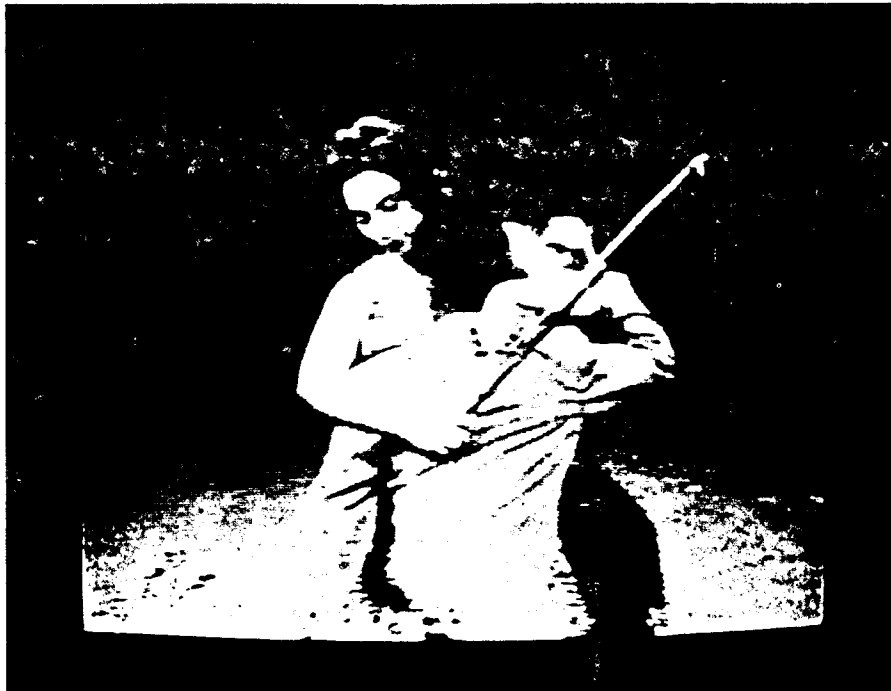


ABSTRACT TIME

Nam June Paik

Paul Schimmel



Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman T.V. BRA, 1974.

PAUL SCHIMMEL: Could you tell me about your relation with Charlotte Moorman? You did make *TV bra* (1969), *TV cello* (1971), and *TV bed* (1972) for her.

NAM JUNE PAIK: I consider her to be a great video artist. Video art is not just a TV screen and tape—it is a whole life, a new way of life. The TV screen on her *body* is literally the embodiment of *live video art*.

PS: She becomes video.

NJP: *TV bra* and *TV cello* are interesting because Charlotte did it. If any other lady cellist did it, it would have been just a gimmick. Charlotte's reknowned breast symbolizes the agony and achievement of the avant-garde for the past ten years. When given a choice between *truth* and *convenience*, people always choose *convenience*. Both artists and distributors are concentrating on videotape-making, which is more *convenient*, whereas my live video art with Charlotte is expensive, clumsy, and, as an art object, almost unsaleable—like a piece of *truth*. It is about time that we make the distinction between video art and videotaped art.

PS: How would you relate your *train bra* (1973) with your *TV bra*?

NJP: The pair of two bras shows us the way to solve the energy crisis and our current inflation-depression. I wish Charlotte had been invited by President Ford to attend the economic summit meeting at the White House. Transportation and communication are generally considered as two separate issues; however, we should ask *why* people travel. People travel to *communicate* something, either for pleasure or profit. In the case of pleasure driving, they are subconsciously communicating with themselves *via machine*, since few have the courage to scrutinize their inner selves. Tireless indulgence into video-feedbacks by some video artists have the same motives. The frequency of travel will reduce if the need to travel is reduced. What we need is a substitute technology to travel. Here the role of video artists as the pioneer-experimenters in tele-communication-transportation trade-offs is great. Charlotte Moorman showed us this impending conversion in the most elegant way, by adorning herself with *TV bra* and *train bra*.

PS: Within the content of your video pieces, there seems to be an interface between ritual-classical tradition and the modern popular culture. Why is this?

NJP: I like John Cage because he took seriousness out of serious art. There is no difference between ritual, classical, high art and low, mass entertainment, and art. I *live*—whatever I like, I take.

PS: You come to video from music, whereas many video artists came from painting-sculpture. What is the difference?

NJP: I think I understand time better than the video artists who came from painting-sculpture. Music is the manipulation of time. All music forms have different structures and buildup. As painters understand abstract *space*, I understand abstract *time*.

PS: Do you think your video will ever have mass appeal?

NJP: I couldn't care less about it. I enjoy my video. If people like it, that is their problem. This is why I sleep every Monday until 1:00 pm to show the world that I am independent. I am lazy. I tell everybody not to call me on Monday.

