantly in motion, conceptualizing ever-grander installations. There's a box-checking feel to this stretch of Kim's documentary, as she moves quickly through his rise. (Paik's wife, Shigeko Kubota, a pathbreaking artist in her own right, feels more a bystander than a collaborator.) Paik's growing influence culminates in "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell," an international satellite-video installation that connected viewers and performers in Europe, Asia, and the United States to chaotic effect.

Paik came up with the term "electronic superhighway" to describe how new technology would soon allow for major advances in transcontinental communication. In 1995, he debuted "Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii," an extensive video installation that featured a map of the fifty states rendered in neon. Inside each state were monitors that played video clips speaking to each place's unique mythology.

Much like McLuhan's "global village," "the electronic superhighway" is a term that became more

evocative as the pace of technological change caught up to the capaciousness of the language. Once, in the middle of the night, a friend of Paik recalls, the artist phoned him up, as he was often wont to do. "I'm wrong," Paik explained. "It's not information highway. It's wrong. We're in a boat in the ocean, and we don't know where the shore is."

Though Paik's work felt eerily attuned to the rhythms of a changing world, Kim's intention as a storyteller feels a bit more intimate: to contextualize Paik's work within his own struggles to navigate that world. His sense of alienation came from a very specific history. "I've been away from my county for most of my life now," Paik explains early in "Moon," "so every day for me is a communication problem. My problem is how to communicate better."

There's been an explosion of documentary filmmaking over the past few years, a combination of companies needing fresh content and a moment where scepticism toward grand histories is augmented by Wikipedia wormholes and online research. The tendency is to offer the past as usable for the present: the forgotten figure or moment explains something about who we are now. And, in the case of Paik, it's clearly part of his appeal. His art was always about a present that had yet to come into focus for everyone else. Using television as a medium was a truly strange choice in the early sixties. A constant refrain throughout the film is that reviewers thought his work was gimmicky, bereft of ideas. They didn't realize that they were witnessing the birth of electronic art, or new participatory forms of performance, or a serious meditation on technology's reach; they thought that they were just looking at screens. This feels like a particularly rich moment to reencounter Paik's work and to revisit moments when telecommunications had yet to be all-absorbing. He wanted to talk back at the TV—he wanted to remind us that this was possible. Now we are all constantly talking back at the Internet.

What makes Kim's film so powerful is an attempt to cast Paik both as a Futurist and as someone reflective about his past. "It's very funny that you understand my English," a bemused Paik tells an interviewer at one point. "It's unexpected, really." Perhaps he was vexed not just by communications technology but by the challenge of expressing (and proving) himself as more than a kooky outsider. Throughout the documentary, the actor Steven Yeun provides voice-over, reading some of Paik's more personal writings. Where the artist could be prankish and evasive on camera, his reflections on his youth are occasionally sombre or melancholy, qualities that Yeun brings out. Paik spent more than thirty years away from South Korea after his family left during the war; he appeared to fit in just fine in Munich and Manhattan. But in the footage from his return to Seoul, in

1984, he appears uncharacteristically anxious. He is uncertain how he will be received. Within Kim's narrative, this moment feels like a homecoming, as he is greeted like a national hero. He sits at the piano with his sister, visits the graves of his parents. In the years to come, he would work tirelessly to put Korea on the global art map. But, for a moment, he is not an artist. He's simply back at home, somewhere he does not need to explain himself.

1. VOCABULARY MATCH

Match the words from the text to their correct definitions.

	Word	Definition
a	Futurist	A person who studies or creates artwork using technology.
b	Atone	To be forward-thinking and believe in technological progress.
c	Dictatorial	Someone who expresses the ideas and possibilities of the future.
d	Radicalize	A powerful influence or control by someone with authority.
e	Medium	To change someone's views dramatically, especially to more extreme views.
f	Anarchic	A method or channel of communication (e.g., TV, art).
g	Manipulate	Uncontrolled, chaotic, and without order.

2. TRUE OR FALSE

Read each statement and determine if it is *true or false*? Circle the correct answer.

1. Nam June Paik was born in Seoul, Korea, in 1932. *True / False*
2. Paik's works were mainly calm and simple in design. *True / False*
3. Paik saw television as a tool for communication and democracy. *True / False*
4. Paik was influenced by John Cage, a composer who believed in random sound. *True / False*
5. Paik became a famous artist only after creating "TV Buddha." *True / False*

3. SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. What kind of family and education did Nam June Paik have when he was young?
2. How did Paik's views on technology differ from the conventional use of TV in his time?
3. How did Paik's work challenge the way audiences interact with media?
4. Describe one of Paik's most famous works and explain why it was important.
5. How did Paik's personal history and background influence his art?

4. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Paik's ideas about the use of technology in art are relevant today?
2. Paik used television as a medium to express his ideas. Can you think of other modern forms of media that artists use today to communicate their messages? Explain.

5. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Paik's ideas about the use of technology in art are relevant today?
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6. LANGUAGE FOCUS: PAST SIMPLE VS. PRESENT PERFECT

Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in parentheses.

3. Paik _____ (study) music history in Germany before moving to the United States.
4. Paik _____ (create) "TV Buddha" in 1974, one of his most famous pieces.
5. He _____ (have) a difficult time in his early life due to the Japanese occupation of Korea.
6. Paik _____ (be) influenced by avant-garde music and artists like John Cage.
7. The documentary _____ (show) a more personal side of Paik's story.

7. CRITICAL THINKING

Nam June Paik is known for his work with televisions and media, but he also had deep personal reflections on his life and background. Why do you think his history and struggles were so important in shaping his artistic vision?