Twenty years after Nam June Paik inaugurated an art form by tinkering with the innards of television sets to create unprecedented images, he is being honored with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum. While his work is still controversial, few deny that this P.T. Barnum of the avant-garde has brought a new perspective to television.

**VIDEO ART’S GURU**

By D.C. Denison

Seventeen television sets hang from the ceiling in Nam June Paik’s loft in lower Manhattan; another 24, standing on their sides, line the wall. And there are perhaps 40 more sets scattered around this drafty fifth-floor atelier. Many of them have had their circuitry rewired or their broadcast signals manipulated to suit Paik’s aesthetic aims; a few, clustered in a corner and surrounded by electrician’s tape and coaxial cable, are missing their back panels: works in progress by the man who for almost 20 years has been considered the pre-eminent video artist in the United States and Europe.

On a recent Sunday evening, when Paik, dressed in a style that can best be described as disheveled, is host to a reception for two visiting French video artists, the scene resembles nothing so much as a television-repair shop that is running three months behind schedule.

Very few of the guests that evening appear to be surprised by the surroundings. Many of those present have already seen these same television sets in European galleries and museums. Later in the evening, some of them even make requests.

Eventually, Paik obliges by turning on small groups of sets. The effect is difficult to categorize: One multi-monitor collection features quick cutaway shots of soaring airplanes and tropical fish juxtaposed with abstract washes of neon-bright color. The 24 sets along the wall, however, have been tampered with to the opposite effect. These television sets, 12 of which Paik purchased at a hotel-renovation sale last year, have been altered in a way that reduces their broadcast signals to an elegant pattern of simple, stationary bars of electronic light.

As he turns these collections on, Paik offers surprisingly little in the way of commentary or explanation. A slightly built, shy man, he appears to find everything, even his own work, somewhat amusing. As he turns on the 17 sets that hang suspended from the ceiling, his comment, in his aphoristic, Korean-inflected English, is characteristically oblique: “Ceiling, I think, is the last undeveloped interior space in Manhattan.” He points up to an energetic videotape collage of a dancing Merce Cunningham, a gesturing John Cage and abstract waves of color. “Also notice that electronic motion, unlike mechanical motion, has no gravity.”

Nam June Paik has always been an unlikely — and quite disarming — 20th-century media figure. A tenacious student of Zen Buddhism who neither smokes nor drinks, Paik does not drive a car, has yet to buy a stereo and has remained almost totally uninterested in broadcast television. None of the more than 100 television sets in his loft are hooked up to an antenna. Yet Paik’s admirers consider him an artistic video pioneer of the first rank, sort of a cross between Roone Arledge and Marcel Duchamp. Most probably agree with the influential French film journal Cahiers du Cinéma, whose cover story on Paik described his work as “toujours amusant, souvent beau, quelquefois sublime.”

That estimation is far from unanimous, however. Some critics are decidedly less tolerant of Paik’s futuristic declarations and wild Dadaist tendencies; others still regard him as a minor artist, a specialist working in a medium of dubious esthetic significance. “Mr. Paik’s pronouncements abound in exaggerated promises his art shows no evidence of keeping,” wrote the former New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer in 1974 in a review of one of Paik’s many well-attended exhibits at a midtown gallery. “The art one actually experiences is rather modest; its delights are flickering, small-scale and fragmentary, and quickly dissipated.”

All of which should make Paik’s major retrospective, opening this Friday at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, a lively, and possibly controversial, event. The Whitney show is also significant in that it represents the first time a major museum has honored a video artist with a retrospective.

At the reception in Paik’s loft, many of those present expressed the hope that the show would bring video art into the art-world mainstream. Characteristically, Paik himself is not so sure that is where it belongs. “I think video art is half in the art world and half out,” he said at one point in the evening. Then, turning over a nearby technical diagram, he drew two overlapping circles in pencil, labeling one “ART” and the other “INFORMATION.” He pointed to their common area, filling it in with his pencil. “I think I am here,” he said.

