

## To whom it may concern: Nam June Paik's wobulator and playful identity

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BY LANFRANCO ACETI AND OMAR KHOLEIF

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LEONARDO ELECTRONIC ALMANAC CATALOG, VOLUME 19 ISSUE 5

# Far and Wide

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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.

LEA acknowledges and is grateful for the gracious support provided to this publication by the Estate of Nam June Paik. In particular special thanks go to Ken Hakuta, Executor, Nam June Paik Estate.

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# THE GLOBAL PLAY OF NAM JUNE PAIK

## THE ARTIST THAT EMBRACED AND TRANSFORMED MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S DREAMS INTO REALITY

**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, neither can easily be discounted McLuhan's strong advocacy of the powerful tool that technology can be, so powerful that is able to obscure and sideline the message itself in the name of the medium.

"Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase 'Media is message' was formulated by Norbert Wiener in 1948 as 'The signal, where the message is sent, plays equally important role as the signal, where message is not sent.'"<sup>1</sup>

The construction of this hybrid book, I hope, would have pleased Paik for it is a strange construction, collage and recollection, of memories, events, places and artworks. In this volume collide present 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.

Paik remains perhaps one of the most revolutionary artists, for his practice was mediated, geared towards the masses and not necessarily or preeminently dominated by a desire of sitting within the establishment. He also challenged the perception of what art 'should be' and at the same time undermined elitisms through the use, at his time, of what were considered 'non-artistic-media.' Some of the choices in his career, both in terms of artistic medium and in terms of content, can be defined as visionary as well as risky to the point of bravery or idiocy, depending on the mindset of the critic.

That some of the artworks may be challenging for the viewer as well as the art critic is perhaps obvious – as obvious was Paik's willing-

ness to challenge the various media he used, the audience that followed him and the established aesthetic of his own artistic practice. 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.

*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.*<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, it seems limited to define Paik as 'the father of video art' when his approaches were to resonate in a multiplicity of fields and areas.

*Paik's latest creative deployment of new media is through laser 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 scrim, 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 image technologies and forms of expression. The end of video*

*and television as we know them signals a transformation of our visual culture.*<sup>3</sup>

When Mike Stubbs and Omar Kholeif approached me to create this book, the challenge was to create a structure for the material but also to keep the openness that characterizes so many of Paik's artworks and so many of the approaches that he has inspired.

I found the best framework in one of Paik's artworks that was presented for the first time in the United Kingdom, at FACT, in Liverpool, thanks to the efforts of both Stubbs and Kholeif.

My fascination with the *Laser Cone's re-fabrication*<sup>4</sup> in Liverpool was immediate and I wanted to reflect in the publication, albeit symbolically, the multiple possibilities and connections that underpinned the Laser Cone's re-fabrication and its medium, as well as Paik's and McLuhan's visions of the world to come, made of light, optics and lasers.

*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 at 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.*<sup>5</sup>

This catalog became a tool to mirror and perhaps 'transmediate' the laser installation "made of a huge green laser that [...] conjoin[ed] FACT with Tate Liverpool. Travelling 800 metres as the crow flies, the beam of light [...] made] a symbolic connection between the two galleries during their joint exhibition of video artist, pioneer and composer Nam June Paik. Artist Peter Appleton, who was behind the laser which joined the Anglican and Metropolitan cathedrals in Liverpool during 2008 Capital of Culture, [was] commissioned by FACT to create the artwork, *Laser Link*, which references Nam June Paik's innovative laser works."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

#### Lanfranco Aceti

Editor in Chief, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*  
Director, Kasa 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

1. Nam June Paik, "Cybernated Art," in *The New Media Reader*, eds. Noah Waldrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, 229 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003).
2. John G. Hanhardt "Nam June Paik, TV Garden, 1974," in *Permanence Through Change: The Variable media Approach*, eds. Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, 72 (New York and Montreal: Guggenheim Museum Publications and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2003).
3. Nam June Paik/Nam June Paik Studios' official Web site, "John Hanhardt's essay," <http://www.paikstudios.com/essay.html> (accessed January 10, 2013).
4. *Laser Cone*, 2001/2010, Nam June Paik in collaboration with Norman Ballard, installation view at FACT. Photographer: Stephen King.
5. FACT, "Laser Cone," FACT, <http://www.fact.co.uk/projects/nam-june-paik/laser-cone/> (accessed January 10, 2013).
6. FACT, "Laser Link," FACT, <http://www.fact.co.uk/projects/nam-june-paik/laser-link/> (accessed January 20, 2013).
7. Art as a bastard is interpreted, in this passage, as something of uncertain origins 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), 180.

# 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 the artist's work in the UK. The first since his death, it also showcased the premiere of Paik's laser 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 culture.

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 about the visual arts as a hermetically sealed, self-referential canon. Drawing from Bruno Latour, Norman M. Klein and Jay David Bolter, among many others – our think tank and, as such, this reader, sought to study how the visual field has proliferated across disciplines through the possibilities that are facilitated by technology. At the same time, we were keen to examine how artists now possess a unique form of agency – one that is simultaneously singular and col-

lective, 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 telepresent 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 Wobulator'* (1970), while Allen surveys a series of tendencies in the artist's work, developed after he was invited to visit to the Nam June Paik Center in South Korea. Galati and Schofield stretch this framework to explore broader concerns. Schofield considers the use of data in contemporary artwork, while Galati explores the problematic association with the virtual museum being archived online.

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

far and wide 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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1. See: N. M. Klein, "Cross-embedded Media," in *Vision, Memory and Media*, eds. A. Broegger and O. Kholeif (Liverpool and Chicago: Liverpool University Press, 2010).



