FAR AND WIDE

BY LANFRANCO ACETI AND OMAR KHOLEIF
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This catalog is a LEA production with FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology). It follows the first major retrospective on Nam June Paik in the UK with an exhibition and conference organized by Tate Liverpool and FACT. The exhibition Nam June Paik, December 17, 2010 to March 13, 2011, was curated by Sook-Kyung Lee and Susanne Rennert.

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What else can be said of Nam June Paik and his artistic practice that perhaps has not been said before? My guess is not very much... and while I write my first lines to this introduction I realize that it is already sounding like a classic Latin ‘invocatio,’ or request to assistance from the divinity, used by writers when having to tread complex waters.

Nam June Paik and Marshall McLuhan are two of the numerous artists and authors who inspired my formative years. If one cannot deny Paik’s love of play and satire imbued in popular culture and used to disguise a real intellectual and conceptual approach to the artwork, one cannot easily be discounted McLuhan’s strong advocacy of the power of technology. He has called his most recent installation a “post-video project,” which continues the articulation of the kinetic image through the use of laser energy projected onto scrims, cascading water, and smoke-filled sculptures. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Paik’s work shows us that the cinema and video are fusing with electronic and digital media into new fields and areas.

In the following decades, Paik was to transform virtually all aspects of video through his innovative sculptures, installations, single-channel videotapes, productions for television, and performances. As a teacher, writer, lecturer, and advisor to foundations, he continually informed and transformed 20th century contemporary art.

The construction of this hybrid book, I hope, would have pleased Paik for it is a strange construction, collage and recombination, of memories, events, places and artworks. In this volume collide previous events, past memories, a conference and an exhibition, all in the name of Nam June Paik, the artist who envisaged the popular future of the world of media.

Taking risks, particularly taking risks with one’s own artistic practice, may also mean to risk a downward spiral; and Paik did not seem to shy away from artworks’ challenging productions and made use of varied and combined media, therefore re-defining the field of art and placing himself at the center of it.

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The word laser is actually an acronym; it stands for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. Nam June Paik undertook a residency with Bell labs, who were the inventors of the laser. It was here that he created his 1966 piece Digital Experiment for Bell Labs, exploring the stark contrast between digital and analogue and his fascination with technology in its material form. His work with Bell set the precedent for artists and musicians to start using technology creatively in a new way.
This catalog became a tool to mirror and perhaps ‘transmediate’ the laser installation “made of a huge green laser that [...] comprise[d]” FACT with Tate Liverpool. Travelling 800 metres as the crow flies, the beam of light “[...] made” a symbolic connection between the two projects. This connection could be seen as the continuity of publishing volumes as in the long tradition of the journal, but also as a producer of books and catalogs that cater for the larger community of artists that create bastard art or bastard science for that matter.

The catalog is in itself a work that reflects the laser connections, the speed of contacts, the possibilities of connecting a variety of media as easily as connecting people from all parts of the world. In this phantasmagoria of connections it almost seems possible to visualize the optic cables and WIFI that like threads join the people and the media of McLuhan’s “global village” and the multiplicities of media that Paik invited us to use to create what I would like to define as the contemporary “bastard art.”

Lanfranco Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kisa Gallery

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

For me personally this book represents a moment of further transformation of LEA, not only as a journal publishing volumes as in the long tradition of the journal, but also as a producer of books and catalogs that cater for the larger community of artists that create bastard art or bastard science for that matter.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

7. Art as a bastard is interpreted, in this passage, as something of uncertain origiens that cannot be easily defined and neatly encapsulated in a definition or framework. “Art is often a bastard; the parents of which we do not know” Nam June Paik as cited in Florence de Meredieu, Digital and Video Art, trans. Richard Elliott (Edinburgh: Chambers, 2005), 143.
The Future Is Now?

