

Author Massimiliano Mollona

Source *NJP Reader #8 Future Museum: Public to Commons*, pp.165-180

Publisher Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

ARTCOMMONS. The Legacy of Nam June Paik for the Museum of the Commons

Colophon

Editor Sooyoung Lee

Translation Hyungju Woo, Insoo Lee

Designer Kyuho Kim

Published on 31 December 2018

ARTCOMMONS

The Legacy of Nam June Paik for the Museum of the Commons

Massimiliano Mollona

Massimiliano Mollona is a writer, filmmaker and anthropologist with a multidisciplinary background in economics and anthropology. His work focuses on the relationships between art and political economy. He conducted extensive fieldworks in Italy, UK, Norway and Brazil, looking at the relationships between economic development and political activism through participatory and experimental film and curatorial projects. His practice is situated at the intersection of pedagogy, art and activism. Mollona was the director of the Athens Biennale (2015-17), one of the artistic directors of the Bergen Assembly (2017); co-founder of the Laboratory for the Urban Commons (LUC) based in Athens and the initiator of the ongoing project Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI) supported by Foundation for Arts Initiative (FfAI). In Goldsmiths, he teaches the courses: Political and Economic Anthropology; Ethnographic Film and Cinema Studies and Art and Anthropology.

In this text I discuss the relationships between art and politics particularly, how artistic movements come to embody and reproduce the conditions of life under capitalism but also how they can transcend them and prefigure, pre-enact and conjure up post-capitalist forms of valorization of life. I argue that the work of Nam June Paik is pioneering for its radical commitment to a post-capitalist anthropology - non-anthropocentric, relational, and non-Eurocentric - and to forms of art commoning based on expanded media ecologies, distributed agency, common media infrastructures and human/non-human solidarity.

In *Feedback Television against Democracy* art historian David Joselit discusses the uneasy relationship between visual art and late capitalism. The mass circulation of images in cinema in the 1920s and on TV during the cold war era functioned as a typical tool of state propaganda, capitalist consumption and 'mass distraction' (Krakauer 1930). Indeed, the curious by-product of the mass circulation and mass consumption of images under capitalism is the widespread iconophobia that images trigger with their magical spells, especially among some

intellectual circles. For instance, in *On Photography* (1977) the US cultural critic Susan Sontag famously argues that images objectify and spectacularize reality and that their growth and limitless expansion reflects the ideology of unlimited growth of capitalism which is also responsible for the destruction of the earth and animal species. Against the capitalist dogma of unlimited growth Sontag argues for ‘conservationist media ecology’ in which the flow of production and circulation of images is heavily regulated. Nam June Paik was also interested in the relationship between image circulation and commodification under capitalism and in forms of media and human ecologies. Unlike Sontag, he was committed to the open circulation of images. He believed that art could challenge their commodity status by diverting and disrupting their open flows away from the circuits of capital.

As member of the *fluxus* movement, Paik’s early career was shaped by an interest in process based and performative events which, in exploring indeterminacy, inter-modality and irreproducibility, went against the grain the commercial art system. Fluxus was an early form of institutional critique inspired by Kaprow’s famous Happenings – ritualised forms of social interactions and games taking place outside the museum often in the form of secretive meetings among initiates. Fluxus artists operated in social interstices, at the margin of capitalism, refusing the grand narrative of political engagement and class struggle and seeking to build transient and site specific communities and day-to-day micro utopias.