Television images are produced when charged electrons strike the interior, phosphor-coated surface of a cathode-ray tube. In 1962, Nam June Paik, then a young avant-garde musician, bought 13 secondhand television sets and spent about a year in his studio in Cologne, Germany, exploring ways to manipulate these charged particles. Eventually, by interfering with the cathode-ray tube’s electromagnetic field, he was able to splash these electrons against the screen in patterns that were unfamiliar and evocative. The following year, when Paik exhibited these electronically doctored sets at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, the term “video art” formally entered the esthetic vocabulary.

Nearly 20 years later, “video art” still elicits quizzical looks. The vast majority of the work remains largely inaccessible to the general public; certainly very little of it reaches the living-room tube. Yet recently, there has been a definite rise in interest in video art, particularly among eager video students at colleges and universities. The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum both run active video-art programs. The Kitchen in Manhattan, perhaps video art’s liveliest showcase, screens videotapes by up to 10 artists a month in its viewing room. Elsewhere, media centers like the Boston Film/Video Foundation and San Francisco’s Video Free America have also become established and productive.

Unlike the first generation of video artists, who were primarily sculptors and painters and simply dabbed in the new medium, many of the artists whose work is currently exhibited at these galleries are members of the so-called TV Generation. (One of the best-known of these emerging video artists, Bill Viola, described his youth in New York as a “seven-channel childhood.”)

Video art matters to these young practitioners because it attempts to explore the expressive possibilities of a medium that has grown so powerful and pervasive during their lifetime. The challenge implied in all video art is not only the attempt to change the viewer’s perception of the cathode-ray tube, to cause people to see it as something other than simply a tool for delivering large audiences to advertisers, but also to provide an interpretation of the world in the context of a massive communication explosion.

Today, many art students regard television as an attractive and still largely unexplored artistic frontier. Paik’s influence on this second generation of video artists is palpable. Last year, when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Council for the Arts invited Paik to the school for a series of workshops and a lecture, it was a major event. “We had the largest crowd we’ve ever had for a film/video event,” said Benjamin Bergery, a lecturer at M.I.T. “There was a definite sense that people were coming to see the master.” And last December, when Paik made a similar appearance at Video Free America in San Francisco, the crowd was so large that many had to watch the lecture on, appropriately enough, a television.

In his SoHo loft, Paik perches in front of a pyramid of televisions that paint a towering self-portrait. His best pieces are a deft combination of visual innovation and ironic commentary.
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**Vision monitor in an adjoining room.**

There are a number of reasons for Paik's pre-eminent position in the small world of video art. For one thing, though he has always worked in a medium that is essentially corporate in nature, he has succeeded in developing his own unmistakable personal approach to television, which puts standard video fare into a new perspective. The project of Paik's art—global communication, television technology—has also hit home with a growing audience looking for a new slant on the television age. And while many of his less successful projects degenerate into anarchistic silliness, it is this combination of visual innovation and ironic commentary that distinguishes his best work. "The importance of Nam June Paik's work comes from the fact that he's always working on two or three levels," according to David Loxton, the director of WNET's Television Laboratory. "Many of his works are visually stunning, but they are more than that, because frequently he uses his work to make a comment on the television medium itself. This gives his art a richness that is lacking in a great deal of video art."

Finally, Paik's popularity owes something to the fact that in a field that has already earned a reputation for boring self-indulgence, he is a colorful and exotic character, an avant-garde P. T. Barnum whose work is both lively and provocative.

Paik has more than just entertainment in mind, of course. Before he began working in video art, Paik was already well known in Europe as an avant-garde composer and a "cultural terrorist"; his performances, many of them with an aleatory component, were more than that, because they mixed abstract images and electronically produced patterns and configurations. From a number of television stations (specifically WGBH and WNET in New York), where he has produced some of his best work.

Many of his accomplishments have been technical in nature. For example, Paik spent a year at WGBH, as an "artist in residence," constructing (with a Japanese engineer, Shuya Abe) the first videosynthesizer ever used on broadcast television. The Paik-Abe videosynthesizer, as it has come to be called, is a sort of mixing machine, controlled by a console of knobs, switches and dials, that allows the operator to combine images (some of them deliberately distorted) from a number of television cameras with splashes of bright color and electronically produced patterns and configurations. Paik has also continued to use broadcast stations for his antiformalist assaults on the medium. In one — produced by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in collaboration with WGBH — he was asked to provide visual accompaniment for a program of symphonic highlights. Paik's contribution, a movement from...
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...To my mind, he's the only one of the video artists I've seen who has thought through the implications of the medium and acted on his thinking. He's also, of course, a very appealing character—very hard to resist—even if you understand only every eighth word.

