Nam June Paik:
An Interview

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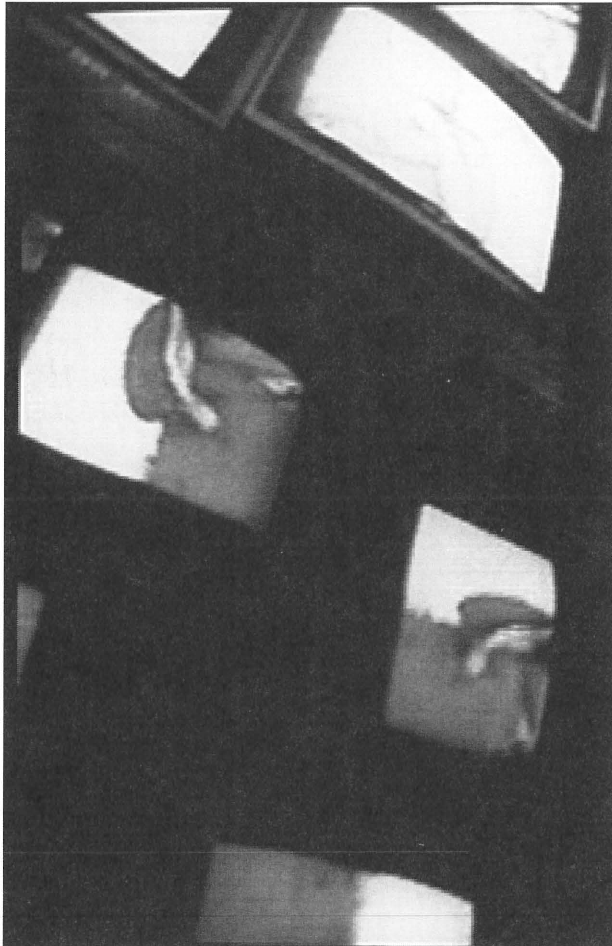

Nam June Paik, *TV-Wall.*

Nam June Paik, a seminal figure in video art, candidly discusses his working processes and values in this interview. He goes on to comment on such diverse problems as technology, cost, collaboration, MTV and the artist's ego. Fluxus, its values and the artists associated with this movement, becomes a central thread to his discussion.

Perhaps I could begin by asking you about your installation at *Documenta 8* entitled: *Beuys' Voice*. What sort of things were you trying to do with that footage of Beuys' performance? Were you interested in registering it *as* a performance?

That's a good question. But artists, generally speaking, don't really set out to do any concrete objective. So, in my case, when I make an artwork, I start from a few given conditions. One condition was that I was invited to do a big work by Documenta. And then, we had just finished a performance with Joseph Beuys in Tokyo, where I played a piano and he — he kind of screamed. It was quite an interesting performance — he liked it very much. Also, Beuys is popular in Germany, he's popular everywhere, but this piece was for Germany! So I thought, I'm going to do something with Beuys on that performance. So first I tried to use multiple projectors, but it didn't work out so well. Then there was a new technology available — multivision, or the so-called "TV Wall." It's quite expensive — they were renting it for ten thousand marks for three days. So I gave up for a long time. But after all, Documenta is a big opportunity to excel and you don't get too many offers, and by that time Beuys had died, so the information had become more dramatic. Through our friends, we inquired how much a couple of companies would charge for three months in the summer. And because in summer there are no trade fairs, they gave it to us for $100,000. So it became more or less feasible. Documenta gave me $40,000 or DM40,000 (I forget) and I raised maybe $60,000 (I forget)! So we did it. And that was a kind of process. Artists, generally, have no profound theories, we have instincts and then practical methods afterwards. The main channel was normal Beuys, undecorated. There were two channels, left and right, where I and Paul Garrin, did some computer processing. It was really successful like that. It went very well. So that's the inside story.

I think I saw another version of that piece at your retrospective in London, at the Hayward Gallery. It seemed a more complicated piece, because there were not only monitors which showed your work with Beuys, but other screens which seemed to show a lot of unrelated images going by at tremendous speed. I found it more difficult to understand or to read what was going on. Was there any reason for this difference between the installations?

Yes, that's an interesting question. In both shows we used identical tapes, because we didn't have any money to re-edit them — we just copied them. However, in the Hayward show we didn't have any money to rent that TV Wall system. So we used the Documenta main channel which went into the TV Wall undecorated — you know, natural Beuys — as one channel. The other two channels were decorated, computerized video. So, without the TV Wall, the proportion of decorated, computerized tape became bigger. Whereas at Documenta, most likely, most people just watched Beuys' undecorated tape. They didn't pay attention to the left or right, which is computerized tape. So everything most likely looked more complicated to you.

