

# MEDAL DAY 2004

2004 MACDOWELL MEDALIST  
IN VISUAL ART

## Nam June Paik



*On August 22nd, the Colony awarded its Edward MacDowell Medal for outstanding achievement in visual art to Nam June Paik. This was the 45th time the Medal was awarded, in the past going to such luminaries as Robert Frost, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Merce Cunningham. This year remarks were given by John Hanhardt, senior curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Mr. Paik’s nephew, Ken Hakuta. They are reprinted below. Mr. Paik, who was unable to attend the ceremony due to health, sent a video message produced by John Huffman, which is pictured below.*

### Remarks by John Hanhardt

This marvelous place and festive setting is a place that honors artists, as we’ve heard, and as I know so well. Just this morning I had a chance to visit and meet with some of the artists, and this is really a celebration on behalf of all the artists who are here. I’m very much honored to be part of this and to have the honor of presenting the 2004 MacDowell Medal to Nam June Paik.

Now, Nam June Paik is referred to as the “father” but he’s also called the “George Washington” of video art in recognition of his unique role in creating and establishing a new art form. It is a really remarkable, legendary, and I should add, heroic story, of life, of true extraordinary accomplishment. A global journey from Nam June’s birthplace — Seoul, Korea — to Japan, and Europe, and on to this country. Today, in honoring Nam June Paik we are recognizing a true visionary; an artist who through the

scope and ambition of his art and ideas had an enormous impact on the art world, gaining international recognition for his singular contributions to late 20th-century art. He led, through his art and ideas, the transformation of video into an art practice that we now see at the center of the international art world. Nam June, when he came to New York 40 years ago, saw a future where the media arts as communication and as a creative medium would link global cultures and redefine art making.

What I’d like to reflect on today is Nam June’s art and ideas, for he has given us new means and ways to see and understand the world around us. Designing new artist tools, he created a new language of moving image making. He imagined television as a totally creative medium, through his television and videotape productions. He remade video into a plastic art form as sculpture and installation art. And he achieves all of this by not being satisfied with what exists in the world. He believes in life as an ongoing creative process of research, renewal, and discovery.

I’m privileged to call him my greatest teacher. And for so many of us around the world, his example — his accomplishments and charismatic genius — captured our imaginations and

challenged us to see and think and to look at the creative process in radical new ways, to not be passive receivers, and to be open to new ideas from unexpected places.

To understand Nam June’s transformation of the moving image of the electronic medium of video and the communications system of television is to begin with his interest in music, composition, and performance. As Nam June wrote in 1963, “I am tired of renewing the form of



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music. I must renew the ontological form of music.” In other words, transform the whole idea of music. As part of Fluxus, the neo-data, avant-garde movement, Nam June began to explore how performance could change how we see and hear by taking his early interest in modernism and turning it upside down and inside out and creating a dynamic dialogue through different arts and materials. He was a laboratory of ideas, ideas drawn from different cultures, which were being tested and were moving through his aphoristic writings, his performances and art works, anticipating what were to be the great changes in late 20th-century art. Music and performance art, like his early interest in film, were temporal media experiences about receiving sounds in time, experiencing place and event as a new act, and life experience within and outside the exhibition space.

Nam June was, right from the beginning, fearless — absolutely confident in the power of his imagination and creative spirit. In his first one-artist exhibition in Germany in 1963 — 1963! — *Exposition of Music — Electronic Television* linked music, new instruments of music, to the electronic medium of television. Amid all the pieces that were in that show, there was a room filled with prepared pianos. These pianos were covered with different objects — toys, noisemakers — and inside he altered the piano itself so it made a whole new dimension of sound. Adjacent to that were his prepared televisions, placed around the space, upside down, on their side, in which the received broadcast image was distorted by reworking the television set.

Here, before the development of the portable videotape recorder and player, which was introduced in 1965, he was working with the television to turn it into an artist’s medium — into a new kind of visual instrument — just as he changed the piano into a new kind of visual and auditory instrument. Altering how we see and play and interact with the piano, he altered how we see and play the television set, the monitor. Nam June was realizing a new capacity for the medium — not the passive reception of the broadcast image, but making it into an artist’s instrument, an interactive medium. By renewing the ontological form of the medium, he had discovered how to create a whole new dimension of moving image making.