Nam June Paik saw his first television set in a downtown Tokyo department store in 1952. He does not remember being impressed with the new invention. At the time, he was 20 years old; two years earlier, he had escaped with his family from war-ravaged Seoul, South Korea, where he was born.

His father owned two factories but lost them both in the conflict. Soon afterward, they fled to Tokyo.

In Korea, Paik had studied classical piano and composition, but World War II and the impending Korean War made it difficult to pursue his interest in 20th-century Western music. "It took me three years to find one Schönberg record," he says, recalling his adolescence in Korea. Once in Tokyo, however, Paik was quick to take advantage of the situation.

He enrolled in the University of Tokyo in 1952; four years later, he graduated with a degree in esthetics (his thesis topic: Arnold Schönberg).

In 1956, Paik traveled to Germany. Two years later, he settled in Cologne, the center of avant-garde music.

Soon afterward, they fled to Tokyo.

Nam June Paik on his perch, and I am impressed with the video artists I've seen: one of the video artists I've seen who has thought through the implications of the medium and acted on his thinking. He's also, of course, a very appealing character—very hard to resist—even if you understand only every eighth word.

Tomkins does not think, however, that Paik's puckish sense of humor detracts from his work or its critical reception. "Nam June's wildness, his sense of humor, is actually very refreshing," he says. "A good many American artists tend to be awfully self-important, very serious about their work. Paik is entertaining, which is kind of a bad word in formalist art circles—it's like the word 'decorative'—but people realize that Paik is really quite extraordinary, both as an artist and as a technician. His things are something quite apart from entertainment.

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Paik is continually editing and re-editing his work. And although he continues to perform with Miss Moor- man, he rarely sticks with any of his video innovations long enough for them to become predictable.

Although it has frequently attracted a great deal of attention, video art has never been a successful commodity on the art market. After five shows at the Galerie Bonino, Mrs. Bonino can remember only one Paik television set that left the premises — it was stolen. Other galleries have not fared much better. "Commercially, video art has turned out to be almost totally unprofitable," says Leo Castelli, who has always had a way with difficult art. (Castelli founded Castelli-Sonna-bend Tapes and Films with Ileana Sonnabend.)

Video art's relative novelty is obviously one reason for its poor showing in the galleries. "If you've been trained in a formal way of thinking about art, you're not likely to accept the television screen as an art form," says Grace Glueck, a New York Times art critic. "By now, people understand how to look at abstract art, but when they look at these video-art pieces, it's difficult for them to understand what the artist is doing."

Howard Wise is perhaps the most energetic dealer in video art, through a nonprofit operation he founded in 1971 called Electronic Arts Intermix (E.A.I.). Wise now represents 75 video artists. The market for their tapes (which rent for between $50 and $75 for one-time use and sell in the range of $175 to $300) is still largely restricted to libraries, universities and museums. Paik remains, by far, E.A.I.'s most popular and successful artist.

Despite his popularity, Paik does not come even close to earning a living from his tapes. He estimates his share from rentals and sales of his work at about $3,000 a year, which means that, like most video artists, he has to make his money in other ways. His main source of income at this point is his professorship at the Kunstkademie in Dusseldorf, Germany, where he spends a few months every year. The Akademie (where his long-time friend and associate Joseph Beuys, the German avant-garde artist, is a fellow faculty member) pays Paik in the vicinity of $20,000 to $25,000 a year. Though the public and private grants he managed to garner in the 1970's are drying up, Paik now supplements his income with an occasional three- or four-day workshop at a university or media center.

Yet while many video artists are frustrated by the lack of financial support, Paik is, as usual, philosophical. "People don't expect to pay for television," he says. "Television is like water. When you want to watch, you turn it on like a faucet, and then, later, you turn it off. People want to see video once, maybe twice, but they don't want to own it. When you work in video art, you are really giving it away. Also," he continues, "video art is not a good investment.