Which version did you prefer yourself?

I don't care. But the computerized version was more expensive — that's all I care!

All the same, you seem very much committed to work with the new media and to the significance of the new media arts. This serious motivation seems to be overlooked by some of your critics, such as the American theorist Fredric Jameson, whose catalogue essay for the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art's "Utopia" show, in 1988, suggested that there was no point in expecting your installations to offer coherent art. He argues elsewhere that video is a mobile medium, which may only generate superficial, ever changing effects. Taking this argument one step further, Jameson likes to argue that post-modern culture as a whole consists almost exclusively of superficial effects without any special meaning. What is your response to that kind of argument?

Where did he write that?

In an essay entitled "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-text" in an anthology entitled *The Linguistics of Writing*. Also in *Flash Art* in December '86/January '87, there's an interview with him, in which he's fairly dismissive about video.

Yes — the so-called semiotic people, you know, they don't like video!

Why do you think that is?

I don't really know. I don't understand semiotics. Most likely semiotics is quite highly regarded in non-French speaking countries, like England, America and also Japan, because it's difficult to understand. Academic people know they have to deal with complications. They think McLuhan is too much talked about, and is not academic enough. It's very hard to make a science out of communications because it is changing very fast, and in a way, it's too large. So French — and also Labor-left British people — made these kinds of post-Marxist theories. For some reason semiotic people like to be very manneristic — they hang on to very little things. They're basically sort of French-based people who kind of missed the bus of revolution, and who want to make a rear-guard critique about it. I respect theory when it is bold and something new. Cybernetics I respect, because you can learn something from it. I think I read one book by Foucault and then one book by Barthes, and one by one more guy. But when I study how much time I spent, I didn't get too much out of it. So I thought I would keep a respectful distance from it, and then I will use my time more productively, that is, making video-tapes and computer-tapes and computer programming.

My work is rather popular in France, so I asked my French friends whether they think I should spend x number of hours to study semiotics or not, and everybody laughed, and told me, you are much more advanced than they are — why should you spend your time studying semiotics? So that is my relation to semiotics. If somebody has a PhD and gets a teaching job in semiotics, that's fine! However, I have no time for that.

Going back to the notion of content in video, would you say that you're interested in communicating some general sort of message or content? Or are you most interested in exploring new sorts of process? Or would you say that it's a combination of the two, or perhaps something else?

You know, I am an artist — and I work with intuition — so I have, maybe, a higher rate of metabolism. I get tired of it very quickly. In 1960 I did some performance art, it was very nice at first. I got

known in fluxus circles in Germany. And then I met Beuys, who was not yet known. Then, when I was approaching thirty-one, I got tired of performance art. At the same time I also needed to make some money and so I started to make some objects sonores — you know, sound objects. Then, slowly, slowly, I got attracted to television. I thought, well, you know it's kind of nice to do the first video art. I said "electronic television art" at that time, since I was doing electronic music art, which was not doing too well.

The first show was a hit, and then the second show was a hit and the third show was a hit, so I stayed with this medium. And when I came to America, it was easier to raise money in television, because official television was so bad. If you said, "Oh, I'm working with television," — everyone was throwing money at you! Also, we have to be written up in the newspapers and have stuff in gallery shows and museums. So you speculate — oh well, I did this, next I did this, next I'll do this. In the case of so-called important visual artists, painters, for example, they get their style fixed up by their mid-thirties — numbers, silkscreens on canvas, dots and enlarged comics and so on. I don't say that they make compromises. But other artists get fixed with styles which become successful. Some artists change and have two or three styles. At most you can have three styles in your lifetime.

Of course, everything in video is in one style, but in my case, I think I changed that a little more. Because number one, my work was not profitable until three years ago. So I had no reason to hang up on one style. And secondly, the electronic industry here progressed very much. Think — at the time when I was doing video, it was 1963, before Sony had even introduced their video recorder. The only home video available was Grunwig's camera. So for the last thirty years video technology has changed. When new hardware combinations came up, either in home video, or more importantly, in computer programming in industry, I had more opportunities to try out new combinations of hardware and software. Hardware-software combinations are very, very rich, almost inexhaustible.

Then, obviously, I was not that bad in that application — there are other guys that are worse. So, for two reasons, because I did not make much money until three years ago, and because hardware keeps changing, I keep changing. So your question is almost irrelevant. Art-making is for anybody like breathing — luckily we don't have to go to the post office and use stamps. We are a kind of privileged class — we don't have to work very hard. So we don't have to set up any objectives.