In parallel to the micro-utopias of fluxus, ‘artists-run spaces¹’ proposed a more radical refusal of mainstream institutions and of retreat from both public museums and the art market. In seeking spaces of self-determination, shared practices, horizontalism and artisanal production artist-run spaces were products of the 1960s counter-culture cast in opposition to the hierarchic rationality of industrial monopoly capitalism. The paradox, according to Detterer and Mannucci, was that these non-profit organizations and cooperatives

1 Printed Matter and Franklin Furnace in New York; Zona in Florence; Western Front in Vancouver; Art Metropole in Toronto; La Mamelle in San Francisco and Artpool in Budapest.

were run like flexible capitalist firm, the equivalent of today's Silicon Valley startups and somehow prefigured the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005)

Indeed, these new artistic practices which proposed the retreat from the state and from the market and were small in scale, transient, ritualistic, spiritual, random, collective, grassroots and self-determined reflected the broader political economy of the 1970s. Fordism and monopoly capitalism – the heavy machines of capitalism – had broken down, imploded in multiple fragments of global commodity chains, deregulated capital flows and small scale and flexible sweatshops. The artistic fetishization of small-scale communities – 'the clan', 'the collective' and 'the team' – reflected this new cycle of capital reorganization. Thus, the new artistic imaginary of the 1970s at best inspired the middle class retreat from society - experiments of immediatism, urban nomadism and communitarianism. But more problematically, it prefigured and pre-enacted a new phase of institutional consolidation associated with the new spirit of capitalism of neoliberalism.

Under post-Fordism value is linked to circulation, finance and speculation and not to production or real economy. Here the enemy is not mass-production or the deadly rationality of corporate life but the general intellect - a new creative and horizontal capital, which outflows the factory and colonizes all aspects of life – especially reproduction and consumption. Nam June Paik had anticipated the condition of art production under post-industrial capitalism. He understood that in such context artistic value comes not from production but from post-production and circulation – sampling, D-Jeying, collaging and electronic disturbance. He was aware that there is no 'outside to capitalism' and that this can only be disrupted and 'hacked' from within based on a radically new anthropological imagination. Particularly, he conceived of video production as a social technique aimed at reframing the commercial media market into an expanded gift-giving network.

In 1974 Paik writes «Media Planning for the Post-industrial Society – The 21st Century is now only 26 years away» as Director of art programme for the Rockefeller Foundation. In the light of the

global energy crisis and of the ongoing ecological disruption modern societies had to transition into the post-industrial economy. The media sector will have a central role in the post-industrial economy. Post-industrial societies will both respect and valorise nature as well as human creativity. In fact, with its low level of automation the media industry will create unlimited employment of skilled workers and replace the boring and de-humanizing industrial labour. He writes: 'People will take pleasure again in their work.'

We know that Paik's utopian vision of the media sector was misjudged and that the alienating labour process of the industrial assembly line was replicated in the cultural and media industries creating equally alienating immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1992).

Nam June Paik wrote this text in the same year sociologist Daniel Bell wrote *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*. We know that Daniel Bell imagined the post-industrial society with a conservative agenda – to destroy the working-class, curb trade-unionism, fragment production across north-south and implement a global financial infrastructure. Paik's vision of the electronic super highways "*connecting New York with Los Angeles by means of an electronic telecommunication network that operates in strong transmission ranges, via continental satellites, wave guides, bundled coaxial cables and laser beam fiber optics*" points to a different direction than Bell's neoconservative utopia.

Paik was interested in the new skills of the post-industrial artists. In their ability to contaminate the circuits of the commercial TV; transforming the logic of 'close circuits' into to that of 'open circuit. (Joselit, *ibid*: 29) thus, hacking and imploding capitalism from within. In fact, Paik was part of a thriving video community of artists and activists in New York. In the pamphlet 'Information Equal Revolution' Joe Weintraub an artist close to Paik writes:

'There exist right now the most powerful information network ever created by man on the planet. I am talking about the television. It is controlled by establishment creeps who are using to keep the masses in a state of moronic amnesia. But their grotesque Disneyland of the mind is being threatened by

underground video and the creeps are getting nervous'

The power of the media artist in disrupting, hacking and re-framing capitalist images is evident in Paik's video "*Waiting for Commercials*." – a humorous compendium of Japanese TV commercials. The short film begins with black-and-white images of a middle-aged male saying: 'the age of the spectator had ended in our present time. For instance, television is an X-ray. Not a pictorial form. Not a visual form. People get inside things. They get involved and go inside themselves.'" Then an abrupt cut lead us into the phantasmatic and coloured world of a Japanese Pepsi-Cola television commercial. The contrast is uncanny and eerie. Is the capitalist commercial reflective or subversive of the patriarchal voice we hear the beginning? What lies below the commercial's shiny and colourful surface?



