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# Like Playing a Musical Instrument: Paik's "Laser Idea" and Exhibitions

## Colophon

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김윤서

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악기를 연주하듯이:  
백남준의 “레이저 아이디어”와  
세계 순회 전시

Like Playing a Musical  
Instrument:  
Nam June Paik’s “Laser  
Idea” and Exhibitions

KIM YOONSEO

김윤서는 백남준아트센터 큐레이터로서 동시대 미술 전시와 연구를 기획한다. 공적 자원으로서 미술관의 역할과 예술실천, 문화예술정책과의 결합에 관심이 있다. 기획전 《백남준의 보고서 1968-1979》(2022), 《오픈 코드: 공유지 연결망》(2021), 《침묵의 미래: 하나의 언어가 사라진 순간》(2020), 학술 심포지엄 《미술관 없는 사회, 어디에나 있는 미술관》(2020) 등의 전시와 연구 프로젝트를 기획하고 도록과 학술 저널을 출판했다.

Kim Yoonseo is a curator of Nam June Paik Art Center working in the field of museology and contemporary art. Her research interests lie in the social role of museums, digital museum practice, and the possibilities for connecting curatorial work and cultural policy. Her curatorial projects include the exhibitions **The Consultant: Paik's Papers 1968-1979** (2022), **Open Codes: Networked Commons** (2021), **The Future of Silence: When Your Tongue Vanishes** (2020), and she has also contributed to symposium series such as **Living in the Postdigital**, **Reliving the Museum** (2020), along with producing exhibition catalogues and academic journal publication.

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While working with my colleagues to organize the exhibition **Transmission** (Nam June Paik Art Center, 2023), I started contemplating some fundamental questions about why Nam June Paik focused on light and how to best exhibit his works involving lasers. While the previous presentations today have focused primarily on **Transmission Tower** (2002) and **32 Cars for the 20th Century** (1997), I'd now like to explore some of Paik's earlier works and exhibitions, along with his writings, seeking clues to these questions from his artistic trajectory.

Nam June Paik expressed his thoughts on lasers in various letters and documents starting from 1965, the year after he moved to New York. That year, in the bottom line of a flyer introducing himself as a video artist to the New York art scene, he mentioned lasers somewhat out of the blue: "Laser idea No 3 - Because of VVHF of LASER, we will have enough radio stations to afford Mozart-only stations, Cage-only stations, Bogart-only TV stations, Underground Movie-only TV stations, etc. etc. etc."<sup>1</sup>

The same year, Paik also shared his imaginative ideas in writings to engineers, speculating about the use of laser technology in art and envisioning the wireless phones of the today: "Can the laser, so-said breakthrough in electronic, become also the breakthrough in art?? Some day every high-brows will have LaserOphone number, as they have today telephone of telex number, which enable to communicate everyone everywhere wirelessly and simultaneously."<sup>2</sup>

In 1965, when discussions about the transition to a computerized society were in full swing, Nam June Paik sent a letter to Billy Klüver, an electrical engineer at Bell Labs and founder of E.A.T. (Experiments in Arts and Technology) Paik then began interacting with various engineers from Bell Labs, which led to him being given a position as

1 Nam June Paik, "Electronic Video Recorder" (1965), in **Nam June Paik: Vide a 'n' Videology 1959-1973**, exh. cat. (New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), unpaginated.

2 Nam June Paik, "Utopian Laser-TV Station" (1965), in **We Are in Open Circuits**, eds. John G. Hanhardt et al. (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 101.

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visiting artist at Bell Labs, where he conducted computer experiments in 1967 and 1968. At that time, some of the scientists who had discovered and patented key principles of lasers were affiliated with Bell Labs, which had also played a central role in the development of transistors and fiber optics. Giving him access to such world-class human and material resources, Paik's experience as a resident artist at Bell Labs surely had a profound influence on his work, ultimately enabling him to realize his rather idealistic vision for lasers in art.