People buy art for intrinsic value but also for tax shelter value, no? Video art does not fit in with this part of the art world. So, I'm afraid video artists will be poor for some time."

One measure of Paik's status in the video-art community is the amount of time he spends on the other side of the lens. In October 1981, the Anthology Film Archives in New York devoted an entire program to three documentaries on Paik. And he is not a totally unwilling participant in these projects, which is why he agreed to join Cage in a reading of a piece Cage wrote, entitled "Nam June Paik: A Diary," for the video team of John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald. (Portions of this taping will appear on one of seven WNET broadcasts by or about Paik, beginning May 9.)

When Paik entered Cage's sunny, spare loft, bowing slightly to all present, everything was already set up: cameras, microphones and lights. "No rehearsal," Paik said, laughing, as he sat down next to Cage in front of the cameras. "Mr. Cage is very busy. One take.

The reading (which began, "What is this thing called Art? TV?") lasted about five minutes. Afterward, Sanborn and Fitzgerald, clearly in awe of their subjects, left the cameras running and peppered Cage and Paik with questions. The first question: "Nam June, did you really cut off Mr. Cage's tie in that performance in Germany?"

Later in the day, back at his loft, Paik relaxed with a cup of tea. As usual, just about every horizontal surface in the immediate area was crowded with soldering guns, capacitors, resistors and technical diagrams. Paik and his wife of five years, Shigeko Kubota, also a video artist, have long since lost their private battle with television technology. Their bedroom is filled with a jumble of equipment, all places, everything was already set up: cameras, microphones and lights. "No rehearsal," Paik said, laughing, as he sat down next to Cage in front of the cameras. "Mr. Cage is very busy. One take."

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*Prices subject to change
VIDEO ART

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limits of electronic music," he says, "and I wanted to ex-
pand electronic music to in-
clude electronic visions."

For the next few years, while continuing to experi-
ment with electronics, Paik embarked on a series of
avant-garde performances in
galleries, museums and con-
cert halls in Dusseldorf, Co-
logen and Stockhuhm. Prob-
ably the most frequently re-
counted work of this period is
"Etude für Pianoforte." The
performance, which took
place in a studio in Cologne,
began normally enough with
Paik playing Chopin on the
piano. It ended a few minutes
later, when Paik jumped to
the stage to where John Cage
was sitting with the pianist
David Tudor and Karlheinz
Stockhausen, produced a pair
of scissors, cut off Cage's tie
at the knot, poured a bottle of
shampoo over Cage and
Tudor (Stockhuhm was
spared) and then forced his
way through the crowd and
out the door. A few moments
later, a telephone rang in the
front of the room. It was Paik
calling from the bathroom,
stairs, announcing the end of
the concert.

Performances such as
these, which caused one Ger-
man music critic to label
Paik "the world's most fa-
amous bad pianist," surprised
even Cage, who wrote soon
after that Paik's "work, con-
versation, performances,
performances, daily doings never cease by
turn to amaze, delight, shock
and even terrify me."

Paik arrived in New
York for the first time in
1964, and almost immediately made his
presence felt by staging a
number of avant-garde per-
formances that included
music, nudity, television
technology and a large, jury-
rigged robot of his own de-
sign, Robot K-456. In most
cases, the music — and the
nudity — was provided by
Charlotte Moorman, a young
cellist and well-known int-
preter of avant-garde music
who, after overcoming her
initial shock, assisted in
Paik's plans to bring sex to
music. "Sex is major theme
in art and literature," Paik
explains. "Why not in
music?"

Paik's first show, at the
New School for Social Re-
search, was typical of those
that followed. It included a
number of color-television ex-
periments. Paik's Robot
K-456, a few sculptural pieces
and the premiere of Paik's
first work for Miss Moorman,
"Cello Sonata No. 1 For Adults
Only." Miss Moorman ap-
peared in an evening gown
and played a few measures of
Bach's Third Cello Suite, then
stopped and removed an arti-
cle of clothing. She played a
few more measures, stopped
again and removed another
article of clothing. The piece
continued in this fashion until
she was almost completely
nude.

The review in the
next day's New York Herald
Tribune began: "There were
some strange doings last
night at the New School...."