Nam June Paik, *Waiting for the Commercials*, 1966-1972

Below I sketch three strands of Paik's anthropological imagination.

1. VIRAL AESTHETICS/MARKET COMMODITIES TURNED (POISONED) GIFTS

Nam June Paik role of activist artist emerges in his notion of "video common markets" intended as de-commodified visual circuits that break open the enclosures of capitalism and bring together different social constituencies – cutting across divisions of race, gender and generation. Think of his collaborations with Fred Barzyk with WGBH public television in Boston:

The effort to bring black and white children together by means of schooling is going awry. Desegregation strategies have become questionable. But television power can help achieve integration and understanding, and it has the added advantage that it happens over the air, unhampered by our polluted and complicated earth. I wonder what would happen if two day care centers for pre-schoolers, one in a black neighbourhood and the other in a white one, would be able to hear and see each other by means of a two-way cable television set-up, so that the children of the two different cultures could start to play with one another over the air waves, without having to cope with stressful bus trips and their negative side effects. (Paik, 1973)

Paik's notion of "video common market" closely resembles the anthropological notion of the gift. When western colonialists travelled to the south they witnessed societies whose economy was not based on money but on free circulation of objects without value. Because of the care they put in the circulation of useless objects colonialists called these societies primitive. In fact, In his essay on *The Gift* in 1922 anthropologist Marcel Mauss shows that these networks of reciprocal exchanges and free circulation of objects fostered egalitarian social structures and sustainable communities. Unlike the capitalist market, which turns objects into commodities (fetishes with the power of give or take life away) and humans into anonymous economic agents, gift-giving develops a political economy of life in which capital, intended as social creativity, is evenly produced and shared. Moreover Mauss shows that modes of circulation are as important as modes of production because they reveal and valorize the relational nature of objects and the social relations attached to them. In this sense, 'video common market' is a vision of a *new media infrastructure where artistic images circulate in-between the circuits of art and the circuits of commercial television and in so doing, create a new form of relational value.*

Besides, in the late 1970s in parallel to the development of the financial economy, the art market was booming. The commercial artist was cast as the 'author' of original and unique artwork valorised according the capitalist economy of scarcity. Whereas in Paik art images

proliferate out of an economy of excess erasing the very distinction between art and life. This erasure is often ironical and playful, combining Zen Buddhism and the Duchampian readymade. Indeed, Paik considered video as the heir of the Duchampian readymade. In an interview in 1975 he declares: “Marcel Duchamp was genius he made everything except video. He made a large front door and a very small exit and that exit is video”. (Joselit, *ibid*: 51)

But unlike Duchamp’s subjective ready-mades, Paik’s ready-mades consisted of “electrons and protons” – they are “sub-objective”, trans-corporeal and biopolitical. Joselit calls such contamination of life by art, such queering of commercial TV ‘viral aesthetics’ (*ibid*: 48).

This viral aesthetics is evident in *Video Tape Study No 3*(1967–69). The film begins with a blurred image. On a heavy background noise we hear a distant voice ‘ladies and gentleman as president of the united states....’ Then the spectral image of President Lyndon Johnson appears shaking through flashes of electronical disturbance. The anchorman says: ‘it seems to me that we are going backward in this country towards a more segregated racial system rather than one of real integration, in this country. What do you think?’ the answer is confident, marked by emphatic elliptical endings. But we cannot understand it because of the sound disturbance. The anchorman continues: ‘there is really no cure for serious diseases of our body.... there is no serious cure for the serious disease of our body politics... do you think that your diseases...’ President Johnson’s answer is muffled by the noise. But we can hear ‘yes...every time we make some progress..... progress creates new problems.. .’ Through digital manipulation the face of the president becomes increasingly, abstract, pixilated and spectral the eyes sockets become skeletal holes. First, he becomes an avatar. Then a monster.

2. ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONALITY/ALTERNATIVE MEDIA ECOLOGIES/POST-HUMANISM

Paik’s complex media ecologies also speak to such alternative anthropological imagination. TV garden is a single-channel video installation in which TV monitors are surrounded by lush tropical nature. The sharp colour of video, its electronic noise mixing

effortlessly with the surrounding nature reveals a magical post-human ecology. Here we enter the realm of non-capitalist societies; we experience their relational ontology, which imagine humans and non-humans, nature and technology as mutually entangled rather than pertaining to separate realms.



Nam June Paik, *TV Garden*, 1974/2002

Paik's anthropology continuously quests to explore the meaning of being human. We know that Paik was strongly influenced by anthropologist Gregory Bateson one of the early contributors to the science of cybernetics together with Norbert Wiener. Combining cybernetics, psychoanalysis, anthropology and politics Bateson was interested in mapping the structures of imagination of non-capitalist and non-western societies. He argued that in the mental ecology of non-capitalist societies humans and non-human are mutually entangled in complex networks. Such relational entanglement undermines the reductive capitalist and western notion of the person as self-contained and self-interested individual. In the west the person is a "mask" - from the Latin root *personare* (resounding through) whose exterior body is inauthentic and deceptive and hides inside a precious and authentic soul. This self-contained and self-interested person - split between a public and a private self - is endorsed with the power of

agency and self-determination – as market subject, head of the family or citizen of nation states. Unlike the western person, in non-western societies personhood is dispersed, fractal – dividual not individual – out of control, contaminated. Under capitalism we are what we make of us. In non-capitalist societies we are what other people make us. Body politics is a central concern in performance and feminist art of the 1970s. In feminist performance art, following Andrea Fraser’s suggestion that “we are the institutions” bodies become site of artistic experimentation and anti-capitalist struggle. These performances aimed at challenging the “un-aesthetic regime of modernity” (Susan Buck-Moss, 1982) and capitalist individualism by emphasizing bodily pain, self-defacement and scarring, erotic pleasure or the abject (think Carolee Schneeman, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović). Whereas from the 1990s onward, body politics goes towards the opposite direction – towards the depersonalization, corporatization, and institutionalization of the persona. People become institutions or institutional conduits, working for institutions or like institutions.

It can be said that Paik led the transition from the first kind of body politics above to the second strand. Paik toys with ways of abstracting the person, turn flesh into pixels, human emotions into vibrant matter. David Joselit writes: ‘in Nam June Paik bodies and objects are absorbed and abstracted into scan lines and pure abstract electronic patterns.’

But I do not think that Paik’s philosophy was post-humanist. Like Judith Butler he was rather interested in the politics of body performativity, and how the virtual world of appearances and micro-encounters, projected on the phantasmatical bodies of the other, clashes with the entrapments of materiality and the everyday. He was interested in the fantasies and fears of a humanity which, as the virtual world takes over the material world, is challenged by its own disappearance. His avatars and robots are makeshift, manmade, imperfect and ultimately human.



Peter Moore, *Nam June Paik's TV Bra for Living Sculpture performed by Paik & Moorman*, Photography, 1969



Nam June Paik, *TV Bra for Living Sculpture*, 2002

As a displaced cosmopolitan, Paik was also critical of taken-for-granted notions of ethnicity, race and kinship. For instance, *Family of Robots* series explore critically what does it mean to be a traditional Korean extended family, consisting of the mother, the father, the baby, the grandmother, the grandfather, the aunt and the uncle. Or what does it mean to be any nuclear family?