I suppose your explorations of new media are like swimming in an endless ocean.

A tabula rasa, you know a white paper. Video is a white paper.

Are there some pieces that you think have worked particularly well, not only as a new process, but as a new way of saying something about something beyond video?

I get bad reviews still — *Art in America* recently wrote one. But I survive. If we think deductively, then certainly *Beuys' Voice* was successful. And another very successful piece is *TV Garden*, where you see lots of TVs among the leaves. That was very successful for two reasons — three. One is that people look down at TV here, so it was kind of a new position. And in a way, you are fixed into one TV generally, but you look around. And I deliberately made the piece so people would look around, but when you watch TV your eyes get fixed. And most likely, the human instinct, the human nerve which controls the eyes' nervous system, is very happy that they are liberated from the one TV position, so that you can look around. And obviously, the optic nerve likes that electronic impulse too, but also likes the natural habitat of looking around. So these two combinations make the people happier to watch *TV Garden*.

And then, of course, many people had thought that television is against ecology, but in this case, television is part of ecology. It had nice color, nice rock n' roll music and it was dark with light flowing from leaves in various greens and various rhythms. People were leaning onto railings in comfortable positions and could talk to their neighbors, whereas when you are watching TV or going to a movie, you don't talk to your neighbor. But in this case, all that discipline is out and you can go in and out at your leisure, like at a John Cage concert. I think that basically speaking, the use of natural leaves and television — that paradox — was important for people.

Well, I think you've said that you're interested in humanizing television and video.

That came from *The Human Use of Human Beings* — a book by Norbert Wiener. He was a fifties scientist — I think he was a genius. Although it was corny, I used the phrase "How to humanize technology" in the press release of the Howard Wise Gallery in 1969. I thought it was very corny. But, for some reason, everybody quoted it and even now they keep quoting it, twenty years after! It was exactly in 1969 that I wrote that press release, anonymously. So, obviously, that rings a bell for many people.

It's probably the reverse of Andy Warhol's claim that he wanted to be a machine, whereas you want machines to be human.

Yes. For some reason this kind of quotation becomes famous, so people must need that.

And what do you think of contemporary culture as a whole? Would you say that we're living in a corny culture?

Contemporary culture? As a whole?

Well, that's a very big question and probably a silly one.

Yes. As you know, I am not Henry Kissinger — I am just a little player. I am generally optimistic about the human future, because of the Soviet crumble. For instance, Milan Knizak, the Czech artist, was arrested three hundred and sixty times. He was in New York when the tanks rolled in 1968, but he chose to return to Czechoslovakia. So he had a hard time. But he is now the president of the Royal Academy there. He was a real vagabond, a fluxus artist. All intellectuals are against technology and all are for ecology, which is very important. But we are inventing more pollution-free technology. Intellectuals don't like cars and television, but we have to admit that compared to Charles Dickens' time, we are living better, no? So we must give up certain parts of our intellectual vanity and look at the good parts of so-called high tech research. For instance, hydrogen power, which nobody's talking about. It seems that people are getting smarter and also that in the Western world people are getting less aggressive. When I look at the art world, they are playing games very harshly, but still they're not as bad as corporate games. Australian, Japanese or Korean artists — or whoever — who are not playing games in New York shouldn't pay so much attention to the New York art world. If you make your own art work and can make a

living, then that's good — if you're happy and don't have to dig ditches.

When I started out to become an artist, I didn't aim or even think about becoming a famous artist. To take fame out of art, well that's the most important thing. Let's make that the closing statement for today. *"To take fame out of the art world."* That was the spirit of fluxus.

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At the end of our discussion the other day, you said that the fluxus movement attempted to take the idea of fame away fom the idea of the artist.

Yes — we hope so! Yes, whether fluxus has any common aesthetic or not, one thing which is remarkable about fluxus is that for thirty years many different egos — twenty, thirty different artists — remained quite good friends and collaborated — which is remarkable. We must be very proud of it, because it is one of the very few anarchistic groups which has succeeded in surviving. Because with anarchists, by definition, the strongest guy becomes the dictator. In our case it didn't happen.

Would you say that there are any special differences between fluxus in America and fluxus in Europe?

Hardly any. For instance, George Macunias, George Brecht, LaMonte Young, Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles were cool people — they wouldn't go out and shout "I am not typical of fluxus." Fluxus is a kind of minimal aesthetic and a minimal aesthetic, by definition, is not easy to succeed in. However, in Europe, we did have a fairly good political base. When George Macunias came, the European neo-dadaist aesthetic already occupied a major forum. So we could incorporate very quickly. American and European fluxus both needed each other. Of course, Europe had its own idea and its more aggressive attitude. It was more arty — or more wet and not quite dry — more dirty and not quite clean. And if we include Joseph Beuys, whom we should include, because he worked with fluxus many times, then we have excellent artistic talent. So we don't owe everything to Americans either.