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# To Whom It May Concern: Nam June Paik's Wobbulator and Playful Identity

## ABSTRACT

*Following Nam June Paik's lead, at times this scholarly analysis takes the form of a letter, intertwining personal voices with an investigation of media technologies. The practices of Nam June Paik are seen as a negotiation between the materiality of media and an articulation of identity. Reproductions of Paik's letters inform written records about his early interactive video technologies such as the Wobbulator built in 1972, technologies that invite us to mix our voices with his. Paik's playful approach to identity is reflected not only by his experimental warping and global transmission of familiar cultural forms such as dance, but also through his light-hearted comments reflecting his position as a nomadic artist. The techniques Paik left behind continue these light-hearted cultural negotiations, as demonstrated both by Emile Devereaux's visual practices and e-mail correspondence surrounding work exhibited at the Fondo Nacional de las Artes in Buenos Aires, Argentina.*

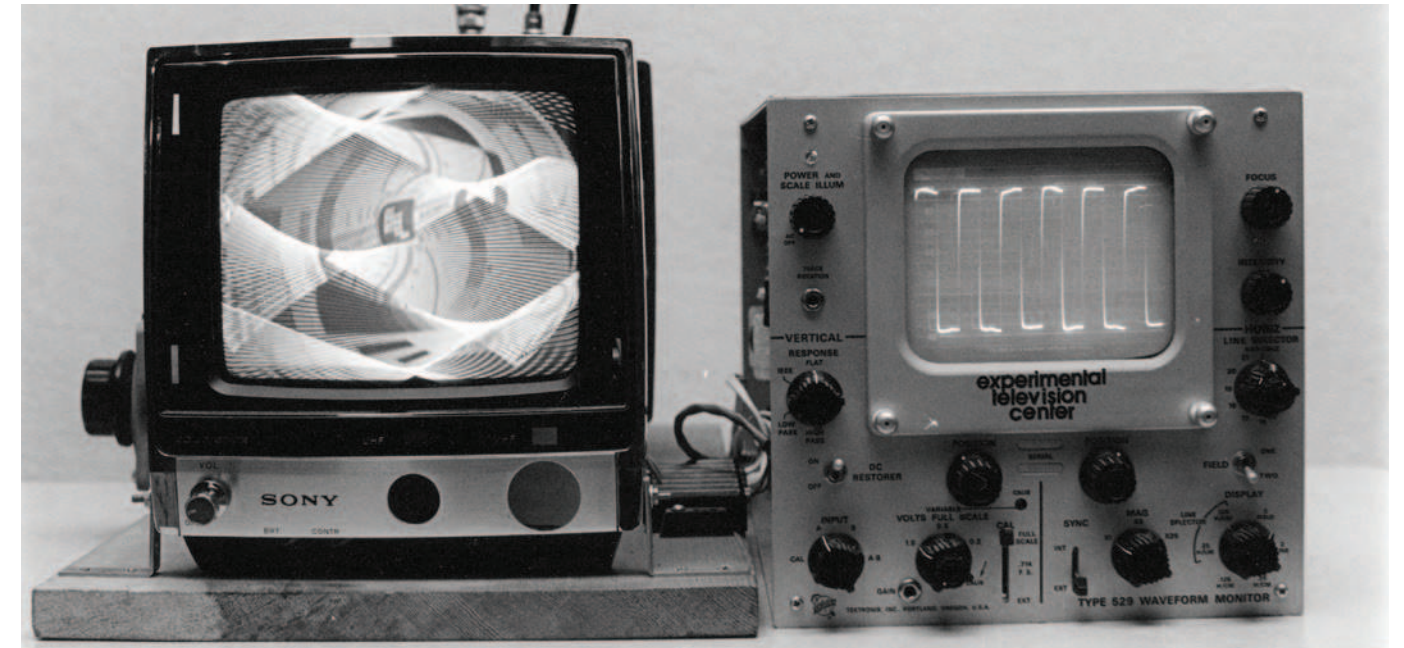


Figure 1. A Wobbulator at the Experimental Television Center, Owego, New York. © Sherry M. Hocking, Experimental Television Center, 1973. Used with permission.