Abstraction can go either way – either towards the commodification, de-humanization and objectification of the other. Or towards its celebration, by casting a calming distance on it. Ultimately, Paik techniques of bodily abstraction were meant to celebrate the human body. His video *Electronic Moon*, starts with colorful abstract patterns of electromagnetic charges mirroring and complementing the rhythmic motion of water. As they dance to the tune of Glenn Miller’s classic *Moonlight Serenade* these living patterns slowly move to the background, bringing the silhouetted bodies of two naked lovers into the foreground – first a breast and then a foot touching it. In the way the raw energy of the sexual encounter is abstracted in color-saturated patterns and shadows, *Electronic Moon* anticipates the celebration of erotic love in the video *Fuses*(1956) of performance artist Carolee Schneemann.

3. EXPANDED CONSCIOUSNESS: OWARDS A NON-EUROCENTRIC INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

In criticizing art institutions Fluxus and similar artistic movement of institutional critique run into a problem. In fact, human cultures cannot exist in a state of flow – in an unmediated state and without institutions. In other to survive every society must externalize drives, fears and desires into institutions – kinship, warfare, religion – that allow them some degree of self-organization. But mechanisms of institutionalization vary between capitalist and non-capitalist societies.

Gregory Bateson(1972) showed that societies are traversed by flows of unconscious and contradictory desires, emotions and projections which take the form of antagonistic and mutually reinforcing oppositions – between good and evil, insider and outsider, male and female, the individual and the collective. With time these opposition grow and become violent internal forces that push societies to the brink of self-destruction. Gregory Bateson described the spiralling trajectories of these forces as schismogenesis.

Non-capitalist societies are able to bring these unconscious contradictions into the open and neutralise them through shared rituals and cosmologies –often violent and terrifying. (Clastres, 1972 and Viveiros de Castro, 2014). These open and public performances of

the unconscious – blurring base and superstructure – are conducive to democratic structures and institutions that are transient, collective, and open, in continuous movement and transformation. Non-capitalist societies are rhizomatic and infinitively plastic, but also stable and ‘auto-poietic’.

Unlike non-western and non-capitalist societies who deal with human contradictions by bringing them into the open, capitalist societies are schizophrenic – unable to keep these contradictions in balance and mentally split between them. Under capitalism the unconscious is crystallized, compartmentalized and ossified in the institutions enthused with the of power to produce the economy and democracy – the state, the factory, money and the market. This violent and schizophrenic institutionalization creates inequality, repression and depression.

The 1960s the art and hippie community in the US was drawn by the work of Bateson He was a member of the Esalen community in the Big Sur in the west-coast of California, which subscribed to a rigorous programme of psychedelic drugs, free sex, yoga, and veganism. At the time Bateson was experimenting with LSD for his theory of expanded consciousness: the ability to cross boundaries between conscious and unconscious; the real and the imagined, the human and the non-human and to externalize and socialize thoughts and emotions.

Nam June Paik was part of a group of New-York-based video artists, experimenting on video synthesizers and LSD to develop and share forms of expanded consciousness.

In “Video Synthesiser Plus”(1970) Paik argues that art consists of three different parties: the creator (active transmitter), audience (passive recipient) and critic (the judge or carrier band). But in the drug experience is the person is at the same the creator the critic and the audience. He asks:

“Can we transplant this ontology of drug experience to the safer and more authentic art medium, without transplanting the inherent danger of overdose? *Participation TV* – the one-ness of creator, audience and critic – is surely one probable way for this goal.”

Global Groove(1974) can be considered one of such experiments, of shared expanded consciousness and of synthetic ontology. Here

humanity is captured in the spaces ‘in between’ – in the ebb and flows of feedback and retroactions generated by simple gestures (such as dance) and in the fluid and blurred boundaries and borders– their dissonant patterns of movement and colour frequencies.

