

# Metropolis M



## Archival activations — the writings by Nam June Paik

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**We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik** (2019) terminates a long silence in publishing primary sources related to Nam June Paik's work. The volume sheds new light on Paik's artistic-philosophical project which is currently on view in the traveling exhibition *Nam June Paik: The Future is Now* soon to reopen at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

What does it mean to work across media and genres utilizing cutting edge technologies to produce artistic work? What does it mean to compose works

“unusually” rather than to follow a pre-imagined ideal? Can assembling the world from found materials, embracing chance and error, and tinkering with what is already given become an alternative to the conventional modes of creation?

Nam June Paik is rightly acknowledged as a pioneer and propagator of the use of new technologies to generate works that expanded our understanding of what an artwork is, what it does, and how it perseveres over time despite its technological transformations. Notably an action performer and grant experimenter of television in his early years— his emergent intermedia practice owed much to his musical and aesthetic studies in Japan and Munich as well as to his involvement in the avant-garde and electronic music and Fluxus in Germany— Paik spent most of his adult time in New York adapting the language of video and television as an artistic means. The works he created, and those which rest dormant in archival sketches, writerly drafts, and visual mock-ups, speak to his immense ambition and will to experiment with the potentialities offered by then little-explored electronic media.

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Paik ranged widely in his selection of materials and the interdisciplinarity of his activities. He challenged the

common understanding of an artwork as a physical object and how an artist might relinquish uniqueness and singularity in favor of producing many versions of his works. Among Paik's greatest innovations—and among the greatest challenges to traditional collecting, conservation, and presentation—was his rejection of the singular authentic object, in support of which he habitually released work in numerous versions, variations, and clones. Moreover, Paik's open-ended creative process allowed for modifications and interventions long after his artworks began their life as part of a museum collection—an issue that became increasingly familiar, if not problematic, to the custodians of the so-called “new media.”

Reading through Paik's collected writings, one gets a chance to interpret his works on display in a new light. For instance, Paik's instructions and scores reprinted in this volume render their realization—the physical manifestations of his artworks—repeatable by liberating them from the obligation to persist in one ongoing, unique manifestation. At least two installations on view at the Stedelijk follow this logic: *TV Garden*, 1974 (a techno-ecological garden featuring a video *Global Groove*) and *TV Buddha*, 1974 (a minimalistic, sculptural ensemble including a Buddha statue gazing at its televisual image displayed in real-time on a monitor via a closed-circuit video). A reading of certain media installations in light of their historical-ontological proximity to conceptual art allows to build a parallel between these conceptual tendencies, score-based works, and installation instructions. Rather than limit these artworks to the conditions of installation art—space, viewer, temporality—we can approach them as intrinsically conceptual works: based on a concept conveyed in instructions or a score and executed by others in an extension of the notion of collaboration. This “execution by the others” imposes a new challenge on conservation and curation. Whereas curators appear to enjoy increasing interpretative freedom in executing these works—for instance, making the curatorial decision to reinstall *TV Garden* along the ramp of the Guggenheim Museum or in a more

confined, rectangular space of K21 in Düsseldorf—conservators often remain trapped in the convention of fidelity to the material and its initial occurrence.

Strikingly, *TV Buddha*, which was to be replaced by a similar, less antique statue and a monitor during a renovation at the Stedelijk, had to remain in its physical form as a material “original.” On the other side of this spectrum, the recent manifestation of Paik’s multimedia work *Sistine Chapel*, 1993, at Tate Modern functions today as a free curatorial interpretation rather than a genuine reconstruction (that is, one that follows the reliance on the sameness of materials, technologies and the parameters of time and space).





The MIT volume of 445 pages extends these objectual observations to the realm of the written word (mainly in, or translated into, English—a wish allegedly expressed by Paik). The readers encounter Paik's vivid intellect in a variety of notated formats and forms: From “speculative writings” that entail Paik’s canonical texts such as “Exposition of Music” (1963), “Afterllude to the Exposition of Experimental Television” (1963) or “Electronic Video Recorder” (1965) to less familiar haiku-style scores, work and performance instructions, scripts and plans for new projects, commentaries and letters to his friends and mentors.

The writings reveal Paik as an intensely political person. Filtered through his intellectually and geographically nomadic, always questioning and critical attitude, his commentaries on culture and politics create a fascinating picture of the time in which he was active. His modest, unassuming manner and a charismatic willingness to collaborate and share credit afforded him opportunities to realize large-dimensional projects, such as his intricate video walls and complex

satellite pieces. As we move through the book, the editors offer introductions and commentaries on Paik's projects that help contextualize the original sources.

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The book does not amend Paik's often idiosyncratic formulations, his wandering between various languages and symbolic systems of language and notated music. The many pages of reprinted documents provide a fascinating insight into Paik's restless spirit, his preferred modes of inscription and annotation, his circling around concepts and their active reworking on the page often marked by endless amendments.

Although the volume credits other sources, such as, among others, the archives Sohm and Beuys and the papers of the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt, it largely—and successfully—builds upon materials drawn from Nam June Paik Papers. Since 2009 housed at the Smithsonian American Art Museum as a gift of the Nam June Paik Estate, this collection is notably the richest source of archival materials spanning almost the entirety of Paik's oeuvre. Working through Paik Papers in the fall of 2019 somewhat simultaneously with the appearance of Paik's collected writings, I glimpsed a world of his creative process shaped by a restless mind. Instructions, plans, screenplays, scripts, invoices, and endless lists presented a vast realm of Paik's activities impossible to order in any representable, finished register. One of the

benefits that comes from the great effort of selective ordering such idiosyncratic, versatile life project like Paik's into a collected volume is that it offers an apparently complete, even if only momentary, overview of his intellectual effort. This non-definite, assembled result is an attempt to "mount a few new antennae on the tower of Paik's oeuvre as signals to others," as Zinman aptly puts it. The editors master this task in an elegant manner providing the reader with an unprecedented opportunity to delve into Paik's scripted cosmos.





Writings based on archival sources, their selection, assemblage and ordering from the chaos of multiple spaces and loci, are never objective, impartial or unbiased. Like an interpreter of a musical score, a scholar, curator or for that matter any activator of these materials actualizes the archive according to his or her interests, background, education and knowledge. The archive is never neutral; it not only reflects the episteme of the times of its activation, but it also further determines it. The archive—understood here as a totality of materials left behind by an artist—conceals as much as it reveals. Certain areas of knowledge cannot be activated for political, social or economic reasons. Various realms of the archive remain unavailable due to geographical or personal constraints.

In *We Are in Open Circuits*, certain motifs in Paik's writings reflect earlier thoughts or act as "protentions" (in Husserlian sense) to those yet to be explored. This logic of activating and working through the concepts by using what is already given is also intrinsic to artworks such as *TV Buddha*, nota bene the first of Paik's work to enter a public collection – the Stedelijk. Paik initially conceived *TV Buddha* to fill a gap in one of his exhibitions at the Bonino Gallery in New York. When the Stedelijk museum acquired it, the former director of the museum Edy de Wilde asked that the piece be unique. "I have too many new ideas to devote my time for the repetition of an old work," Paik responded. In the end, *TV Buddha* spawned perhaps the largest series of works in Paik's oeuvre. We don't mind—one simply can't get enough.

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*NAM JUNE PAIK: THE FUTURE IS NOW* is at view at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam until August 23, 2020. The show will re-open on June 1.  
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