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Nam June Paik predicted the Internet, YouTube and Instagram. But he was more interesting as an artist than as a prophet.

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Roman Mensing's "Nam June Paik, Yawning." (© Roman Mensing/Artdoc.de)

Artists are not prophets, except occasionally by dumb luck. Just because they explore new ways of doing things doesn't mean they can see into the future. To romanticize them as seers — as when, for instance, we praise Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein for supposedly anticipating how Stein would age — is to misunderstand their role. The job of the artist is not to foretell the future; it is to see the present with fresh eyes.

Okay. But then you have the case of Nam June Paik. The Korean American artist (1932-2006) is the subject of an international traveling retrospective — the first major show since his death — at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Oct. 3.

The idea that Paik was uncannily prescient is particularly hard to shake. Widely regarded as the founder of video art, Paik (pronounced "pake") famously coined the term "electronic superhighway." He is also routinely credited with imagining early versions of the Internet, the smartphone, Google Glass, YouTube and Instagram.

All that — to the extent that it's true (and I think it may be a little tendentious) — is impressive. And yet eulogizing Paik as a prophet is a way to avoid the more germane question: Was he any good as an artist? And, if he was, what was the nature of his success?

Born in Seoul, Paik began making video art in the early 1960s. In 1950, in response to the war in Korea, his father, who owned a successful textile manufacturing firm, took his family to Hong Kong and then Japan. As a child, Paik trained as a classical pianist. He wrote his undergraduate thesis on the modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg while studying aesthetics at the University of Tokyo.

Paik met the experimental composers John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen after moving from Japan to West Germany. Cage's embrace of chance as an aesthetic principle had a profound effect on Paik, as did the composer's attempts to break down the distinction between conventional music and other sounds.

In early examples of what proved to be a lifelong commitment to collaboration, Paik filmed short performances that combined simple operations (buttoning and unbuttoning his jacket; pouring flour and water over his head) with music by Stockhausen and by the composer's future wife, Mary Bauermeister.

"Paik mit Rasierschaum, Originale, Köln (Paik with Shaving Cream, Originale, Cologne)," 1961. (Collection Archiv Bauermeister/© Peter Fischer). "Record Shishkebab," 1963/1979. (Arter Collection, Istanbul; Flufoto/© Estate of Nam June Paik)

Some of Paik's ideas for performances didn't need to be carried out: "Theater for Poor Man," for instance, consisted of the following instructions:

"Summon a taxi, position yourself inside, request a long ride, OBSERVE THE METER."

Conceits like these were classic Fluxus japes. Inspired by Dada, Fluxus was an international movement founded in the 1960s that sought to break down the distinctions between art and life. George Maciunas, the group's guiding spirit, believed "everything is art and anyone can do it."

Many of the Fluxus artists had been displaced from their homelands by war. Paik had fled Korea. Maciunas had fled his native Lithuania as a child ahead of the advancing Red Army. Yoko Ono, another original member, endured terrible privations in wartime Japan. They tackled big themes — the existence of God, the purpose of art, freedom, sex, time, nothingness. But they did so with refreshing irreverence. Cage was a bridging figure between Fluxus and the thinking developed in

the 1950s at North Carolina's Black Mountain College by Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham (all of whom ended up collaborating with Paik).

"Exposition of Music- Electronic Television," 1963. (Don Ross/San Francisco Museum of Modern Art/Gift of the Hakuta family/© Estate of Nam June Paik)

Early on, Paik carved out a niche for himself working with visual and audio technologies. "Exposition of Music-Electronic Television," his breakthrough 1963 show in Wuppertal, West Germany, featured a room of manipulated television sets, and he continued to treat TV sets as sculptural objects for the rest of his life.

Like the pop artists' attitudes toward mass consumer culture, Paik's attitude towardaudiovisual and early computer technology was pointedly ambivalent. In the same way that Cage composed music for "prepared pianos" — instruments with bolts, screws, mutes and rubber erasers placed on the strings to alter or silence the sound — Paik deliberately damaged and even gutted TVs.

"Magnet TV," 1965. (Whitney Museum of American Art/Purchased with funds from Dieter Rosenkranz/© Estate of Nam June Paik). "Merce/Digital," 1988. (Collection Roselyne Chroman Swig, San Francisco/© Estate of Nam June Paik).

When he broke down television sets and tape recorders, splashing paint on their exteriors and using magnets to mess with their operations, it was hard to tell whether he was expressing a humanist's impulse to destroy technologies that threatened our humanity or celebrating their as-yet-unfathomed potential. At times, he was like a serene Buddha, simply smiling at it all. Accepting, not criticizing.

Paik's most famous work — "TV Buddha" — has been installed in the first room at SFMOMA. It shows an 18th-century wooden sculpture of a seated Buddha, which Paik purchased at an antique store. The Buddha is being filmed by a CCTV camera. The live feed appears on a spheroid TV that looks like an astronaut's helmet and directly faces the Buddha.

"TV Buddha," 1974. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam/© Estate of Nam June Paik) "TV Buddha" from another angle. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam/© Estate of Nam June Paik/Photo: Katherine Du Thiel)

"TV Buddha" presents a standoff between spirituality and technology — and between past and future — that is also a feedback loop, implying a mutual dependence. It embodies a philosophical conundrum, like a Zen koan. (One of the precepts of Zen, of course, is: "Kill the Buddha.") I absolutely love it.