PS: That way you don't have to wear double-knits and go to work. Did you ever have a steady job?

NJP: No, not really. I just did what I thought I should be doing.

PS: And you still do that?

NJP: A bum doesn't do anything he doesn't like. I do the same thing.

PS: Do you think video as an art object will ever turn into the public mass media mainstream, or will it remain on the fringe of society?

NJP: The demarcation line between high art and mass art is often fuzzy, e.g., Buster Keaton and Humphrey Bogart were not considered high art in the 1930s and 1940s, but now many highbrows consider them to be important artists. On the other hand, quite a few high art pieces, including some Picassos, are now clichés.

In February, 1966, I made a videotape distortion of Charlotte Moorman on the Johnny Carson Show. Nine year's time turned this quasi-popular art into a chic, ambiguous high art. However, the real confrontation and confusion of high and

low art came in February, 1967, when both Charlotte and I were arrested for indecent exposure for the so-called topless cello performance at Cinematheque. After having spent a night in jail, the judge asked my profession. I said, "Composer." He dismissed me since there was no mention of a composer in the N.Y. State Penal Code 4911B, since nobody could have foreseen that a composer could be arrested for indecent exposure. The next morning two investigators from the Immigration Service came to my loft and were flabbergasted by my 23 TV sets (9 were color). They assumed that I was making a living as a TV repairman, which was illegal for me since I was on a non-working visa at that time. It was not easy to explain to them that 23 old TV sets make high art. One of them asked why I had so many books. I just said, "I like reading." Then the phone rang—a "real" topless bar in San Francisco offered Charlotte \$5000 for one week's performance. Another call was from Andy Warhol, who offered Charlotte another week at his Dom Cabaret. While I was still worried about expulsion from the U.S., I was asked, "How did you *manage* to get arrested?" The final argument was from Russell Baker of the *New York Times*: "For all we know, Casals might have been greater had he not been forced to keep a layer of wool between his knee and his cello."

PS: What about the whole aesthetics of boredom?

NJP: In 1967 I wrote a short history about the aesthetics of boredom. Being an aristocrat means being bored. Boredom and aristocracy have been correlative since medieval times in the West and East. Acquisitiveness in money means buying a SoHo loft and saving money. Acquisitiveness in time means loving only exciting stuff, a desire to be entertained every second. If you give up acquisitiveness in money, you should not own anything. If you give up acquisitiveness in time, you should be bored and enjoy boredom.

PS: What do you think of your position as the George Washington of Video?

NJP: Yes, I think that history shows this, so the problem is what to do with it. Historical classification is often vulgar.

PS: What prompted you to begin your work with video?

NJP: I sold everything I had, and bought 13 TV sets in 1962.

PS: What prompted you to do this?

NJP: It was a slow process. I was working with electronic music at Radio Station of Cologne every day, which also transmits TV. It was natural for me to think that something similar to electronic music could also be done on the TV screen. I wrote to John Cage in 1959 that I would use a TV set in a multi-media concert. At that time John Whitney was experimenting with computer film and the German painter K.O. Goetz was talking about computer-programmed painting. From all those, the idea of TV crept in, though for a long time I thought it was a task for painters. I waited and waited but nobody did it. One late morning, the idea suddenly flashed, "Why not me?" I learned from Arnold Schoenberg to dig up the root and shake up the tree from the root on. Therefore I bought physics and electronics textbooks and started from the root.

PS: When you are video-synthesizing a piece do you feel you have complete control?

NJP: No, I don't like to have complete control. That would be boring. What I learned from John Cage is to enjoy every second by de-control. Surprises and disappointments are built in the machine.

PS: There is a lot of talk that the written word is going to die out. Do you agree?

NJP: No, because the written word is very efficient due to



Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Concerto for TV Cello & Videotapes, 1973/74.



Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, Concerto for TV cello & Videotapes, 1973/74.

its random-access-ability. You can skip and jump any part of a book. There is complete freedom, whereas in television you are the prisoner of time.

PS: Do you think some day you will be able to dial a computer and see any TV show at any time you want?

NJP: Yes, I bet that will come. I am very serious about following the development of electronics because history has shown that we are very hardware-dependent. I hate hardware, I hate the video-synthesizer, but it is interesting. I much prefer to sip a drink at SoHo bars but I watch the development of hardware carefully; even if I cannot change the course of history, at least I want to know, when I die, in what way the world ends. Whether we die from TV x-ray, a car accident, or nuclear war, we all die from hardware. Our problem is not Capitalism versus Socialism, but the conflict of human time versus machine time. When I was asked to submit a text to the Machine Show Catalogue (MOMA, 1969), I sent the following:

"From Marx to Spengler, from Tolstoy to Tockeville, not a single prophet of the recent past predicted the greatest problem of today . . . parking."

I think the world will justify me so that I justify the world.