

ARTS

A giddy immersion into a multimedia art form

Euny Hong Koral found televisions and bewildered audiences everywhere at the Nam June Paik retrospective in New York — but the artist had an answer for everything

An American humorist wrote, "I'm not a vegetarian because I love animals. I'm a vegetarian because I hate plants." Along the same lines, it is difficult to tell whether an artist who uses television sets as the material for all of his pieces does so because he loves television, or because he thinks it is a bourgeois evil.

The works of Korean-born media artist Nam June Paik, now 67, give rise to this question. His career is being celebrated in a provocative retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This newly opened exhibition features over 50 of Paik's works festooned throughout the museum's famous helical rotunda, providing a giddy immersion into the multimedia art form he originated. (The exhibit runs until April 26.)

The floor exhibit, "Modulation in Sync", was created as a site-specific piece for this retrospective. A green, lighting-shaped laser refracts

through a seven-story waterfall that spans from floor to ceiling, resembling something-out of Frankenstein's laboratory. The waterfall is surrounded by 100 upward-turned television screens broadcasting a cacophonous mix of Paik's video works, which appear to celebrate the futuristic jauntiness of television technology.

As one alights the helix, however, the artworks become progressively more cynical. One of the most famous pieces in this exhibit is the "TV Buddha" (created in 1974), which features a Buddha statuette gazing at its own image in a monitor, which is continually broadcast through live video feed. A few feet away is the "Video Buddha" (1976),

based on the same concept, only with an Ozymandias twist: the Buddha has disintegrated into a pile of dirt, with only its head remaining.

Speaking from his Soho loft this week, Paik casually dismissed the notion that he was trying to make a statement about the subversive nature of television. "I don't have any particular commentary on television programming," he said. "I'm not a politician. I'm just interested in television as an abstract object, in its dual characteristic of being a fixed object that shows ephemeral images."

Paik's statements echo the doctrines of Fluxus, a German "anti-art" art movement of the 1960s, of which Paik and the non-traditional musician John Cage were key proponents. Predictably, Fluxus comes with a manifesto, written by its founder George MacLennan: "Art [teaches] the needlessness of art, including the eventual needlessness of itself, Art should therefore not be permanent." Paik elaborated: "My art is based on a particular postwar nihilism. It was thus particular to a certain era. Everything is temporary. I am happy to be vanished and forgotten [after my death]."

Regrettably, Fluxus presents itself as a package deal. Paik's witty installation pieces can be enjoyed in their own right, but they are intended as an *entrée* into the movement's aggressive ideology. A prime example is Paik's video art, a medium he pioneered in the 1960s (excerpts are being



The videos came across as attempts to compress profundity into a thunderclap of a moment: detail from "Good Morning Mr Orwell", 1984, by Nam June Paik

screened in the museum. It is in these video works that Paik achieves what he considers to be his most important objective: "to show the [uncanniness] of everyday life." The frenetic montage includes footage of a visit to Guadalcanal the

Paik made with Charlotte Moorman, a cellist, in 1977. She treats the natives to a dissonant cello concert while wearing only the "TV Bra" (1969) Paik made for her, which consisted of two functioning television sets covering her breasts. According to

the text flashing on the screen, this is the first television ever seen in Guadalcanal. The camera pans to the horrified faces of the natives, but it is not clear whether they are alarmed by their first glimpse at television. What is maddening about "anti-art" art movements is

attempts to compress profundity into a thunderclap of a moment, but they require much forgiveness on the part of the audience. Paik said of my reaction: "If people get it, they get it."

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