Later, in a 1974 report,<sup>3</sup> Paik described how television broadcast rights were being eroded by capitalist motivations. He highlighted the imbalance in broadcast transmission and reception strength, noting that the strongest signals were reserved for commercial broadcasters and major markets like New York, while people in small towns or rural areas of the US had difficulty receiving even public broadcasts. He then encouraged greater interest in communication media other than books and traditional print materials, particularly video art. To address the imbalance, Paik proposed the "Electronic Super Highways," a term that would later be widely used to describe the internet. He argued that, just as the United States had constructed highways connecting the east and the west in the 1920s, which helped to revitalize the economy by boosting the automobile industry and allowing for easier transport of goods, the nation should now focus on improving the transport of information through broadband networks.

One of the key examples in this context is Route 66, the first transcontinental highway in the United States, which appears in many of Nam June Paik's artworks. Constructed as one of the first contemporary highways in the US, Route

3 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning for the Post Industrial Age" (1974), in *We Are in Open Circuits*, eds. John G. Hanhardt et al. (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 154-165.

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66 soon became an iconic and historical road. Just as the Gyeongbu Expressway now serves as a central lifeline in South Korea, Route 66 played a crucial role in connecting the east and west of the United States, contributing significantly to economic development. This transcontinental road inspired Paik's "Electronic Super Highways," an idea that has spread throughout the world and continues to expand to this day. And lasers, which are a core technology enabling our powerful electronic communication networks, now traverse the entire globe from east to west, disseminating information. Paik subsequently developed his concept through various artworks and exhibitions with the phrase "Electronic Super Highways" in the title, visualizing the cultural diversity and identity of each state in the United States, while expressing his desire for hyper-connection and communication. To be specific, Paik promoted his idea throughout the US with a well-known work entitled **Electronic Super Highways**, now in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, as well as a major traveling exhibition of the same name, which traveled to several museums over a five-year period, including Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art in Florida in 1994.

Paik had already explored the concept of "Electronic Super Highways" in various works produced in Germany. In 1977, for example, Paik and his colleagues presented a performance via satellite broadcast for the opening ceremony of Documenta 6 in Kassel. Host Peter Iden explained the performance from a studio in Kassel, while artist Russell Connor, located in the United States, broadcast live images of Germany via satellite. A number of Paik's works – including **TV Cello**, **TV Bra**, **TV Buddha**, and **TV Bed** – appeared in this performance, which marked the beginning of his major works involving satellite broadcasts. Today, the entire video can be viewed worldwide through the online database "Paik's Video Study," established by Nam June Paik Art Center.

As I was preparing for this presentation, my attention was drawn to another artist who participated in Documenta 6:

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the German artist Horst H. Baumann, who presented a work involving lasers, entitled **Laser Environment**. Starting in 1980, a few years after the opening of Documenta 6, Baumann and Paik teamed up to present dynamic works combining lasers and video at traveling exhibitions in Germany. Through these works and exhibitions, such as **Laser Video**, **Video Gate**, and **Video Laser Environment**, we can observe how the collaborative process enabled these two artists to expand their work.

Around the same time, in 1982, Paik and Baumann collaborated on a laser video that was shown at Paik's solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. According to the museum's press release, this collaboration was one of two projection works that were featured at Paik's solo exhibition, and the exhibition map shows that it was installed at the end of the visitor route. Notably, this work had previously been shown in Germany before being introduced to the US at Paik's exhibition at the Whitney. Rather than directly projecting lasers in the manner of today's beam projectors, this installation utilized lasers as a light source. To try to understand how this work operated based solely on images from the exhibition, I consulted with artists Hong Minki and Yun Jeho. It seems that Paik and Baumann utilized refraction to project multiple images. In addition, crystal lenses were used to diffuse the lasers, since, at that time, projecting a laser on a fixed point for an extended period of time would have posed a fire hazard. The prominent display of multiple projected images can be seen as an extension of the many works involving multiple monitors that Paik created in the 1980s and 1990s. This concept was further extended in **Sistine Chapel**, featured at the 1993 Venice Biennale, in which Paik used forty-two projectors to cast images on all four walls and the ceiling of the exhibition space.

