

Art in the Age of the Internet 1989 to Today

This text originally appeared on the temporary blog accompanying the exhibition *Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today* at the Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston, on view Feb 7 - May 20, 2018.

Emily Watlington on the 'Paiktriarchy' of Video Art History

By sheer coincidence, footage from two works in our exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center—*Before Projection: Video Sculpture 1974-1995*—appears in the ICA's *Art in the Age of the Internet, 1989 to Today*. Nam June Paik's *Internet Dreams* (1994), which opens the ICA's exhibition, contains synthesized stars and hearts also found in Shigeko Kubota's *River* (1979-81), as well as footage of Paik and the artist Charlotte Moorman collaborating also found in his "robot" *Charlotte Moorman II* (1995).

This overlap succinctly captures the way that Paik has always been part of a *network* of artists, countering common narratives that he is a "father" or "inventor" of video art. Elsewhere, I have called these narratives 'the Nam June Paiktriarchy of video art history.'¹ And in a tour I recently gave connecting the exhibitions at the List Center and the ICA, I highlighted instead how his network of artists included women collaborators that his work overshadowed—including Moorman, and his wife Kubota. I wanted to show that movements aren't invented by singular figures, and that it is typically impossible to prove firsts: one would have to claim that every video made before Paik was not "art." But more significantly, I wanted to highlight how the networked connection of artists the two exhibitions reveal is an innate and significant property of the medium of video as well as art in the age of the internet. Moreover, it highlights how concerns from video art preceded net-based practices. For Paik, the idea of "broadcasting"—a term used to describe radio and analog television

¹ Watlington, Emily. 2017. "Total Freedom to Dissolve': Shigeko Kubota's Video Sculptures." *Haunt Journal of Art* vol 4. 10.

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but derived from agriculture and means “to disperse seeds widely”—prefigured the internet in enabling the broad spread of imagery and ideas.

Indeed, Paik’s term “electronic superhighway,” which he coined in 1974, is regularly invoked by historians as his “prediction” of the internet. But Alexander Galloway’s important history of the early internet offers a critical point: the interstate system is itself an internet, meaning, it is a network of networks. And both the interstate and internet were developed around the same time—the late 1950s to early 1970s—for the same reason: to decentralize control in the face of nuclear threat and enable rapid communication and transportation in case of war.²

These forms of de-centralized, de-hierarchized networks developed in response to nuclear threat were later imagined as utopic, egalitarian forms—for Paik especially, who went so far as to imagine broadcasting as a tool for ending segregation by allowing students from different neighborhoods to interact without “stressful bus trips and their negative side effects.”³ But less optimistic artists have helped us see how even if the internet is a distributed network, it still intersects with other systemic forms of inequality.⁴ At the ICA, Lynn Hershmann-Leeson’s pair of dolls with cameras for eyes that surveil the galleries and livestream the footage online set up a hierarchy between surveillant and surveyed. And in Sondra Perry’s *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (2016), she considers how systemic oppression of black identity is programmed into digital technology through a series of images that reveal how image capture and editing technologies are calibrated for white skin.

-Emily Watlington

² Galloway, Alexander. 2004. *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 28-53.

³ Paik, Nam June. “Media Planning for the Postindustrial Society: The 21st Century is Now Only 26 Years Away.” <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/33/>

⁴ See: Dean, Jodi. 2003. “Why the net is not public sphere.” *Constellations* 10, no. 1: 95-112.