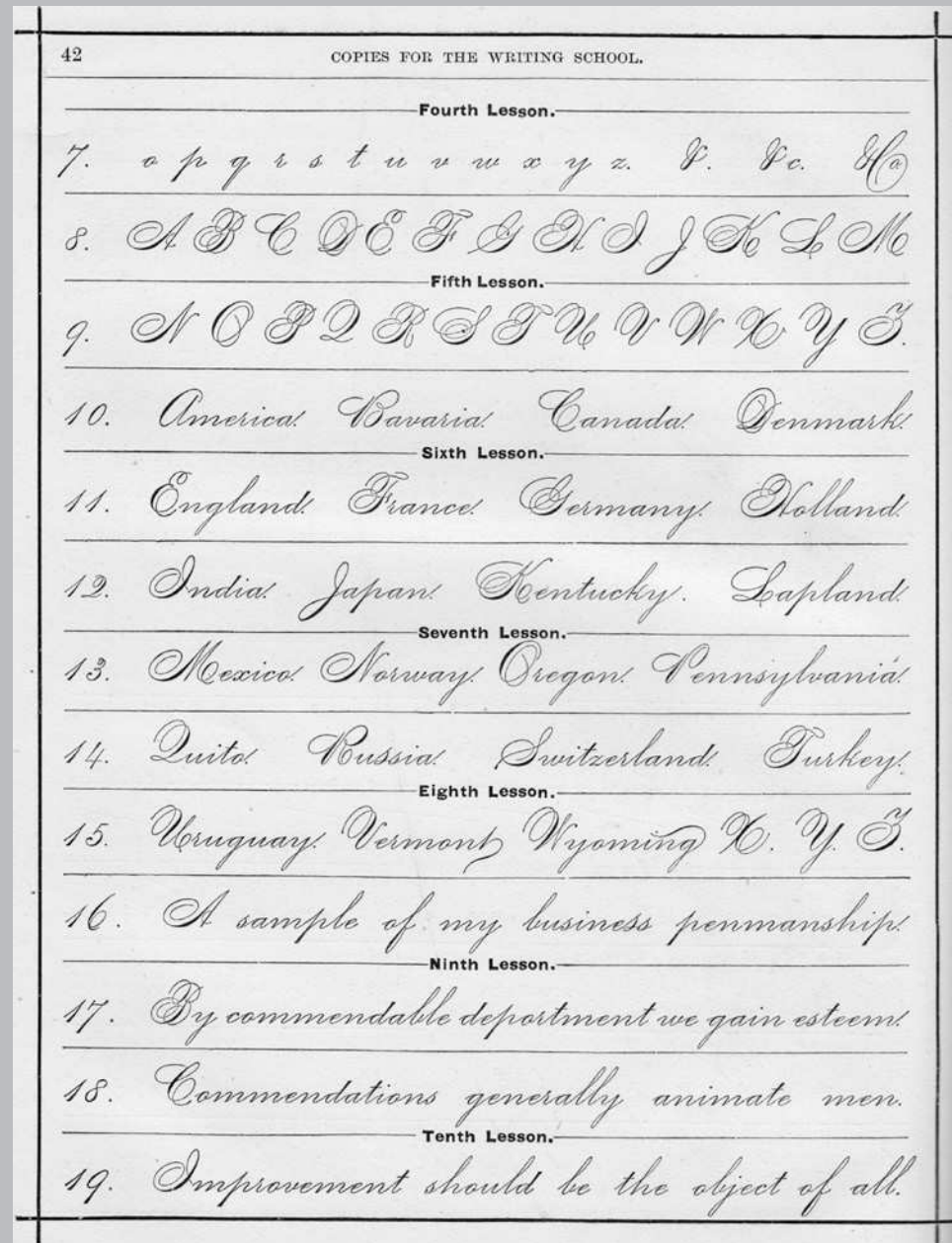
by

Emile Devereaux

Digital Art & Culture, Lancaster Institute for Contemporary Art

**“The path of evolution silently passes over the silent ones; they are outside of all discourse . . . Since they don't write anymore, they cannot respond to possible inconsistencies in their personal file . . . As if swallowed by the earth, nobody knows them anymore, . . . they are neither seen nor heard. . . [T]he honourable law does not spare anyone who has dishonourably excluded him-or herself, just as the laws of natural selection themselves know no exception.”**

To whom it may concern: I am interested in the nether reaches touched by digital media networks. These most distant navigations of scale and time include intimate spaces, linking private thoughts with unknown destinations. Nam June Paik left us with new media words to reach these dimensions, wobbling inventions with which we may inject ourselves into media channels in the first person, like a written letter. If the letter I write here mixes what is personal with what is philosophical and scholarly, it also follows Paik's writing approach. Like the media technologies he left behind, Paik's



**Figure 2.** The Ninth Penmanship lesson from Hill's *Manual of Business and Social Forms*, 1875, repeats the phrase, "Commendations generally animate men," Electrotyping by Shniedewend, Lee, & Co., Chicago. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

letters, too, have been republished, reaching many more eyes than originally anticipated, conveying his thoughts about his experimental video techniques. Paik's playful voice resonates equally through his electronic works and letters, part typewritten, part handwritten (a reminder of a post-structuralist emphasis on writing as both visual and material).

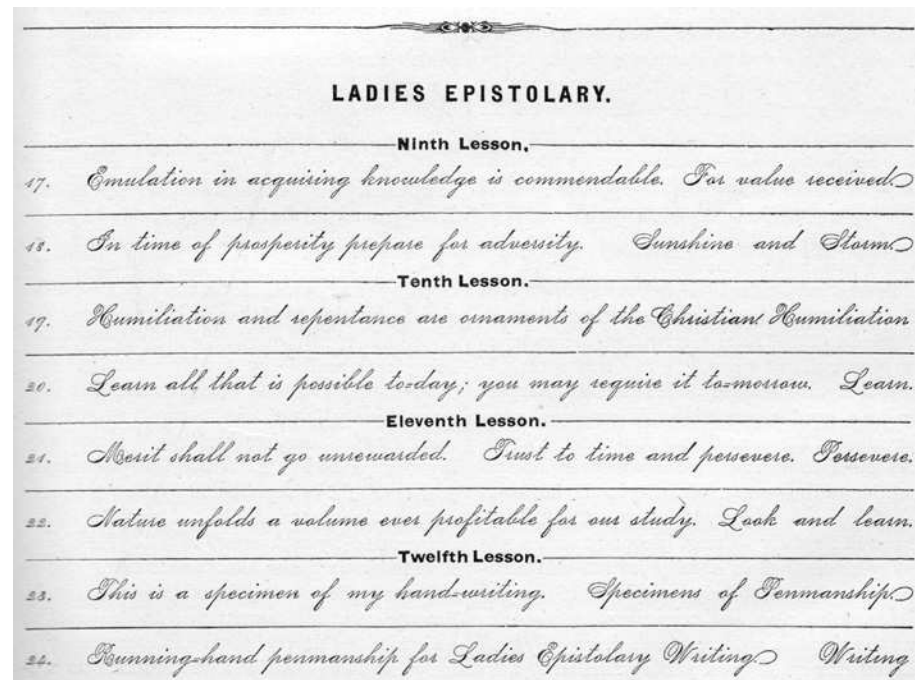
'Long-hand' implies that our very hands can stretch across distance. Even this written form, however personal it may seem, is highly structured. Hill's writing guide from 1875 instructs, "Your letter should be a representation of yourself, not of anybody else. The world is full of imitators . . . who pass on, leaving no reputation behind them." <sup>2</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hill's volume provided detailed writing instructions for every business and social occasion, interspersed with electrotyped image plates; exemplary models of cursive alphabets, scripts and symbols to repetitively and painstakingly copy in attempting to refine one's hand. Laboriously training one's handwriting to conform allowed for the communication of an authentic self. Hill's writing guide emphasizes the mastery of penmanship and the fluidity of expression while excluding entirely from its pages any mention of innovations in writing technologies. Within this Chicago-based publication there is no mention of the telegraph, patented by Samuel Morse some thirty-five years earlier. Perhaps more understandably, typewriters are also absent, as the first serial production of the typewriting machine in 1874 fell just after the manual's registration in the Library of Congress, its actual publication year coinciding with the first secretive submission of a typescript novel to a publisher, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. <sup>3</sup>