He had his first one-artist show in New York in 1965. In 1964, he came to this country, and I’d

like to just quote to you, the title of that exhibition was *Nam June Paik: Electronic TV, Color TV Experiments, 3 Robots, 2 Zen Boxes & 1 Zen Can*. It was this fantastic show about the possibilities of new images created out of the cathode ray tube, the tube on which you saw television. His *Magnet TV*, which is now in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection, he placed a magnet onto it and created an abstract image on the screen. It wasn’t the broadcast image, but he was creating an entirely new moving image that no one had seen before, and was rendering the TV set into sculpture, into a sculptural element with a moving image unlike anything seen before. Paik incorporated then the Portapak, as it was developed, and placed it into his art making. So he was changing the tools, he was changing the technology. This is not the passive reception, but the interactive, *proactive*, action to change art.

Nam June through his gallery exhibitions, performances, and collaborations created a truly visionary path over the next four decades. Let me just cite his performances with the incredible Charlotte Moorman. Some of you may remember her, a legendary performance artist, cellist, interpreter of avant-garde music, for whom Nam June created the *TV Cello* in 1972. This was a cello made out of televisions, placed together, and at which she could play visual images and auditory sounds. And she called it “the first advance in the cello since 1600.” And their performances around the globe were a vital part of the international avant-garde. He developed with Shuya Abe, a Japanese engineer with whom he worked on a number of projects, a video synthesizer in the 1960s which was a device that transformed a mix of video and film images, creating a visual vocabulary for the new medium. Like a painter mixing his pigments, Paik was mixing electronic colors, film and video footage, manipulating and altering the moving image in a way unimagined before this new artist’s tool was created. With this new image-making device, Nam June was to produce videotapes that were to be broadcast on television and seen in his sculptures and installations.

So here he is actually making the very tools that didn’t exist in the marketplace. There was nothing to mix and match and transform and alter the electronic imagery of video. He had to make the tool. And it then subsequently was to have an impact on all kinds of art making.

His television productions, I want to mention, are really seminal landmarks in the history of the medium. From *Global Groove* in 1973, where he

*The work of Nam June Paik.*  
FROM TOP: MacDowell Buddha, installed at the Colony; Family of Robot, Grandfather, 1986; Magnet TV, 1965.

imagined a future where *TV Guide* would be as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory. Featuring the Paik-Abe synthesizer, it mixed ads from Japanese television, TV work by a whole range of artists, including performances by John Cage. To his global television satellite-linked productions. Here he joined together New York, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and it featured performances by artist friends, including Joseph Beuys, Merce Cunningham, Allen Ginsberg, David Bowie, Laurie Anderson. In productions such as *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* to his video essays, which have been broadcast, *Living with the Living Theater*, *Guadalcanal Requiem* and *Allan and Allen's Complaint*. They together constitute, I think, among the most brilliant sustained and innovative productions for television that expanded the very idea of television as an artist's medium. They are personal, compellingly beautiful, and moving visual essays.

Now his astonishing array, and with all this I'm talking about this invention, there's this extraordinary array of video sculptures and installations, which have entered into the art world and into museum collections, private collections. I always mention a few highlights from his *TV Garden*, which is in the Guggenheim collection. Imagine a darkened space filled with plants growing and televisions playing his tape, *Global Groove*. *Vyramid*, a tall structure-sculpture of televisions, playing kaleidoscopically his moving images, in the Whitney Museum. *TV Buddha*, which we have an example of on view today, with the Buddha contemplating himself through the video closed-circuit system, the original of which is in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. *Video Flag*, the Detroit Institute of Arts; *TV Clock* in the Pompidou Collection; the *Family of Robots*, Art Institute of Chicago; *Fin de Siecle II*, a wall of monitors of the moving images, articulating and changing that architectural space; to *The More the Better* in Seoul. Returning to his birthplace, creating an installation in which the museum built a building to house it — 1,003 monitors celebrating the October 3rd Korean liberation in a national Korean contemporary art museum. Here the very physical quality of the moving image, like all of his work, just expands and transforms the very presence of art.

Robert had mentioned the exhibitions I have curated in working with Nam June, and I want to mention *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* at the Guggenheim Museum in Frank Lloyd Wright's extraordinary rotunda space. Now I met with Nam June as we were planning it, and I said, "Nam June, how are we going to activate this

space?" He said, "John, I want you to create a seven-story waterfall, through which we're going to project laser. We're going to project the laser onto the oculus, the top. We're going to cover the ground floor with about 200 monitors, and we're going to project video images on the side." He understood that this extraordinary space that Wright had created could be activated to embrace the moving image, from laser and its power and energy, to his moving images captured in this physical space.