George Macunias, since he was an international Marxist, always paid attention to Eastern Europe. He was also a Japan-worshipper. He discovered Takeshisa Kosugi, and some unknown Japanese at that time, who became known. He also had a very strong Dutch connection. He had the idea of an "united artists" front, like Karl Marx's idea that all workers should unite. So he was very international from the beginning. There was really no elbowing for national hegemony or personal hegemony. I think that's the record we are most proud of.

Didn't Joseph Beuys argue at one point that fluxus wasn't giving sufficient attention to political and practical problems and lacked a "clearly marked goal"?

Yes, around '65 or '66 he went his own way. But from '62 to '66 he called himself "fluxus" many times, So, knowing what he achieved in the art world, we must be proud of him.

Could you tell me a little more about the development of your work? You started out as a composer, didn't you?

I think I made three performance pieces that can survive. And then I do notation work and video. I wrote two piano pieces which will survive absolutely my death. I'm 58, so you have to think — even healthy Ben Vautier had a heart attack not long ago. Fluxus is still a kind of step-child in the art world, so if we don't care about our legacy, we will be very quickly wiped out by commerical interests. We have to be vigilant about what we did!

Are you carefully trying to document this work?

Not document. My music was not recorded. I refused to record it because you need a certain kind of excited consciousness, and if you record it, it looks very empty. I thought when I was young that it was better not to leave any records, rather than leave a false record. But now I know how to record those things!

Was John Cage one of the people you enjoyed working with?

Of course! His ascetic, ego-less way of life influenced lots of people. Also his kind of west coast, semi-American Indian aesthetic — his un-dense — not dense — aesthetic — influenced many people. I admire these west coast people very much — they are still very underrated. People think they are influenced by oriental zen — that's true too, but I also think they're influenced by electro-magnetism coming from the earth. You know, geographical magnetism, which defines American Indians as involved with an ego-less, nature-bound lifestyle. I think that comes from an electro-magnetic sphere that we haven't discovered yet.

How do you find living in New York? Do you find that conducive to work and survival, or would you prefer to live in California?

I'm in New York two-thirds to three-quarters of the year. The very practical reason is that computer-time is very, very cheap in New York — almost one-quarter of California or one-tenth of Germany. A certain kind of computer I use for video is not only cheaper — its a fraction of the cost elsewhere. The Media-Alliance program finds the empty hours of computers for artists, and uses them as a training ground for the new computer operators of that company. It's a very good mixed economy — capitalism and socialism. I have to be in New York for that reason. There's no other place. Also there's a certain density of communication in New York, so that you meet people in the street and talk. We're all regular human beings so you work harder if there's an incentive. You say, ah, this guy's not really as talented as I am, but he's now getting bigger space in the *New York Times* and you tend to work harder for that week! You have to admit that happens.

What general directions would you like to see video-art move toward yourself? Are there any particular possibilities which interest you, or which you'd encourage?

I'm lucky to have access to high-grade computers very cheaply, which Germans, Japanese or French don't have. So I need to handicap myself

and do some low-tech video. Or I need to make the best use of my resources. Because computers change very quickly, things that we can do this year, we may not do next year, because that computer may be junked! Many of my early technological pieces are unplayable now. So I will continue with what I have access to. Because I've got assistants who are much better than I! For example, I work with Paul Garrin, he's about thirty-one — he's a genius. His computer programming operation is about twenty times better than mine. He may quickly get rich and never have time for me, so I want to make good use of this opportunity to work with him. I also have another assistant my own age in Japan.

Do you enjoy collaborative work?

Yes — with high-tech you have to collaborate. There's no other way. I work not only with these two guys, but when I go to the computer studio, it's the chance of that day that such a person is there. But that doesn't mean that only high-tech art survives. For example, last year I made a Living Theater video tape, *Living with the Living Theater*, which is not high-tech video, but a documentary. As you may know, the highest rated TV show is an anthology of home-video — a thing called America's Funniest Home Video, it's the ultimate documentary. It's the very show that I've been preaching about — everybody makes video!

Turning from high-tech art to low-tech art, are you still doing performances yourself?

I'm getting old, so I conserve energy, you know. I don't want to imitate young people when I'm old, because I didn't imitate old people when I was young.

What do you think of the recent development in multimedia theater? Have you seen any of the productions of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson?