Although forms of communication change through the introduction of new technologies, individuals continue to struggle and push at the frameworks in order to articulate their experiences. Nam June Paik's experimental approaches stretched understandings of a media infiltrated world, at times dismantling the constitution of the very media used to convey his thoughts. If forms are solidified through struggle,

then difficulties that Paik encountered in practices such as recording video after chopping holes in the stabilizing signal <sup>4</sup> were more than absurd Dadaist gestures. Paik was leading the way towards increasingly more interactive media technologies and practices by destabilizing the structures of the television medium. What happens when other artists pick up Paik's inventions? What voices emerge when these approaches are applied within different historical, technological and geographical landscapes?

I would like to argue that bits of Paik's life are retained in all his works, just as identities often leak through forms of communication. Proper historical forms of longhand, for example, obviously conveyed gender (as the term "penmanship" implies). Hill's writing guide politely suggests that, "Ladies can, if they wish, terminate with the finer hand, while gentlemen will end with the bolder penmanship." <sup>5</sup> With a much less gentle touch Friedrich Kittler asserts that the gendered articulations of writing, far from optional, were hotly contested, especially in the use of an inappropriately feminine script. <sup>6</sup> In contrast, when the typewriter and other mechanical writing replaced handwriting the character of the writer was thought to be concealed. Since the typewriting machine made "everyone look the same," <sup>7</sup> the new technologies radically transformed the social terrain of writing, allowing women access to an almost exclusively male writing process. If male pseudonyms at first granted women access to formal writing, assistance in operating the machines created a new source of employment for women, until the word 'typewriter' implied a convergence of "a profession, a machine, and a sex" and took on the meaning of "both typing machine and female typist." <sup>8</sup> Identity is conveyed through the form of the typewritten letter, therefore, with an inverted gender; <sup>9</sup> the authoritative voice of the assumed masculine writer filtered through a feminized machine.





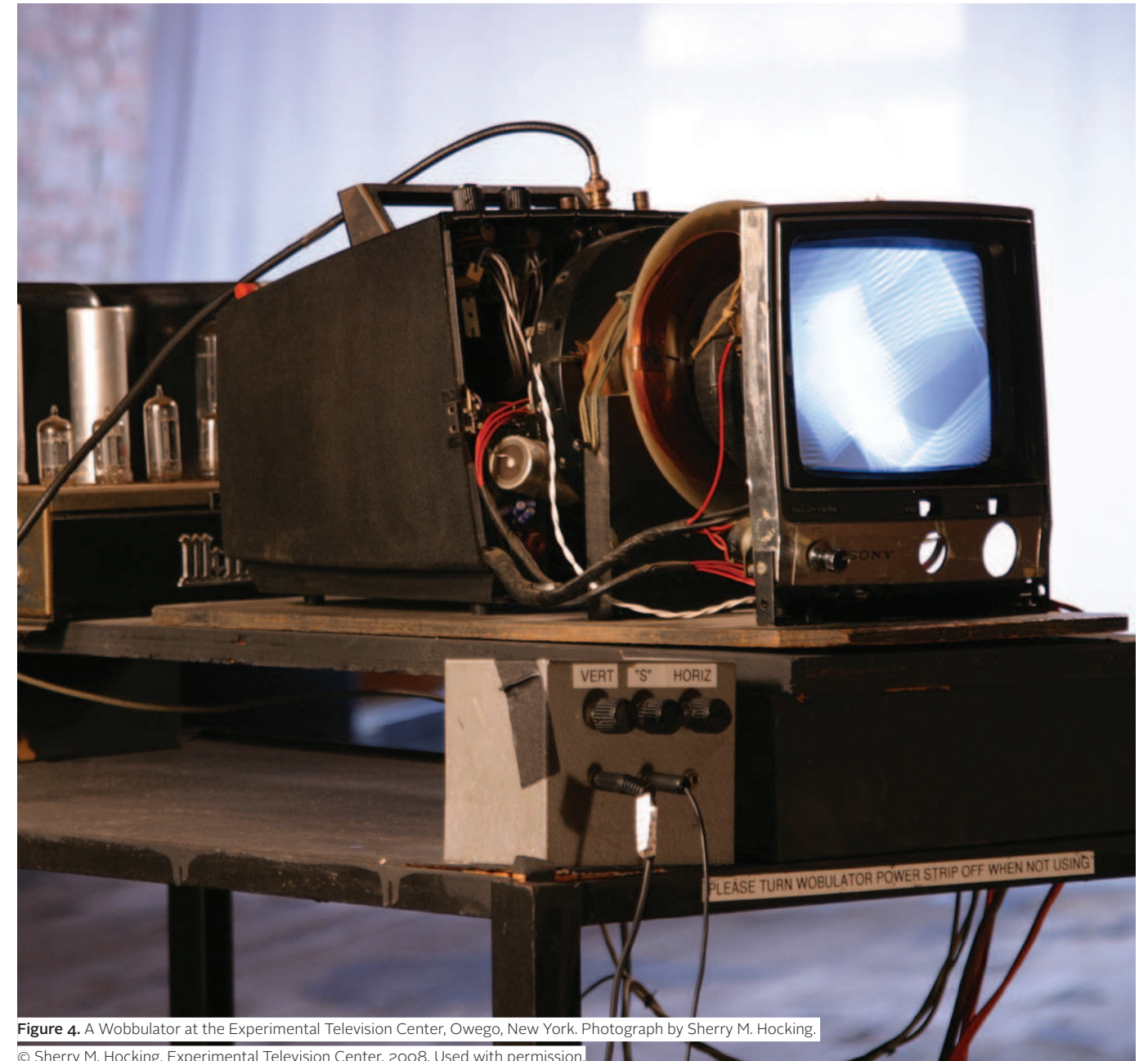
**Figure 3.** The Ladies Epistolary lessons from Hill's *Manual of Business and Social Forms*, 1875, guides the writing of the phrase, "Emulation in acquiring knowledge is commendable." Emulation within computer science is to modify one system to run the same programs or work with the same data as another system. Electrotyping by Shniedewend, Lee, & Co., Chicago. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Of course, media records the social hierarchies and misunderstandings of any particular historical moment. For example, Fred Stern's documentary film interviews Paik's collaborator Charlotte Moorman in 1980, revealing some of the reactions Paik initially encountered upon arriving in New York in 1964. Mixed with the obvious admiration and respect that Moorman holds for Paik are frank, humorous, and somewhat painful articulations of her first attempts to understand Paik's proposals and professional positioning as a well-connected male Asian artist in the 1960s: "What? . . . I can't believe that I'm sitting here talking to this oriental man about these things."<sup>10</sup> It could be argued that through their collaborations and Paik's technological experiments, cultural understandings developed in conversation around the work.