‘Dancing patterns..... Here the mind is turned inside-out. I appreciate these images precisely for their deconstructive and reflexive openness, for their horizontal inclusions and their valorisation and celebration of the lines, boundaries and fragments in-between. That’s right you can be on LSD every day.’(Paik, 1974)

4. UTOPIA TIME

Art historians have noted how the art of Nam June Paik reflects on the time acceleration brought forward by modern technologies. Accelerationism, a theory proposed by sociologist Darmunt Rosa(2015), argues that technological changes under capitalism, sparked a progressive and irreversible acceleration of social life – people and objects travelling at incredible speed and to greater distances. In the 1980s such acceleration reached its apex, due to the new financial, political and media infrastructure of late capitalism. In experiential terms, the technological acceleration of late capitalism generates extreme displacement and hyper mobility and at the same time, a sense of impotence and stasis vis-à-vis the energy and mobility of capital. But for some left-wing revolutionaries technological acceleration can destroy capitalism from within, through viral self-contamination, parasitical finance and the abolition of human labour.

Despite his faith in the electronic super highway, Paik was not an accelerationist. On the contrary his work is informed by an aesthetic of ‘active boredom’ intended as a radical subversion of the linear time of capitalism. Discussing the time Paik writes(1993):

Boredom itself is far from being a negative quality. In Asia, it is rather a sign of nobility. To repeat, the confusion [surrounding video art] finds its origin in our confusion of INPUT-time with OUTPUT-time (this is the experiential time)

In 1964 at the mythical Filmmakers’ Cinematheque in New York. In

an endless loop unexposed film runs through a projector. Initially, we only see a surface illuminated by a bright light. Then we see the flow of film emerging and disappearing in the form of scratches and dust cumulated on the damaged surface of the film material. We experience the film mutating from a state of transparency to one of opacity. Our experience is challenged all the time. The circular and slow time of the film is a time of active transformation, one in which human mastery is challenged and the viewer is left floating in-between image and materiality. This existential space between stillness and movement opens a window into the realm of the non-human. Heidegger considered boredom as the temporal and existential status of the non-human, the animal, the abject and the outcast and as such, a state of expanded empathy.

Zen for film poses a challenge not only to the spectator, but also to the curator. How can museums constitute, sustain and circulate those gestures of commoning and solidarity, which are by definition impermanent, opaque and transgressive?

In conclusion how does the art of Nam June Paik contribute to a post-capitalist anthropology and to the museum of the commons?

- Going beyond capitalocentrism. Paik's exploration of alternative economies of production and circulation recalls the notion of 'diverse economies' by feminist theorists Gibson-Graham. They argue that contemporary economies are 'post-capitalists' that is to say, they consist in a mixture of communism, capitalism and state-controlled economies, of queer subjects driven by diverse impulses and rationales – self-interest, generosity and corporate loyalty. How can we create complex material and immaterial ecologies, which disrupt capitalism from within, at the intersection of markets, states and communism? This transversality of modes of production and complex networks of human-non-human entanglements enact new and complex class configurations.

PROPOSITION ONE: Think of the art-market as a circuit of reciprocity.

- Generating solidarity out of grassroots practices instead of using ideology or religion. Paik's notion of complex ecology reframes solidarity, commoning and sharing through a post-representational, relational and non-anthropocentric framework.

PROPOSITION TWO: Think of solidarity in terms of politico-ecological practices.

- Rethinking the spaces of art. Is Paik's art located in the physical video monitor or in the virtual space of the imagination of the viewer? Was his commitment to Rockefeller private or public? What kind of space is the super electronic highway? Paik complicated the Eurocentric and western distinctions between public and private.

PROPOSITION THREE: the space of the commons is neither public nor private – it is a space in-between – not of stasis of active dialectical agency.

- Rethinking the temporality of art. Capitalism is split between superfast present and catastrophic future. Paik shows an experiential time that is both present and linear but also expands in the long term in circular feedbacks and loops. How can we shift from the economies and ontologies of survival to those of sustainability? From institution to instituting?

PROPOSITION FOUR: The time of commons is processual and operate in the middle-term, not as continuation of the same (logic of capitalism) and neither as eternal presents. The middle term is where the melancholic past is reactivates as revolutionary future.

And finally, to museum curators the art of Paik asks:

How can museums constitute, sustain and circulate those gestures of commoning and solidarity, which are by definition impermanent, opaque and transgressive?

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