Oh yes — *Einstein on the Beach* was so good — I was really jealous. It's one of the most unforgettable experiences of my lifetime.

I suppose that's not really the sort of work that you'd be tempted to do?

No. It needs a lot of labor and a lot of energy and organization. I did television shows, but I'm not really that sort of a perfectionist.

What about installations? Are you interested in them?

Yes, because they're easier to make. That means there's more net contribution to humanity there. Because the combination of changing space and time on that rather big scale, computing that much information, is like a combination of grand opera and big exhibits. At the Whitney Museum I had a piece called *Image Wall*, 28 feet wide and 20 feet high. And I think that I was able to create in that limited space the sound and the power of a space five times bigger than that.

So it's a sort of condensed art?

Yes — inch by square inch — it has more power, I must say. *Art in America* said it was like the Palladium disco in New York — but the designer of the Palladium said he was influenced by my other work. The Palladium has fifty monitors going up and down. It looks like a spaceship landing and going up — it's great.

What do you think of MTV?

I think MTV is great. The first two or three years of MTV were very good — it was a big cultural phenomenon. And we video-artists must take credit for that, because two key persons in MTV were from our lab. You know, their vice-president in technology was practically my engineer. We had what was called the Television Laboratory. And two key persons — the first program director and the first vice president in technology — came from our organization.

I get the feeling that some of your pieces — such as *TV Buddha* — seem quite contemplative. One's reaction is to look at them for quite a while.

Maybe.

By contrast, MTV usually seems to offer a constant flood of images. Do you have any preference for rapid images or slow images?

Generally, I might make it either very rapid or very slow. For example, *Living with the Living Theater* juxtaposes a very rapid style and normal tempo. It's my newest video piece. We're trying to get airtime for it in New York this summer, but it's not easy.

I think you've also exhibited computer-generated images of various artists like Laurie Anderson. How do they relate to your work?

When I did that big *Image Wall*, which I'm very proud of, I made four big television worldwide global shows, with various degrees of satisfaction. So I was able to attract big name composers and performers in the show. One of them was Laurie Anderson, and as I'd raised the money, I made some computer-varation images from the show. Others included Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Philip Glass and also Rebecca Allen, she's a UCLA computer professor. We used her computer-video from the German rock n' roll group Kraftwerk. It made a real difference to my last piece — it made it really very strong. All the newspapers wrote that it's my work. It's my work, but her work is a very essential part of my work. In a way she works under my name, which is unfair to her. I was more well known, so they associated it with my name, so she was not very happy. I constantly used her name on the screen because she spent eighteen months of full-time work producing four minutes of tape. Can you imagine — that's a very important part of a young woman's life. So it's unfair to use somebody's life-time's work without credit. I didn't make much money either — money isn't really part of it, But the star-system is made so that there are only a few stars.

Fluxus was fighting against that system. We never limited the numbers of fluxus. Anybody who said "I am fluxus," was fluxus. But luckily, not many young people said they were fluxus. So we got back to the start: how to deal with the star-system in the art world. The human being's artistic instinct is very contrary to our idea of the star-system. In a way, being a star physically shortened Joseph Beuys' life. He was a friend of the homeless, so he could not say, "I won't see you." He tried to be a friend of everybody.

When he succeeded, I bet it shortened his life. He had to create artwork and he had this instinct to make more art, but he was constantly talking. I think it's a problem of so-called post-industrial society. Vanity becomes important for everybody. Aristocrats had diamonds — not for any real use but to show they had power. That becomes "I know John Cage," "John Cage knows Henry Kissinger," and so forth. It's this kind of thing — vanity's evil cycle — that's the problem.

Nam June Paik, independently, or in collaboration with scientists, has explored nearly every facet of video art. He is best known for his video sculptures, synaesthetic video tapes and closed-circuit environments. He produced television projects such as *The Medium is the Medium* for WGBH-TV in 1969 and *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* in 1984, a "satellite spectacular" between the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris and WNET-TV New York.

John G. Hanhardt

John Hanhardt interrogates the interrelation between video art and the history of abstraction during our century. His thesis is that a specific body of film and video works has explored the issue of abstraction as a means to define their respective media. This has been done, Hanhardt points out, "by choosing the basic temporality of the moving image and the material basis of the image itself as sites for an epistemological inquiry into the viewing experience, thus exploring the perceptual transaction between spectator and text." Whereas critics like Kuspit and Jameson have seen video as marking an epistemic break with modernism, Hanhardt shows some of the fundamental interconnections between video art and the history of avant-garde abstractionism, for example, as reflected in the work of experimental film-makers like Stan Brakhage.