Nam June's cybernetic vision of art and technology fused an artwork that truly inspires and astonishes. I can't tell you how many artists, museum directors, curators, critics, members of the public, tell me of their experience in enjoying Nam June's art, and their wish to see favorite pieces again. It's an extraordinary accomplishment, this artist who imagined and realized a new art form and created major art work in all of its genres and formats. It's a towering achievement that shows a singular command of his medium, and a genius to imagine — to create — art that inspires with its intelligence, wit, and I should add, playful spirit. He's a humanist, demystifying technology — not removing it from our ability to interact and create with it, creating a personal, and human-scale art, wanting to entertain, educate, and give to people an experience to enjoy through an aesthetic that brings beauty and the supreme insight of play into art.

*Medal Day 2004. FROM TOP: John Hanhardt and Ken Hakuta, speakers; MacDowell Chairman Robert MacNeil, John Hanhardt, Ken Hakuta, Executive Director Cheryl Young, President Carter Wiseman, and Resident Director David Macy at Hillcrest.*

*Nam June's cybernetic vision of art and technology fused an artwork that truly inspires and astonishes.*

—JOHN HANHARDT



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TOP: *The More the Better*, 1988; BOTTOM: *Modulation in Sync*, 1999.

Recognized around the world and claimed by each country as their own, Nam June is really, truly, as I mentioned, a global artist. Korea, his birthplace; Japan, where he studied; Germany, where he lived and created and taught, and represented that country in the Venice Biennial; and also in France, Italy, Holland, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand — all countries in which he worked and created and had an extraordinary impact. His creative energy, his tireless ambition to achieve the unexpected is described in an extraordinary, wonderful body of drawings, prints, paintings, videotapes, sculptures and installations, and writings. An enduring and vital legacy that is today inspiring a new generation of artists working in video, on the Internet, who see his ability to invent and to create, and the impact on the technology, and not be this “passive receiver,” but to create new methods, new media and materials, is really an inspiration.

In 1996, he suffered a stroke, and is now confined to a wheelchair. He continues to develop ideas; as I mentioned, his recent commission in Berlin for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, an extraordinary piece, and of course his retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. And he paints and draws and plans for the future, but he cannot travel, and speaking in public is an effort.

I want to acknowledge here the love and support of his wife, Shigeko Kubota, and the extraordinary help and support of Ken Hakuta, his nephew and manager of the studio, who has brought just so much to the quality of life for the artist. And to John Huffman, who is with us, working with the artist in the studio, and produced the videotape that we’re going to see where Nam June is acknowledging his thanks to MacDowell.

So, with that, thank you. I turn things over to Ken Hakuta.

## Remarks by Ken Hakuta

Thank you very much. Unfortunately, Nam June’s health is not that good, so he really cannot come here. On his behalf, I am here to accept the Medal. He would really like to thank Robert MacNeil, and Carter Wiseman, Cheryl Young, and all the board members of this great Colony. I think he would love to be here. He lives in SoHo. Maybe you’ve seen him being wheeled

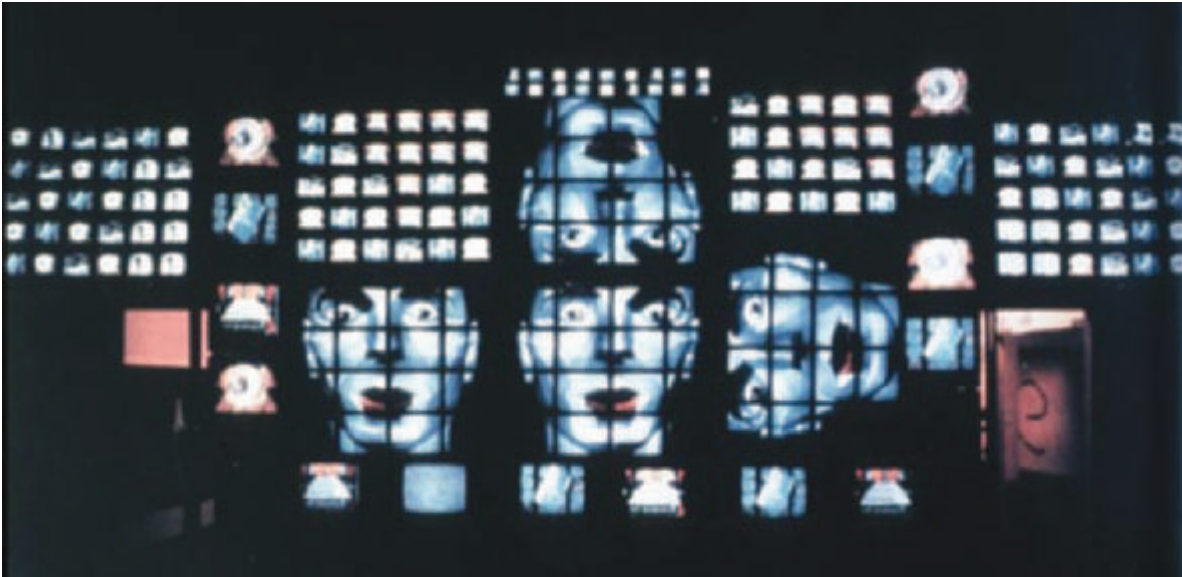
around if you hang around there, as some of you have.