(Three years later, Miss
Moorman was arrested for in-
decent exposure during a per-
formance of Paik's "Opera Sextonmiique." She
was convicted in a highly
publicized trial and given a
suspended sentence.)

In 1965, the Galeria Bonino
on 57th Street in Manhattan
gave Paik a one-man show of
his "electronic art," the first in
a series of five he would
have at the gallery during the
next 11 years. "Nam June's
shows were always very ex-
perimental," Fernanda
Bonino recalled recently. "It
was always very messy —
wires everywhere — and
something was always break-
ing down. Most of the time,
Nam June used to sleep under
a table in the back room, so
he could attend to the pieces.
Whenever he had a show, it
always looked like there was
some sort of happening or
performance going on, but it
was just Nam June."

Critical reaction to these
shows was surprisingly
favorable. John Canaday,
then The New York Times's
art critic, wrote an enthu-
siastic review of one of Paik's
first shows at the Bonino Gal-
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The notoriety that sur-
rounded Paik's early work —
especially Miss Moorman's
topless performances — has
followed Paik for years and
has led some to classify him
as little more than a particu-
larly tenacious holdover from
the heyday of modern-art
"happenings." But Paik has
rarely stood still long enough
to justify the charge. The
electronic clutter in his loft
clearly attests to the fact that
he incorporates the ever-ex-
panding tools of television
and computer technology as his
palette. Re-
cently, he has worked with
both laser and satellite tech-
nology. Even his videotapes,
perhaps the "best-known
works, are in a constant state
of flux. Like a nervous poet,
The Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street, NYC
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NAM JUNE PAIK

With a One-Man RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
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The entire fourth floor and the Film/Video Gallery on the second floor of the spacious four-story Whitney Museum of American Art are given over to the Retrospective, which consists of video installations, video sculptures, videotapes and live performances.

Among these are:

THE TV GARDEN, where numerous TV sets will be playing Paik’s “Global Groove” and other of Paik’s well-known videotape programs amidst a luscious garden of plants and flowers.

THE TV CLOCK, 24 TV sets, each indicating one of the 24 hours of the day/night.

TV FISH shows tropical fish in 15 aquaria, behind which 15 TV sets display similar fish swimming on their screens, thus superimposing live fish over video fish.

LASER VIDEO PROJECTION, developed by Horst Bauman, projects laser images from Paik’s videotapes across the gallery walls. A New York premiere.

Paik and Charlotte Moorman will continue their long-standing collaboration, which began in 1964, by giving two evenings of performances on Wednesday, June 2, and Thursday, June 3, each at 8:00 PM.

Charlotte Moorman will perform Paik’s LIVING VIDEO SCULPTURE, CONCERTO FOR TV CELLO, 1971. Times to be announced.

There will be a panel discussion of Paik’s art on Wednesday, May 21, at 6:30 PM. Participants will be Pontus Hultén, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; John Cage, composer; Dr. Wulf Herzogenrath, Director of the Kolnischer Kunstverein, Cologne; David Ross, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and John C. Hanhardt of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

A definitive and scholarly catalogue published by the Whitney Museum of American Art in association with the W.W. Norton & Co. will accompany the Retrospective.

John G. Hanhardt organized the Exhibition and the Catalogue.

All of Nam June Paik’s video programs, including those shown at the Retrospective, are available from ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, INC.

A Catalogue is available from ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, INC., listing and briefly describing Nam June Paik’s videotape works and those of seventy-five other distinguished video artist/producers.

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The programs will be aired on seven consecutive Sundays at midnight.


In addition to the above programs, Paik’s videotape programs include the following:

"Nam June Paik Edited For Television," 1975, with Russell Connor and Calvin Tomkins.

"Suite 212," 1977, includes early works.

"You Can't Lick Stamps In China," 1978, with the late Gregory Battcock.

"Lake Placid '80," Paik’s winter sports.


All the above programs are available in video cassette formats from ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, INC. Write ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, INC., 84 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 on your institutional letterhead.

Most of Paik’s videotape works were produced in conjunction with the TV Lab at WNET/13, David Loxton and Carol Brandenberg, Directors.