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*The Angel of Junk: Sitting with Nam June Paik**

Colophon

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This special issue poses the question: What does a post-pandemic museum look like? How has the move to immaterial exhibits—a move that precedes the 2020 crisis—changed the "ends" of the museum? Specifically, we have been asked to consider: "how might the museum become an equal space to all, and how can diverse communities access the dematerialized museum without discrimination and exclusion?"

That we were still asking these questions in 2020 indicates how greatly the Internet has failed to deliver on its early promise. In the late-twentieth century, "cyberspace" was sold as the solution to all political problems and inequalities: it was "Andre Malraux's" museum without walls; the Athenian agora 2.0; the harbinger of friction-free capitalism; and a "discrimination-free" zone. In contrast, it is now blamed for everything bad in this world: social media algorithms, powered by military-grade PSYOPs that spread lies, fuel conspiracy theories, radicalize users, prolong pandemics, and foster planet-wrecking levels of consumption; and artificial intelligence programs that exacerbate existing inequalities and threaten humanity's future.

These questions also challenge us to rethink the gifts of Nam June Paik. Celebrated as the "father" of the electronic superhighway, it is tempting to dismiss Paik's visions as failed hype. His call for the free trade of communication—a "video common market" and a "weekly television festival" to draw together "all kinds of music and dance from every nation"—as a means for world peace seems painfully naïve.¹ His visions of communications as "creating exponential savings in energy and ecology" and his view of the media as solving racial problems in the U.S are similarly unwitting.² His embrace of Don Luce's assertion that "jazz was the first tie between blacks and whites" ignores the actualities of slavery and reconstruction; his speculation that a two-way video link between pre-schools in white and black neighborhoods could compensate for the failure of bussing acquiesces to segregationists.³ In addition, his vision of TV as fostering population control in India seems to promote mind control and social engineering.⁴ Further, his cute robots and attempts to "humanize technology" seem almost laughable in the face of today's powerful and discriminatory AI.

Yes, but Paik's gifts go beyond these statements, and he was well aware of the limitations of the "electronic superhighway." Reflecting on the "cabled together" daycares mentioned previously, he asked, "Is this an escapism, hypocrisy, or a first remedy for the long-term cure of the racial problem? In any case, technology is here waiting to be used with much less expense than bussing."⁵ Further, he warned of mass surveillance on the electronic superhighway, telling the Rockefeller Foundation that "if the liberal establishment continues to ignore media and communication and leave it to the mercy of purely commercial capital, government agencies, or computer analysts, all hardware will again be monopolized by some mysterious power complex and the result might be a super-watagate."⁶ Further, the point of Paik's *Robot K-456* was laughter: it engaged in street performances and accidents that were playfully spectacular in order to "cope with the disaster of technology in the twenty-first century."⁷

To understand, however, what Paik may offer us in this moment of crisis during which "it feels like there is no time for calm thoughts and actions," we need to look beyond his visions of global telecommunications and his embrace of cybernetics. Paik's 1993 award-winning *Electronic Superhighway – From Venice to Ulan Bator* exhibit in the German pavilion of the Venice Biennial not only featured the enormous multi-screen "Electronic

* This research was undertaken, in part, thanks to funding from the Canada 150 Research Chairs Program.

1 Nam June Paik, "Global Groove and the Video Common Market (1970)," *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2019), 143.

2 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning For The Post Industrial Age (1974)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 163.

3 Nam June Paik, "Global Groove and the Video Common Market (1970)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 143.

4 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning For The Post Industrial Age (1974)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 155.

5 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning For The Post Industrial Age (1974)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 158.

6 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning For The Post Industrial Age (1974)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 159.

7 John G. Hanhardt, "Nam June Paik: From Avant-Garde to Post-Video Art," *Nam June Paik: Global Visionary* (Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian American Art Museum; in association with D Giles Limited, 2012), 36.

Superhighway," but also robot statues and a "Junk Room," filled with spare parts, and old TV sets without covers.

Paik's engagement with junk—his recycling of televisual content and devices—offers us a moment of pause. Following Kim Yoonseo's directive to "start with the physical and material nature" of media, the rest of this essay explores how Paik's art portends a way to think around and against "the coming singularity" and the AI catastrophes before us—but only if we embrace the junk piling up and recycling before us.