It is such a key work that I would like to have seen it given a room to itself. Instead, "TV Buddha" appears in a gallery crowded with other pieces, busy with didactics. Most of the rest of the show is similarly hectic. The idea, perhaps, is to re-create the frenetic visual and informational environment to which Paik was so attuned and to which we are all groggy, punch-drunk heirs.

But the style of display tends to drown out the side of Paik I'm most drawn to: his attempts — sometimes halfhearted, sometimes almost desperately sincere — to recoup some form of inner life from the boiling broth of noise and distraction in which we find ourselves plunged every morning — often before we've even looked out the window or made it to the bathroom.

"TV Garden" (1974). (Peter Tijhuis/Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf/© Estate of Nam June Paik)

Major Paik works from the 1970s and ’80s include a garden dismally strewn with 49 TV sets and several delightful anthropomorphic sculptures made from lashed-together TVs. Some pieces were intended to be interactive, while others were originally animated by live performances, so one often has to read the wall texts to grasp what they were about.

If that’s a drag, the star-studded cast of Paik’s collaborators keeps you engaged: Besides those already mentioned, it includes Lou Reed, Issey Miyake, Allen Ginsberg, Keith Haring, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Joseph Beuys and Peter Gabriel. There’s also a whole section devoted to Paik’s long-term collaboration with the cellist Charlotte Moorman. Their partnership, combining avant-garde music and performance art with technology, became a media sensation thanks to Moorman’s willingness — underwritten by her sardonic, sensation-seeking intelligence — to shed her clothes.

“Charlotte Moorman With TV Cello and TV Eyeglasses,” 1971. (Peter Wenzel Collection, Witten, Germany/© 2021 Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society/Paula Cooper Gallery). Nam June Paik sitting in “TV Chair” in 1976. (© FriedrichRosenstiel, Köln/Cologne, Zentralarchiv für deutsche internationale Kunstmarktforschung ZADIK/Universität zu Köln)

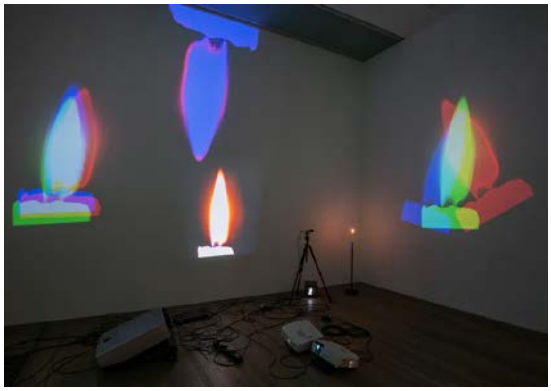
Set against search engines, cloud computing, frictionless commerce and social media algorithms, Paik’s work can feel a bit hapless and passe. That’s the problem with making art with the latest technologies: The medium quickly comes to seem almost comically outdated.

And yet the very earnestness with which Paik tried to graft new technologies onto varieties of spiritual awareness chimes with a paradox I lately detect at the heart of today’s big tech. Even as Silicon Valley is conscious of how profoundly and rapidly its inventions are changing society, it seems to have grasped that it is not fully in control. Having lived the Mark Zuckerberg philosophy of “move fast and break things,” there are signs that some in the industry want to slow down, reappraise and possibly even reconnect with things spiritual. Paik found elegant ways to articulate this apparent contradiction, in the process reminding us that tensions between technology and spiritual life predate the Internet.

If Paik was good — and I think he was — it was generally in a shut-your-eyes-and-hope-you-hit-the-bull’s-eye kind of way. He would have accepted this; randomness was built into his aesthetic philosophy.

“Sistine Chapel,” 1993. (Andria Lo/© Estate of Nam June Paik)

Near the end of the show, the curators — Rudolf Frieling and Sook-Kyung Lee, assisted by Andrea Nitsche-Krupp — have re-created an installation, “Sistine Chapel,” that first appeared at the 1993 Venice Biennale. It’s essentially a mini-Paik retrospective: an audiovisual collage of footage from his past videos. Forty projectors bombard the gallery’s walls and ceiling, switching at random between four videos. The whole intolerable spectacle — an ironic, spiritually deflating take on the sublimity of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel — is complemented by booming audio. It’s an early example of a whole genre of deliberately hectic, overwhelming installation art, and it takes serious willpower to stop yourself from fleeing.



“One Candle (Candle Projection),” 1989. (Jon Huffman/© Estate of Nam June Paik)

Astonishing, then, to move from this, the show’s penultimate gallery, into a much smaller room that feels like a private side chapel or monk’s cell installed with “One Candle,” from 1989. Also known as “Candle Projection,” it consists of a single flickering candle — a real candle — filmed by a CCTV camera simultaneously projected in several places onto the walls. Each projection is separated into the basic video color spectrum of red, green and blue. In contrast with “Sistine Chapel,” most of the wall space and ceiling are left blank.

The effect of peace and mystery — and of peace within the mystery of a reality permanently mediated by technology — is beguiling. I found myself thinking of something Rabbi Nachman of Breslov once said, and which I first read in Peter Matthiessen’s “The Snow Leopard”:

“As the hand held before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so the little earthly life hides from the glance the enormous lights and mysteries of which the earth is full, and he who can

draw it away from before his eyes, as one draws away a hand, beholds the great shining of the inner worlds."

Are the screens to which we are all addicted equivalent to Nachman's "hand held before the eye"? Or did I have the analogy all wrong? I almost felt an epiphany coming on. But then the candle flickered in triplicate, and it eluded me.