Besides recording changing social circumstances, technologically-mediated communication itself always seems to threaten conventional expectations of gender, culture and space. Nam June Paik consciously confronted all three<sup>11</sup> – pushing forward and combining a variety of practices, including explorations in performance, sculp-

ture, installation and television signals. If by appropriating the global reach of television networks into his practice, Paik's work touched a wider audience than earlier artists,<sup>12</sup> I'd also like to suggest this is due to the fact that his personal voice was woven into the very materialities of his practice; intimacy is conveyed despite the work's technological basis. The retention of Paik's touch is a part of his ongoing influence, part of the draw that he continues to exert on the development of new artistic approaches and technologies.

To whom it may concern: Inappropriately, I feel I could almost write a letter to Nam June Paik, as if somehow I grew up with him and knew him casually and distantly. I would explain my familiarity by including in my letter years of postgraduate study at the University of California, San Diego, walking past one of Paik's video walls almost daily, my mind nervously preoccupied with a conversation to take place in my advisor's office overlooking Paik's *TV Buddha*. If in attempting to grasp Paik's work the letter format frames my words in a compatibly mobile container, the personal voice in my letter also runs the risk of sounding sentimental, casual or lacking in authority. Paik's work

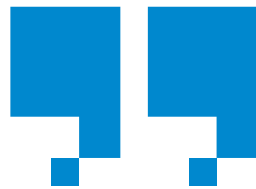


**Figure 4.** A Wobulator at the Experimental Television Center, Owego, New York. Photograph by Sherry M. Hocking. © Sherry M. Hocking, Experimental Television Center, 2008. Used with permission.





## Paik's work, like that of a letter posted in the mail, establishes an improvisational framework for conversational exchange.



also feels informal and approachable, operating as correspondence, reaching across space.

At this moment in technological history, in which social media sites such as YouTube encourage the dissemination of autobiographical voices, the private, intimate, *I* also inevitably finds its way across disciplinary boundaries and other frameworks that have attempted to limit or discredit this vulnerable voice.<sup>13</sup> Forms of knowledge, then, are being transformed by technological developments; the proliferation of new hardware and software applications shaping how we position ourselves and our private lives in relation to discourses that are communicated to us. Facebook readily illustrates one of these negotiations of identity, reminding us through its persistent advertising of systems of categorization that label and tag us for marketing purposes. In processes like these identity can hardly be 'extracted' from the technological; centuries of narratives expressing the dreams and fears of machine objectivity must once again be rewritten. Advertising voices and those of other powerful economies that moved more closely into homes first with radio, then with the

television screen, justifiably evoked warnings from the Frankfurt School. These and other thinkers would warn us today against holding media narratives close to our hearts, not to model ourselves after what we see on a screen, not to play out the roles through interactive computer devices that demonstrate we accept the power relationships that are passed through digital representations. Paik's play with identity defies systems that articulate cultural differences by pinning them down, solidifying identifying markers. Rather, like those culture-jammers of the 1990s, he reworks familiar referents to distort and disrupt. In other words, for Paik the materiality of technology mixes with identity to break apart systems of categorization. An examination of the basic material properties of Paik's form of correspondence then, is the first step towards understanding how his work connects with viewers. How might the materialities *television*, *signal*, and written *letter* resonate?

Paik's television object, the same body as the set in the nostalgic home, acts like a well-connected member of the family through whom we are lucky enough to receive a personal introduction to

celebrities. Their faces enter our imaginations through the television screen. This television object stands in the background of Polaroid photos, in hues of orange and brown, part of the living rooms of the past containing siblings, cousins and grandparents, wearing funny clothes and partaking in holiday celebrations. We recognize this television as a family relation, or as a suggestible memory. In addition, Paik's long-term exploration of the materiality of the *signal* (not only the television object) extends this personal connection into practice and the future. Artists continue to rework Paik's gestures and thoughts like a television medium, once transformed into a signal and transmitted, they are subject to recording, potentially endless re-run, edit and re-combinations. Paik's work, like that of a letter posted in the mail, establishes an improvisational framework for conversational exchange. Paik's real time experiments with television signals such as *Participation TV* (1963-66) invited viewers to alter the video signal through a microphone, demonstrating the malleable and conversational capabilities of television, even if that conversation did not extend back into mainstream network television transmission.