At the 1993 Venice Biennale, Nam June Paik was the representative of the German Pavilion. After opening that exhibition in June, he returned to Korea two months later for the Taejon Expo, where he introduced a new work entitled **Taejon Memory** at the exhibition **Future Lies Ahead**. Paik had

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been invited to participate in the Taejon Expo by the art event's curator Pontus Hultén. In keeping with the globalization policy of President Kim Young-sam, the Taejon Expo marked the start of a new trend in Korea in the 1990s, wherein many foreign artists, curators, and art professionals were invited to contribute to sculpture parks or host major art events. Notably, Pontus Hultén is perhaps best remembered as the curator of the exhibition **The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age** (MoMA, 1968), which was the first time that Paik showed his video works at MoMA. Hultén also served as the founding director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where he actively promoted video art, which was then unfamiliar to the French art scene dominated by the traditional media of painting and sculpture. After establishing the department of photography, film, and video at the Centre Pompidou in 1977, Hultén held a retrospective of Nam June Paik there in 1978. He also spearheaded efforts to add Paik's video works to the collection of the Centre Pompidou, and their collaboration continued at the 1993 Taejon Expo.

In preparation for the 1993 exhibition, Paik exchanged letters with Hultén in which he discussed the background and title of his new work, which used eight early-model automobiles to represent industrial society. Paik revealed that the title **Taejon Memory: Tribute to Bob Breer's Father** was inspired by his own memories of the Korean War, when he and his family had evacuated from Seoul to Busan via Daejeon when he was eighteen years old. The second part of the title refers to Paik's fellow artist Bob Breer, whose father Carl Breer had designed a model of the Buick 35. Thus, for this work, Paik located several scrapped automobiles in the United States, including a Buick 35, and had them shipped to Daejeon. Notably, many existing records show that such efforts to import large quantities of commercial goods, such as decommissioned vehicles or antique televisions, for art exhibitions in Korea often faced problems getting through customs.

Although Paik did not create a detailed manual for the exhibition, his letters can serve as a type of manual. In his



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letters, he wrote that the cars could be arranged according to the curator's desire, parked in a single group or scattered here and there, even in a parking lot. Paik expressed his desire for audience members to be able to directly engage with the cars by touching and even entering them. But he also conceded that the cars could be kept locked, if keeping them open posed any problems for the venue. Through photos of the exhibition, we can see that visitors were able to get very close to the cars, although they were not allowed to enter them. Instead, the vehicles were filled with various everyday objects, such as mannequins, guitars, and television monitors. As a result, these objects became the central elements of the work, signifying changes in mobility and communication. The phrase "Electronic Super Highways" was written on the cars, emphasizing the core concept that Paik had been promoting since 1974.

Looking back at this exhibition, many questions arise. What happened to these cars? Where are they now? Were they disposed of after the exhibition? Should they have been preserved and restored, like Paik's **Fractal Turtle Ship**, which was shown at the same time in a different hall? In 2023, the Daejeon Museum of Art commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of **Future Lies Ahead** with a new exhibition entitled **Future Lies Ahead: Daejeon 1993/2023**. According to the guide for the new exhibition, **Taejon Memory: Tribute to Bob Breer's Father** (1993) was sold to a domestic gallery after the 1993 Expo, and is now part of the collection of Museum SAN in Wonju. For contractual reasons, the work is not allowed to be moved for offsite exhibitions, so it could only be represented at the 2023 exhibition through photos and archival materials. I hope that some of the presenters at this symposium may shed new light on **Taejon Memory: Tribute to Bob Breer's Father**, and that our questions might be answered through the resulting discussions, as well as ongoing research into Paik's writings.