He has prepared, with John Huffman here, and John Hanhardt, a personal greeting to all of you, which we will show after a couple of words here. Also, be sure to check out the *TV Buddha* in the building next to us, because that is really quite a beautiful and great installation. I think you will enjoy that.

Nam June’s health is not good, but as John Hanhardt said, he is still productive. He paints every day and he comes up with concepts, and you’ll see his latest project in the videotape that we will show. He’s excited about ideas; he’s always interested in current news. He’s interested in everything from sports, science, stem-cell research. He’s into all the scandals, you know, he likes to know what’s going on — he’s always into that. As his nephew I’ve hung around him — my life has intersected with his throughout my whole life — and now I run his studio, and I try to keep him from going bankrupt. I say that because every time he has a project, he goes for broke. And more. He’ll spend everything he has now, plus all his income for the next five years. He has done that repeatedly throughout his career, so the artists I’ve met at the Colony here, some of whom have said, “Oh, geez, we have no money.” Well, you know, that doesn’t seem to be anything new.

John Huffman here, and I, we try to run Nam June’s projects, which are around the world and quite complicated sometimes. And also we do things; for example, there are so many interesting Nam June stories. Nam June is quite an outrageous person — he really doesn’t care about anything. He really does not. If he were here today he definitely would not be in a suit. He’d be in an overcoat, probably. He doesn’t care how he dresses, he doesn’t care how he looks. He really doesn’t care about too many things. He really doesn’t care what other people think of him.

This is an interesting story I’ll tell you. Aside from trying to keep him “liquid,” this is one of the most interesting things I did with him. In 1998, Nam June was invited to a state dinner at the Clinton White House, June of ’98. If some of you remember, it’s not that long ago, that was the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which had broken out earlier, in January or February. Nam June was going, and he asked if I would go with him. So I said, “Sure.” I went with him. I wheeled him into The White House, and these gigantic Marines took over from there. Nam June



LEFT: *Fin de Siècle II*, 1989; BELOW: *Medal Day* 2004 celebration.

was very amused, I think. He was having a great time, talking to all the people there.

Then we got to the receiving line. Nam June decided to show respect, I think, to the president, Mrs. Clinton, and the other dignitaries there. He decided to get up from his wheelchair, get on his walker, and try to walk across the receiving line. Across the receiving line at the state dinner is the world's press. They're all there; I don't know how many, tens of cameras and video cameras, everything. So as Nam June is talking to President Clinton — and I'm standing right behind him as he's making some small talk to President Clinton — Nam June turns around and says to me: "Ken, I think my pants are falling." True story here. And I said, "What?" "My pants are falling!" he says. I look down, and his pants are falling! They are completely down on the floor. So I pick up his pants. I pull them up and I just hold them there.

Now, Bill Clinton is such a cool president he still continued to have small talk with my uncle. I think they were talking about Chelsea, maybe, I don't know. A little bit down the line, I could see that Hillary was really not amused at all. She was ticked. But Bill Clinton was — nothing. It was really quite amazing.

After that interesting dinner, Nam June was inundated with phone calls, faxes, everything. All his friends around the world thought that was the best Fluxus performance in the world. Everybody wanted to know, including the press, whether it was an accident or whether it was — because you have to remember, my uncle is in a wheelchair now but he has a reputation for being a cultural terrorist. So I asked Nam June, "Did you drop your pants on purpose? Was it an act? Was it an

artistic statement? A *political* statement?" And so he said, "My pants dropped. That's all." He told me, and this is very Nam June, he said, "It really doesn't matter. It was a great event."

He's just like that — totally unfazed. Was he embarrassed? No, of course not! And I think Bill Clinton was very cool about that, too. The press was so excited that somebody else's pants — not the president's — had dropped in The White House. They were so excited by that. It was the ultimate Fluxus event.

About two hours ago, I called Nam June and I told him I was going to receive this Medal for him, and I asked him, "What advice do you have for the artists in the Colony?" I'll pass on to you what he said. He said, "Work hard. Be lazy," which is a very Nam June Paik thing to say. And he wished you all well. Thank you very much.

*All photos of Mr Paik's work courtesy of John Hanhardt.*



*Now I run his studio, and I try to keep him from going bankrupt. I say that because every time he has a project, he goes for broke.*

—KEN HAKUTA