Far and Wide: Nam June Paik is an edited collection that seeks to explore the legacy of the artist Nam June Paik in contemporary media culture. This particular project grew out of a collaboration between FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, and the Tate Liverpool, who in late 2010-2011 staged the largest retrospective of the artist’s work in the UK. The first since his death, it also showcased the panorama of Paik’s career work in Europe. The project, staged across both sites, also included a rich public programme.

Of these, two think tank events, *The Future is Now: Media Arts, Performance and Identity after Nam June Paik* and *The Electronic Superhighway: Art after Nam June Paik*, brought together a forum of leading artists, performers and thinkers in the cross-cultural field together to explore and dissect the significance of Paik within broader cultural context.

This programme was developed by a large group of collaborators. The discursive programme was produced by FACT in partnership with Caitlin Page, then Curator of Public Programmes at Tate. One of our primary research concerns was exploring how Paik’s approach to creative practice fragmented existing ideological standpoints with the visual arts as a hermetically sealed, self-referential canon. Drawing from Bruno Latour, Norman M. Klein and Jay David Bolter, we were keen to examine how artists now possess a unique form of agency – one that is simultaneously singular and collective, enabled by the cross-embedded nature of the current technological field.

These positions are explored throughout the reader and our programme and in this special edition of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac. Here, the artist who goes by the constructed meme of the “Famous New Media Artist, Jeremy Bailey,” tracks Rosalind Krauss’s influence and transposes her theoretical approach towards video art to the computer, examining the isolated act of telepresence augmented reality performance. Roy Ascott gives a nod to his long-standing interest in studying the relationship between cybernetics and consciousness. Eminent film and media curator, John G. Hanhardt honors us with a first-hand historical framework, which opens the collection of transcripts, before further points of departure are developed.

Researchers Jamie Allen, Gabriella Galati, Tom Schofield, and Emile Deveraux used these frameworks retrospectively to extrapolate parallels, dissonances and points of return to the artist’s work. Deveraux and Allen focus on specific pieces. Deveraux discusses Paik and Shuya Abe’s Raster Manipulation Unit a.k.a. “The Wobbulator” (1970), while Allen surveys a series of tendencies in the artist’s work, exploring broader concerns. Schofield considers the use of data in contemporary artwork, while Galati explores the problematic association with the virtual museum being archived online.

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It is worth mentioning at this stage that there were many who joined in contributing to this process, who did not partake formally in this reader or the public programme. Dara Birnbaum, Tony Conrad, Yoko Ono, Cory Arcangel, Laurie Anderson, Ken Hakuta, Marisa Olson, all served as sources of guidance, whether directly or indirectly through conversations, e-mails, and contacts.

Still, there remain many lingering questions that are not answered here, many of which were posed both by our research and organizational processes. The first and most straightforward question for Caitlin and I was: why is it so difficult to find female artists who would be willing to contribute or speak on the record about Paik’s influence? It always seemed that there were many interested parties, but so very few who were eager to commit to our forum.

The second and perhaps more open-ended question is: what would Nam June Paik have made of the post-internet contemporary art scene? Would Paik have been an advocate of the free distribution of artwork through such platforms as UbuWeb and YouTube? Would he have been accepting of it, if it were ephemeral, or would he have fought for the protection of licensing? This question remains: could an artist charged with bringing so much openness to the visual arts, have been comfortable with the level of openness that has developed since his death? There is much that remains unanswered, and that, we can only speculate. Far and Wide does not offer a holistic biography or historical overview of the artist’s work or indeed its authority. Rather, it serves to extract open-ended questions about how Nam June Paik’s influence may have travelled, and to consider what influence it has yet to wield.

Omar Kholeif
Editor and Curator
FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology

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John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Shuya Abe; opening of the Paik exhibition, Galeria Bonino, New York, November 25, 1971. Photograph © Tom Hae. Used with permission.
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LaserLink Peter Appleton, 2010. View from FACT (Foundation for Art Creative Technology) to Tate Liverpool. Photograph by Stephen King. © Estate of Nam June Paik. Used with permission.

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