The intimacy that Paik preserves by working the television medium also extends into his form of writing. Largely preserved as *letters*, the majority of his thoughts about his early video experiments are conveyed in the catalog *Videa 'n' Videology 1959-1973*.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps his letters arrived at the appropriate address before eventually joining archival collections or contributing to books and art catalogs through reproduction. Once overshooting its pre-determined location and landing in the archive, however, a letter never knows into what other hands or technologies it might fall. Jacques Derrida's analysis of Lacan extends the framework of the symbolic and destabilizes spatial locations through demonstrating the postal principle: how the correspondence of a letter may always *not* arrive at its destination.<sup>15</sup> From sculptural works such as *TV Buddha* (1973) that link television signals with the beyond, or video works such as *Global Groove* (1973) or *Suite 212* (1975) that refer to multinational corporations and the transferability of cultural forms, Paik's consistent medium

of television transmission cements a long-distance relationship between *here* and *there* without fixing a precise location.

How Paik's work both connects locations in time and space and maintains a letter-like intimacy requires a closer look. Starting in 1964, Paik had already begun experiments with distorting the television image, techniques displayed in works such as *Demagnitizer* (1965) and *Magnet TV* (1965). Like other thinkers in the 1960s such as Marshall McLuhan or Guy Debord, Paik's work commented upon the inescapable prevalence of television imagery and its expansive circling of the globe through the rapid development of satellite transmission. Yet Paik's techniques for manipulating the television signal have resonated among viewers tangibly, as demonstrated through the medium of television. Paik's equation is arguably even more direct than Guy Debord's analysis of commercialized media through film production. Paik had always worked at the forefront of new practices and by 1969-70 his collaboration with Shuya Abe resulted in one of the earliest electronic devices for manipulating television imagery: *The Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer*, suggesting that viewers could themselves place their hands in the video signal and make changes.

By this time, other artists started experimenting with techniques similar to those that Paik had already explored. The well-known early video artist Steina Vasulka describes this spirit of inventiveness among New York City artists at the time:

*Our discovery was a discovery because we discovered it. We didn't know all those people had discovered it before us. It was just like feedback: Pointing the camera at the TV set and seeing feedback was an invention that was invented over and over again. As late as 1972, people were inventing feedback, thinking they had just caught the fire of the gods.*<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 5.** *Digital Flames*, Emile Devereaux, 2007, animation still. © Emile Devereaux, 2007.

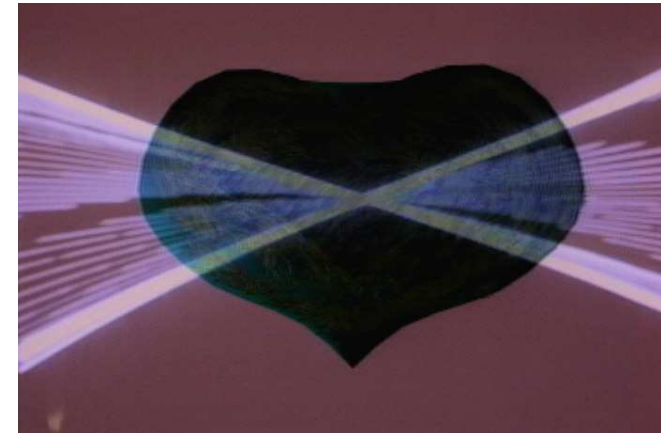
The easy availability of television sets contributed to a playful and accessible sense of experimentation around these technologies. With the tools at hand, techniques could be owned by each individual and belong to no one in particular. It was common to feel the right to possess a technique as much as one could possess a television set; when viewing Paik's work, one also feels a sense of being able to accomplish similar works oneself.

The friendly television box, a much cherished focal point for most families in Europe and the United States by the mid 1960s, encouraged a commonplace ritual of gathering and staring at the television screen in the family home. This activity also links Paik's work with letter writing, in the same way that Hill's letter writing guide locates the letter's point of origin as rooted in memories inside the heart, centrally aligned with the household fire: "Doubly dear is the letter from the hollowed hearthstone of the home fireside, where the dearest recollections of the heart lie garnered."<sup>17</sup> For Paik's early distortions of television imagery further abstract the transmission into the types of monochromatic patterns and flickering reminiscent of the lick of

flame in a fireplace or campsite. "When I first saw video feedback," explains Woody (the other half of the artistic Vasulka duo), "I knew I had seen the cave fire. It had nothing to do with anything, just a perpetuation of some kind of energy."<sup>18</sup> By evoking flame-like visuals, Paik's early video abstractions not only trigger intimate memories of gathering around fire or the television set, transmitting these sentiments widely, but the energy of the technological flames also conjures a spirit of inventiveness and exploration of new frontiers.

It seems that the independent explorers of early television technologies – transmissions that were newly beginning to circle the globe – were also individuals who crossed national borders and experienced migration in their own lives. Paik spent significant time outside of Korea, his country of birth, living in Japan, Germany and New York City. Woody and Steina Vasulka lived in Iceland, Czechoslovakia and New York City. One could chart other international migrations of other early video artists uprooted from 'home,' as if they were moving with the video flame; navigating geographically and across national and cultural boundaries.

Coincidentally, the only time I incorporated Paik's tools into my own work, I unconsciously connected Paik's electronic flames with a heart. The undulating rays radiating from a heart were an expression of my own vulnerability and an attempt to communicate across barriers of culture, language and geographical distance. I had been invited to contribute site-specific work in *Subjected Culture*, a feminist art exhibition in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Alongside another piece in the travelling group show, my private e-mail correspondence (an electronic letter), had been published by the curator in the exhibition catalog (with my reluctant permission). Before continuing to link my own personal experience with Paik through the equation of memory-heart-electronic-flame-letter, I'd like to say more about the technologies that contributed to my work.



**Figure 6.** *Bajo La Piel (Under the Skin)*, video stills from installation at Fondo Nacional des las Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Image by Emile Devereaux. © Emile Devereaux, 2008.