Winter Is Coming

Although the SARS Cov-2 virus may be novel, the problems associated with it, as Director Kim Seong Eun notes, were not. Even as museums planned for an "augmented" future, they were not prepared because of long known yet unaddressed problems of technological dominance and control, viral hatred and discrimination, inequalities, and accessibilities. This was true not only of the museum but of institutions more generally—and the implications of this "overlooking" go beyond the 2020 pandemic and electronic communications. These questions are posed for and to the future. If we were "too late" for the 2020 crisis, the hope is that we will be on time for the next.

The next catastrophe we face is arguably AI. Like the "electronic superhighway," AI has been sold as "solving" problems of racism: it promised to eliminate discrimination because machines can not "see" race, sex, age, or infirmities.⁸ Further, it allegedly ended human inequalities by equipping humans with docile machine-servants that would spread the perks of the 1%—chauffeurs, personal assistants, expert advisors—to the 95%. Like the Internet, it seems to have done the opposite. Current machine learning machine programs perpetuate discrimination: from recognition systems that misidentify non-white faces to hiring programs that downgrade women's CVs; from risk assessment tools that penalize families on public assistance to predictive policing programs that target African American communities.

According to many scientists, technologists, and science fiction writers, "AI = The Apocalypse." It ends human work; it ends human freedom; it ends everything, including ends themselves. This fear is so potent that groups of Silicon Valley programmers in the early twenty-first century stopped their employers from developing "malevolent AI" projects, such as *Project Maven*, a Google bid to develop AI for the U.S military's drone program, and entrepreneurs, such as Elon Musk, called for an AI "slowdown."⁹ Fear of the coming apocalypse is so potent that Alphabet, the parent company of Google, in its 2018 Form 10-K SEC filing, stated: "new products and services, including those that incorporate or utilize artificial intelligence and machine learning, can raise new or exacerbate existing ethical, technological, legal, and other challenges." These products threatened Google's brand and thus its "revenues and operating results."¹⁰ Could a company invested in AI "do no evil?" given that these systems rightly have been called "weapons of math destruction" (Cathy O'Neil), "algorithms of oppression" (Safiya Noble), and "the New Jim Code (Ruha Benjamin)"?¹¹

Crucially, the dream and the nightmare are intertwined. All these "revenge of AI" scenarios presume that "good" technology is slavish. To put it bluntly, it is because technologies are treated as slaves that the "coming singularity" is so feared. It is no accident that those developing and intimately intertwined with technology were—and are—the most fearful and certain. As Georg Willem Friedrich Hegel pointed out centuries ago in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the greater apparent mastery, the greater the actual dependence: in the master-slave dialectic, the master's very identity and life depend

8 Max Ehrenfreund, "The Machines That Could Rid Courtrooms of Racism," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wnk/wp/2016/08/18/why-a-computer-program-that-judges-rely-on-around-the-country-was-accused-of-racism/>

9 Kate Conger, "Google Plans Not to Renew Its Contract for Project Maven, a Controversial Pentagon Drone AI Imaging Program," *Gizmodo*, January 18, 2006, <https://gizmodo.com/google-plans-not-to-renew-its-contract-for-project-mave-1826488620>; Camila Domonoske, "Elon Musk Warns Governors: Artificial Intelligence Poses Existential Risk," *NPR*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/07/17/537686649/elon-musk-warns-governors-artificial-intelligence-poses-existential-risk>.

10 Alphabet, "U.S.S.E.C. Form 10-K" (Washington D.C., 2018), <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1652044/000165204419000004/goog10-kq42018.htm>

11 Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019); Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2018); Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*, Reprint edition (New York: Broadway Books, 2017).

on the slaves' actions. A few years before his death, the physicist Stephen Hawking, whose daily life and very ability to communicate relied on technology, both praised his software's ability to predict his next words accurately and cautioned: "artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. Once humans develop artificial intelligence, it could take off on its own and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete and would be superseded."¹² Hawking's argument presumed progress and competition for recognition: a combination of Darwinian and capitalist struggle. Those who issued these warnings assume and accept the inevitability of progress and competition, scientific or capitalist.

