

# NAM JUNE PAIK

The following interview with the New York-based pioneer video artist, Nam June Paik, took place during his visit to the 8th Biennale of Sydney.

N.Z.: 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?

N.J.P.: That's a good question. But artists - generally speaking, you know - we don't really set out to do any concrete objective. So, in my case, when I make an artwork, we 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 'T.V. 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 then, by that time, Beuys had died, so the information had become more dramatic. So, 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 not profound theories, you know - we have instincts, and then practical methods afterwards. The main channel was normal Beuys, undecorated. And then there were two channels, left and right, where I and Paul Garrin, did some computer processing. So it was really successful like that. It went very well. So that was the inside story.

N.Z.: 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?

N.J.P.: 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 T.V. Wall system. So we used this *Documenta* main channel which went into the T.V. Wall undecorated - you know, natural Beuys - as one channel. The other two channels were decorated, computerized video. So, without the T.V. Wall, the proportion of decorated, computerized tape became bigger. Whereas at *Documenta*, most likely, most people just watched Beuys' undecorated tape, at the centre. They didn't pay attention to the left or right, which is computerized tape. So everything most likely looked more complicated to you.

N.Z.: Which version did you prefer yourself?

N.J.P.: I don't care! But the computerized version was more expensive - that's all I care.

N.Z.: 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 Arts "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?

N.J.P.: Where did he write that?

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

N.J.P.: Yes - the so-called semiotic people, you know, they don't like video!

N.Z.: Why do you think that is?

N.J.P.: I don't know really. I don't understand semiotics. Most likely semiotics is quite

Interviewed

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# INTERVIEW

highly regarded in non-French speaking countries, like England, like 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 kind of Labour-left British people made these kind 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 kind of 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 Ph.D., and gets a teaching job in semiotics, that's fine! However, I have no time for that!

N.Z.: 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?

N.J.P.: You know, we are, as I told you, an artist - and work with intuition - so we have, maybe, a higher rate of metabolism, so we get tired of it very quickly. So when in 1960 I did some sort of performance art, it was very nice at first. You know, I got kind of known in Fluxus circles in Germany. And then I met Beuys, who was not yet known. Then I was approaching thirty-one and I got tired of performance art. At the same time also I needed to make some money and then I started to make some *objects sonores* - you know, sound objects. Then, slowly, slowly, I got attracted to television. So 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.

So then 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 this American country, it was rather easier to raise money in television, because official television was so bad. You said, oh I'm working with television, and everyone was throwing money at you, you know! Also, we have to be written up in the newspapers and 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, they in a way got 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 became 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 has not been profitable here, until three years ago. So I have no reason to hang up into one style. And secondly, all the electronic industry here has progressed very much. Think - at the time when I was doing video, you know, it was 1963, before Sony had even introduced their video recorder. The only home video available was Grundwig's camera. So for the last thirty years video technology has changed. So when new hardware combinations came up, either in home video, or more important, in computer programming in industry, I have more opportunities to try out new combinations of new hardware and new software. Hardware-software combinations are very, very rich, almost inexhaustible.

And 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.

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

N.J.P.: A *tabula rasa*, you know a white paper. Video is a white paper, a *tabula rasa*.

# NAM JUNE PAIK

N.Z. 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?

N.J.P. 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 which was a very successful piece is *TV Garden*, where you see lots of T.V.s among the leaves. That was very successful I think for two reasons, three reasons. One is that people look down at T.V. here, so it was kind of a new position. And in a way, you are fixed into one T.V., generally, but you look around. And I deliberately made it to look around, but when you watched T.V. your eye got fixed. And most likely, the human instinct, the human nerve which is controlling the eyes' nervous system, is very happy that they are liberated from the one T.V. position, so that you can look around. And obviously, of course, the optic nerve likes that electronic impulse too, but also likes the natural habitat of looking around. So these two combinations made the people happier watching *TV Garden*.

And then, of course, many people had thought that television is against ecology, but in this case, television is part of ecology. Then it had nice colour, and nice rock n'roll music, and it was dark, with light flowing from leaves in various greens and various rhythms. And then people were leaning onto railings in kind of comfortable positions, and could talk to their neighbours, whereas when you're watching T.V. or going to a movie, you don't talk to your neighbour. But in this case, all those disciplines are 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.

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

N.J.P. That came from *Human Use of Human Beings* - a book by Norbert Wiener. Norbert Wiener is a fifties scientist - I think he's a genius. Although it was corny, I used the phrase 'How to humanize technology' in the press release of the Howard Wise Gallery, in '69. I thought it was very corny. But, for some reason, everybody quoted it and even now keep quoting it, you know, twenty years after! It was exactly in 1969 that I wrote that press release, anonymously. So, obviously, that rings a bell for many people.

N.Z. It's probably the reverse of Andy

Warhol's claim that he wanted to be a machine, whereas you want machines to be human.

N.J.P. Yes. For some reason this kind of quotation becomes famous, so obviously people need that.

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

N.J.P. Contemporary culture? As a whole?

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

N.J.P. Yes. As you know, we are not Henry Kissinger - we are 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 '68, but he chose to go over 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. And then, the President of Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis, he was the best friend of George Macunias - they were class-mates in grade school. His father and Landsbergis' father were best friends. And so, obviously, although our Liberal Left betted on Karl Marx too long, and found they bet on the wrong horse, the horse of liberalism also won, so that's very nice. Of course all intellectuals are against technology, and all for ecology, which is very important. But in a way, we are inventing more pollution-free technology. We 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 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 up the ditches!

When we started out becoming an artist, we 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.