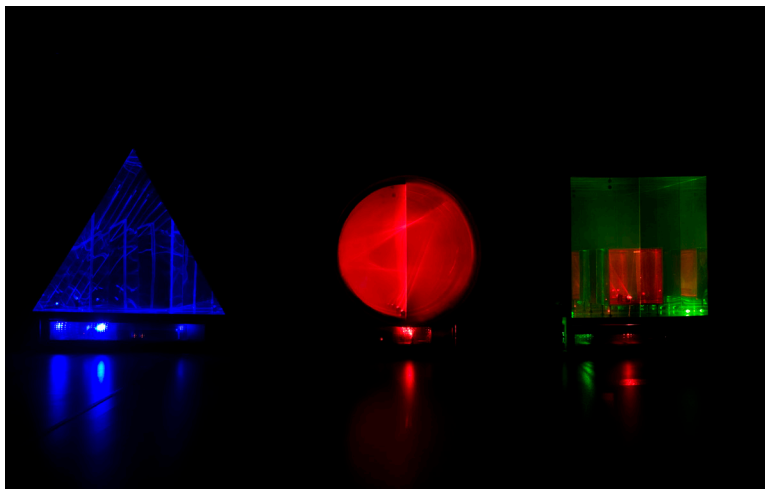
Even after his death, Nam June Paik and his art continue to tirelessly tour the world. As mentioned, since Paik did not

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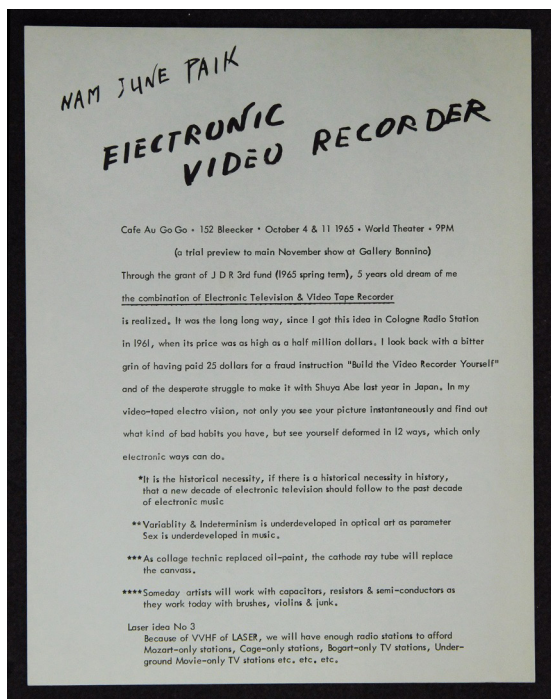
typically provide a manual for his complex works, we must study his writings, letters, and work proposals, as well as the testimonials of curators and technicians, in order to properly exhibit his works today and in the future. Such tasks are particularly important for exhibitions at Nam June Paik Art Center and Leeum Museum of Art, which often serve as references points for exhibitions at other institutions. For example, Paik's works: **Three Elements: Circle, Square, Triangle** (1999), previously exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, are now part of Nam June Paik Art Center's collection. When preparing to exhibit this work, in which lasers are projected on three separate components (a circle, triangle, and square), we are confronted with a seemingly endless list of choices. What differences or new meanings might arise from showing the three works together, as opposed to individually? Is it best to display them in complete darkness in order to emphasize the linear light of the lasers? Are there any new methods of exhibition that could produce interesting results? These and other questions related to the preservation, restoration, and exhibition of Paik's works will continue long into the future. And as we ponder such questions, we must constantly consider the integral role of music, which lies at the crux of Paik's video works. That is why I titled this presentation "Like Playing a Musical Instrument."

Indeed, one of the best ways to encounter Nam June Paik's works and discover new ontological meaning from them is through the gateway of music. Just as music, sound, and light are produced through frequency, art is also the result of synthesizing and modulating visible light. It is just as important to utilize music to preserve and exhibit Paik's works in their original forms within the traditional contexts of "visual art," "fine art," and "museums" as it is to excavate new meanings from a contemporary perspective. As such, we should cherish this invaluable opportunity to uncover forgotten materials and share new interpretations with some of the people who directly worked and communicated with Paik in the past. In closing, I thus wish to express my

gratitude to Park Sang Ae, archivist at NJP Art Center, and  
Chin Zeeyoung, conservator at Leeum Museum of Art, for  
co-organizing this academic symposium.



Nam June Paik, *Three Elements*, 1999



Nam June Paik, *Electronic Video Recorder*, 1965