To tackle these systems, we need to redress the inequalities that these systems are "trained on" and naturalize. We have to remember that these systems do not predict the future—they predict the past. These programs are trained using highly curated and "cleaned" data. They are verified as accurately based on their ability to "predict" past data, which has not been included in the training set. This means if the inputted past is racist, these programs will make racist predictions, and they will only be authenticated as true if they make racist predictions. The truth is "garbage in = garbage out." In the name of disruption, they foreclose the future, one solution at a time, so that we amplify and automate—rather than acknowledge or repair—the mistakes of a discriminatory past. They seek to make disruption impossible.

However, the discriminatory past is embedded even more insidiously through methods that underlie machine learning, methods developed by twentieth-century eugenicists: linear and logistical regression; discriminant analysis; and correlation. Most succinctly, these methods seek to linearly correlate the past and future by discovering unchanging "natural" traits.¹³ They embody what Walter Benjamin has called "homogeneous empty time." Based on this notion of linear progress, eugenics promised a "final solution to almost every social problem" via careful cultivation of the "human crop" since "selection of parentage is the sole effective process known to science by which a race can continuously progress."¹⁴ Eugenicists reconstructed a past in order to design a future that would repeat their racist abstractions: in their systems, learning or nurture—differences acquired within a lifetime—were "noise." This system actually considered learning to be impossible. As Karl Pearson put it, "no training or education [can] create it [intelligence]. It must be bred."¹⁵ At the heart of machine learning lies disbelief in learning. Predictions based on correlations seek to make disruption impossible, which is perhaps why they are so disruptive.

If this is so, what can we do? Especially within the context of this special issue and the museum? How might Paik, with his speculations on video time and his engagement with debris, help us?

¹² Rory Cellan-Jones, "Stephen Hawking Warns Artificial Intelligence Could End Mankind," *BBC World News*, December 2, 2014, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540>

¹³ See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data* (forthcoming MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2021).

¹⁴ Karl Pearson, *Nature and Nurture, the Problem of the Future* (London: Dulau, 1910), 29; Pearson, *The Groundwork of Eugenics*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 20.

¹⁵ Karl Pearson, "The Huxley Memorial Lecture," *Science* 18, 463(1903): 636.

Junk Memories

Like Benjamin, Paik questioned the validity of homogeneous time. Like Benjamin, but in a very different way, Paik viewed images and rubbish ways to forestall overarching narratives of technological progress.

Paik's approach to video clashed with his contemporaries, who argued that video had to be unedited in order to be truly revolutionary. Describing the refusal of some video artists to edit their work as "overzealous," he argued that input-time and output-time should not be equal. Editing was not simply complicit with mind-numbing entertainment. It was also key to capturing the complexities of human experiences with time: "in some extreme situations or dreams our whole life can be experienced as a flashback compressed into

a split second (the survivors from air crashes or ski accidents tell it often)··· or, as in the example of Proust, one can brood over a brief childhood experience practically all of one's life in the isolation of a cork-lined room. That means, certain input-time can be extended or compressed in output-time at will."¹⁶ Not only did properly edited video simulate the human brain, it also enabled us to understand earlier, pre-capitalist moments. Paik provocatively mused, "the more I work with T.V., the more I think about Neolithic the new stone age··· because both have one big thing in common··· that··· is the audio-visual memory structure with the time-based recording system··· One is chanting/dancing··· the other is video recording··· and I enjoy the speculating business into the deep past, before the invention of the private property system··· yes, our video art is communal communistic property, easy to share but hard to monopolize···"¹⁷ These musings provide context for Paik's declaration that there is no more "'History,' but only 'Imagery' or 'Videory.'"¹⁸ Videory discards the past but rather than engages the past through images. These images embedded the past within the present, as the undead.¹⁹ As John Hanhardt has put it, "Paik's work embodies time as a present time."²⁰

There is, however, an intriguing historical tension between Paik's video content and his video installations. If Paik's videos embraced a living or perhaps more appropriately an undead present, his robot family statues made of old TV sets, as Patricia Mellencamp has observed, made TV historical.²¹ The physicality of these sets helped museums endure despite the efforts of idealistic video artists to "destroy the museum as a site."²² For Paik, the video was inherently physical and libidinal: "communications flow is the new metabolism of homo sapiens."²³