In 1972, a raster scan manipulation device was constructed for the Artist in Residency programme at the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, New York. Also known as the "Wobbulator" the apparatus operated alongside the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer, leaving its mark most noticeably upon "Paik's early TV experiments, such as *Dancing Patterns*."<sup>19</sup> The Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer primarily colorized imagery while the Wobbulator created the motion effects by magnetically scanning a "monitor modulated by audio signals."<sup>20</sup> Additional cameras allowed for generating video feedback and fine adjustments to the input signals through knobs, shaping the wavy patterns into the types of abstractions that, like the device's name, distort recognizable imagery into ever increasing waves of lines.

During my residency at the Experimental Television Center in 2008,<sup>21</sup> I made use of Paik's Wobbulator (without the synthesizer) to add distortion to video imagery input into the feedback loop; the monochromatic image quickly reduced itself into a radiating wave. Operating instinctively, I digitally composited the Wobbulator's distinctive patterns within a 3D animated world made up of a simple



fuzzy revolving planet in the shape of a human heart. Unaware of Paik's earlier use of the Wobbulator to create *Dancing Patterns*, I further merged this technologically mediated footage with clips of dancers extracted from archival films. Archival dancers emerge from the caverns of this strange heart planet (inside or outside the body?) in a flash of the Wobbulator's rays. As often occurs in the re-appropriation of archival imagery, the dancers in the final piece, *Bajo la piel (Under the Skin)* felt familiar, as if they had been seen before, perhaps from a memory of childhood. Like the letter that connects the inside of the home and heart with the outside world – linking memories, heart and hearth – the motivation behind this work was to reach across boundaries.

As a large-scale, site-specific projection in Argentina, the video seemed to speak to viewers in a similarly intuitive register. The archival footage of dancers formed a common cultural backdrop, drawing upon popular dance forms and styles. Loie Fuller's flowing angelic fabric wings and much appropriated dance style have had over a hundred years of exposure around the globe, and although



**Figure 7.** *Soldiers Stage Girlie Show*, archival footage from 1942, Universal Newsreels collection. Used with permission via the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

the comedian Eddie Cantor may not be as recognizable, he appears to be so – his classic vaudeville style and suit, bowler hat and tap dance, hold him hovering at the edge of memory, a familiar figure who's nearly forgotten. Although I feared that my production choices evoked feelings of sentimentality, I would take any measure to connect with audiences in this case. The curator had published my private e-mail correspondences in order to represent me at the outer edges of feminism, announcing me as a man born female, and in so doing shaping my identity differently than I would myself. Not wanting to market an identity better placed in a freak show, and at the risk of social isolation, I strategically sought common ground, embracing historical imagery from popular culture to draw viewers closer to my work.

More accurately, my trust and respect for the curator Graciela Ovejero led me to approve this act of disclosure.<sup>22</sup> Her vision for the exhibition was one of subversion. Travelling throughout Argentina, a collection of international experiences had been gathered by Ovejero to present new possibilities for women's lives to audiences outside of urban centres, prior to the final show at Fondo Nacional des las Artes in Buenos Aires. My desire to support her goal in a distant location collided with my fears of a digitally-connected world. Generating this

discourse at a distance threatened to produce uncomfortable confrontations in my actual physical location; potentially shaping future encounters as well. Here, my playful visual practices collided with forms of writing through e-mail correspondence. Boundaries tested and visually stretched within the confines of art seemed at risk of being pinned down by words. The narrative I sent for the catalogue on its own did not articulate identity with the directness that Ovejero sought. The negotiation of voices occurring through this e-mail correspondence between Argentina and New York, direct address and exposure in confrontation with poetic speech, was eventually resolved through publication of what was originally intended as a private exchange.

This experience represented simply another of the many moments where identity is removed from the hands of an individual and distorted, almost like Paik's wobbling image of the tap dancer in *Global Groove*. These manipulations may be performed by others, corporations or taken on ourselves. If the dissemination of tap dance can first be traced to the transportation of slaves from the West Indies in the 1800s, its subsequent adoption and alignment with vaudeville link it properly or improperly within the histories of several nations and cultures around the globe. Cultural forms are recognizable and therefore identifiable based on what has been seen before. They are rendered visible based on one's own experiences, whether the exposure is articulated by living persons or media screens. Nam June Paik certainly seemed to understand these inescapable distortions and reinterpretations cast upon him as an Asian man. What other choice did he have but to speak of "Westerners" and "we Asians"<sup>23</sup> as he did in his Binghamton Letter written in 1972? An earlier artist statement from 1963 expresses Paik's reluctance to market himself as a representative of Asian culture at all: "Now let me talk about Zen, although I avoid it usually, not to become the salesman of "OUR" culture."<sup>24</sup> Paik does speak of Zen, but he ambitiously balances the discussion with a more global perspective, positioning his practices and observations of his experimental televi-

sion within philosophies of perception, experience and art-making in relation to Sartre, Plato, Hegel, Schiller, Joyce, and Zen. Paik intelligently understood the necessity of framing himself as a spokesperson for Electronic Zen and to playfully construct narratives of Asian cultures while based within Western societies, leading at times to contradictions.<sup>25</sup> In a similar appropriation, Korean media have placed emphasis on Paik and his work as expressions of Korean nationality.<sup>26</sup> Notably, Paik's typewriter also produced combinations of text and symbol that our computers cannot exactly reproduce: "The working process and the final result has little to do, ... and therefore, ... by no previous work was I so happy working as in these TV experiments."<sup>27</sup> His unconventional treatment of punctuation echoing the distribution of his words and practices along media channels, sent to unknown destinations, the spaces filled in by those who will receive, manipulate and carry his messages forward.