However, if communication was the new metabolism, it also produced great waste. Paik deftly reincorporated the detritus of technology into his process and archive. This was inspired not only by his commitments to ecology but also his art. As his nephew Ken Hakuta notes, Paik frequently took his broken toys and incorporated them into his early work. Paik sought not to create the "best" technology—he did not engage in endless technological progressivism. In response to his brother, who offered to make a better functioning robot than *Robot K-456*, Paik stated that he "did not want the robot to function too well, just so-so."²⁴ Again, the 1993 Biennial included the "Junk Room" and a display of broken TV sets. As Hanhardt notes, Paik's archive, which served as Paik's "memory/image bank" was filled with objects that evoked memories and histories. It is haunted by the "ghosts of projects" and "fragmented texts."²⁵

Paik's last piece, *Chinese Memories*, seems to embody this merging of the present, past, and future. The Chinese and Korean characters, as well as his signature, serve as graffiti over the traditional Chinese cabinet, which contains within it a similarly written-over TV set, playing Paik's earlier videos, such as *Global Grove*. Neatly laid beside it are books, and as Edith Decker-Phillips explains, Paik very much wanted his collections of Chinese stories, *Scrutable Chinese*, to be published.²⁶ Here, Paik encloses *Global Groove*, with its montage of popular and traditional songs, TV commercials, and avant-garde performances, within a palimpsest of translated stories. This work seems to evoke what Paik once called "negative science fiction," a genre to engage "with the distant past as the science fiction deals with the distant future··· and with the same techniques, that is: the free combination of proven knowledge, speculated wisdom, pure fantasia··· and a rich mixture of inventiveness without responsibility."²⁷

As these descriptions should make clear, Paik offers us a materialist temporality that recalls Benjamin's famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and his arcades project. Not only does Paik engage montage, which Benjamin viewed as key to "blasting a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history," he also tries to seize the past as an image that compresses everything into a split second. Benjamin, inspired by Baudelaire, also celebrated the detritus of history. Like the ragpicker, Paik "collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic."²⁸ In Thesis IX, Benjamin famously described the Angel of History as Klee's *Angelus Novus*, fixated

16
Nam June Paik, "Input-time and Output-time (1976)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 148.

17
Nam June Paik, "DNA Is Not Racism (1988)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 268.

18
Nam June Paik, "Input-time and Output-time (1976)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 148.

19
Paik intriguingly argued, "once on videotape, you are not allowed to die··· in a sense": Nam June Paik, "Input-time and Output-time (1976)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 148.

20
John G. Hanhardt, "Nam June Paik," 84.

21
Patricia Mellencamp, "The Old and the New: Nam June Paik," *Art Journal* 54(4), (1995): 44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/777693>

22
Nam June Paik and David Ross, "A Conversation with Nam June Paik," *Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space* (New York: HNAbrams, 1993), 58.

23
Nam June Paik, "How to Make Oil Obsolete," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 252.

24
Ken Hakuta, "My Uncle Nam June Paik: *Nam June Paik: Global Visionary*, 19.

25
John G. Hanhardt, "The Textual Worlds of Nam June Paik: The Time of Writing and Reading," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 2.

26
Edith Decker-Phillips, "Nam June Paik's Chinese Memories," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 2.

27
Nam June Paik, "DNA Is Not Racism(1988)," *We Are in Open Circuits*, 267-268.

28
Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 349.

upon the past, which he sees not as a chain of events but rather "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. [...] This storm is what we call progress."

Clearly, there are many political and philosophical differences between Paik and Benjamin. Paik's embrace of fashion as part of the information metabolism and his gleeful use of montage would probably make Benjamin's skin crawl. Paik would no doubt roll his eyes at Benjamin's however irreverent Marxism. Regardless, I bring them together to think through what redemptive histories they may offer through their efforts to divine through and with junk.

In the age of machine learning and its relentless engagement with the heterogeneous empty time of progress, we need different modes, senses, and practices of the time, which embrace rather than destroy the possibility of learning. We need artwork that questions this time and uses technologies against themselves to open these different modes through what Kelly Dobson has called "data visceralization." We need to build technologies that break the rosary beads of history and instead enable us to learn the past within the images that flit before us in the present. We can travel these roads, with Paik, by sitting in his junk room.