Alongside the debates his work generates, Paik also suggests a utopia. Paik represents a freedom of aligning oneself with technology, allowing for a positioning that moves through cultural referents and varying degrees of otherness. Media imagery contributes to a superficial reading of identities, projected onto us despite our refusal, based on assumptions like gender, race and nationality, representing the political, economic and historically based goings-on of our 'home' nations. Meanwhile, other identities remain outside of media recognition, but never permanently or 'safely' so. Within Paik's improvisational frameworks for conversation and the exchange of ideas, the *I* who speaks, like that of the Fluxus performer, forms a fleeting, unfixed and unavoidable nodal point that nonetheless conveys identity.

Other republished letters indicate more formal aspects of migration, such as Paik's request to John Cage for visa sponsorship: "It is not easy to get the U.S. visa for a South Korean citizen." Here he provides a sample letter for Cage to copy: "The content can be harmless, f.i. 'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, MR. NAM JUNE PAIK IS MY OLD PUPIL AND FRIEND SINCE'" (followed by an unintelligible typo).<sup>28</sup>

Even this sample letter written for official purposes does not alter Paik's light-hearted tone; it still implies an ambiguous destination, a nameless reader, and points to the arbitrary legal requirement that seeks to assign an identifiable date as a marker for the start of a friendship.

Treating identity playfully, however, is dangerous, particularly when local legislation places individuals within intolerable, exploitable, or otherwise unprotected categories and when distances are obliterated through the continuousness of the digital. Paik admirably played his unavoidable game of identity and in so doing, demonstrated methods for confusing the media's identifying systems and introducing distortion. Even my work *Bajo la piel* (*Under the Skin*), which draws upon Paik's rays in order to gather strangers together on common footing, sets up systems of recognition based on disguise (as a joyful gesture and act of rebellion against establishing fixed categories). Underemphasized Can-can girls in the centre of the frame, upon looking more closely (or perhaps remaining unnoticed) are WWII soldiers in drag.<sup>29</sup> The types of distortions and weaving together of cultural codes that media allows do not undermine our connections with our hearts or homes but rather help us to inventively craft the world as we see it, rather than accept definitions that are handed to us.

The revolutionary invention of the typewriter adjusted women's access to education, employment and the act of writing itself, adding lives and identities to official histories and the generation of discourse. Let's follow the typewriter's lead and use technologically-mediated means to shift cultural or sub-cultural markers in discourse: "Only as long as women remained excluded from discursive technologies could they exist as the other of words and printed matter."<sup>30</sup> As Kittler eloquently states: "Only the excessive media link of optics and acoustics, spellings and acronyms, between the letters, numbers, and symbols of a standardized keyboard makes humans (and women) as equal and equal signs."<sup>31</sup> Creating new combina-

tions touches others: “[a]s Derrida has taught us, there are many futures and even more returns.”<sup>32</sup>

To identify is not the point – let’s follow Paik’s lead and participate in systems of playful exchange. ■



**Figure 8.** *Bajo La Piel (Under the Skin)*, documentation of installation at Fondo Nacional des las Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Image by Emile Devereaux. © Emile Devereaux, 2008.

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2. Thos. E. Hill, *Hill's Manual of Social & Business Forms: Guide to Correct Writing* (Chicago, IL: Moses Warren & Co., 1875), 79.
3. Kittler, 192.
4. Nam June Paik, *Nam June Paik: videa 'n' videology, 1959-1973*, ed. Judson Rosebush (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), unpagued.
5. Hill, 32.
6. Kittler, 184. Kittler's footnote credits Cynthia Cockburn as the source of this example, her 1980's feminist historical analyses of the male domination of technology likely provides the fuel behind Kittler's words. For example see *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How* (Boston, MA: North Eastern University Press, 1985).
7. Ibid, 199.
8. Ibid, 183.
9. Ibid.
10. Excerpt, "Charlotte Morman and the New York Avant Garde," by Fred Stern. See in particular, clip starting at 4:30, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiEJdOlgcDE> (accessed January 20, 2013).
11. For example, Elizabeth Armstrong's description of Paik's performance, *Zen for Head* (1962) emphasizes its shared ownership with La Monte Young and its intermedia qualities, thereby linking this work with future art works involving acts of appropriation and "culture-jamming," facilitated by the development of digital imaging technologies. Elizabeth Armstrong, "Fluxus and the Museum," in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center: 1993), 4-5. Amelia Jones links the piece with Janine Antoni's *Loving Care* (1992). If Antoni's work can be seen as a commentary and subversion of women's labour, then Paik shares a similar reading alongside a commentary about the global division of labor. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press: 1998) 281, n. 42.
12. The recurring theme of the recent retrospective exhibition and catalogue of Paik's work at the Tate: Sook-Kyung Lee and Susanne Rennert, eds., *Nam June Paik* (Dusseldorf & London: Tate, 2010).
13. This observation was reinforced by Patricia Clough's lecture, *The New Aesthetic: Autobiography and Sociality*, Lancaster University, May 30, 2012
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25. For example, Paik retrospectively described keeping his critiques of Communism to himself during the late 60s and 70s when living among artists in Western cities. See also the interview with Ken Paik Hakuta about his self representation as "A poor man from a poor country," in Sook-Kyung Lee and Susanne Rennert, eds., *Nam June Paik*, exhibition catalogue for Tate Liverpool and Museum Kunstpalast, Dusseldorf.
26. Youngna Kim, "Constructing Transnational Identities: Paik Nam June and Lee Ufan," in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and. Convergence: The proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson, 910 (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, Imprint of Melbourne University Pub., 2009).
27. Paik, 1974. Reprint of "afterlude to the EXPOSITION of EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION," March 1963, Galerie Parnass.
28. Paik, 1974. Reprint of a letter written to John Cage in 1964.
29. "Many different layers of meaning are built into my artworks, like hidden 'visual tracks' available to be read; out in the open, but not necessarily possible for everybody to see." Devereaux, 198.
30. Kittler, 214.
31. Ibid., 231
32. Avital Ronell and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Fighting Theory*, trans. Catherine Porter (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 2010), 153.

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