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Nam June Paik Today

Nam June Paik, FACT and TATE , Liverpool, UK. December 17, 2010 – March 13, 2011

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ESPACES NÉOMÉDIATIQUES

LIVERPOOL

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From December 2010 to March 2011, visitors to Liverpool were treated to an exhibition of the work of the late artist Nam June Paik (1932-2006) (tagline: “video artist, performance artist, composer and visionary”), which took place concurrently at Tate Liverpool and FACT (The Foundation for Art and Creative Technology). Given the lack of attention in the UK to this important figure in the emergence of media art (the last Paik show was at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1988 and focussed mostly on his video works), the exhibition also benefited from a day-long conference (“The Future is Now: Media Arts, Performance and Identity after Nam June Paik”), live Paik-inspired telematic performances by contemporary artists comfortable with new media such as Kristin Lucas and Jeremy Bailey, and an online discussion about the curatorial and conservation challenges of this split-venue retrospective.¹

A key theme of the conference and the discussion was how to best consider Paik’s work in both a historical and futuristic sense. On the one hand, there is the groundbreaking nature of Paik’s work with technology and the difficulties of restoring or maintaining it with the increasing fragility and irreplaceable nature of its materials (analogue cathode ray tube televisions, for instance, as in his work *Zen for TV* 1963-1975), while on the other hand, the content of Paik’s work prefigured much of our understanding of the multi-channel broadcast world we live in now. This conflict was very much evident as the co-curators Sook-Kyung Lee (for Tate), Susanne Rennert (for museum kunst palast in Dusseldorf), and Laura Sillars and Heather Corcoran (for FACT) struggled to be historically accurate and materially sensitive (the goal of a retrospective exhibition), and to pay tribute to the younger generations of artists Paik inspired, now living in a 24/7 digital world.²

At Tate, the exhibition included a very impressive array of original sculptures in a museological setting (hands off!) and a fair bit of documentation (video or print-based) of Paik’s activities, while at FACT in addition to a video archive of over eight hours of single channel works, local artists were commissioned to work with local people to make their own versions of Paik-esque interactive sculptures: *Magnet TV* from 1965, on view at Tate, was re-imagined as *The Television will be Revolutionised* and displayed in the Media Lounge of FACT. The works at FACT felt more in the collaborative spirit of the way Paik worked (he collaborated extensively with Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Shuya Abe to name but three), and included a remake of his *Laser Cone*, an immersive installation first made with Norman Ballard in 2001. This was complemented on the roof of the building by the work of another UK pioneer in the field of making electro-acoustic instruments, Peter Appleton, who had created a visible, tangible link across the city between the two venues with a laser beam of green light.

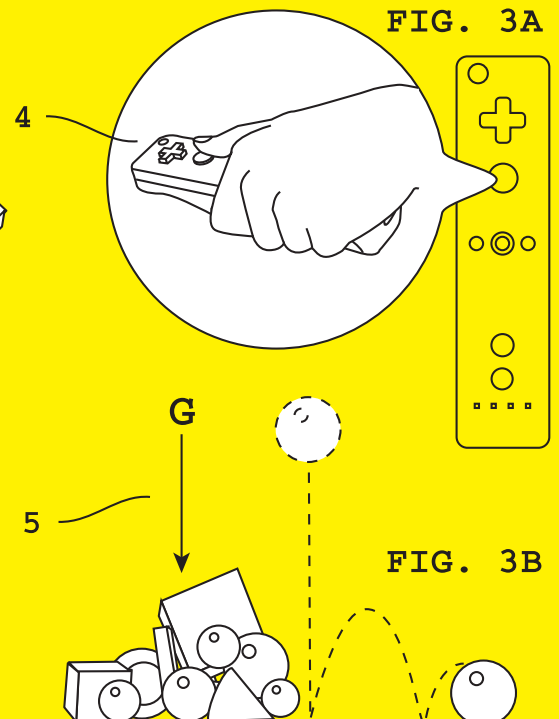
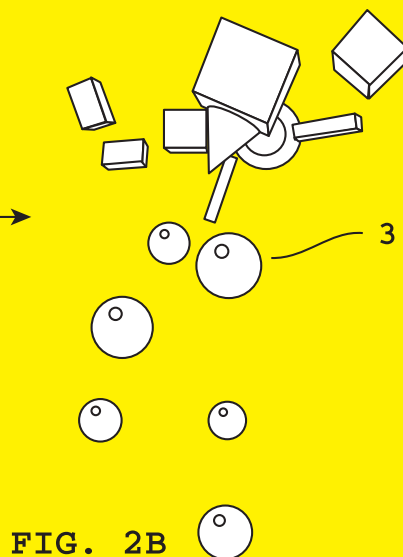
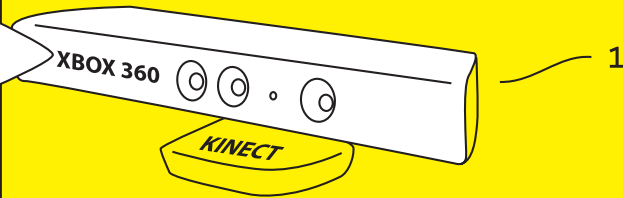
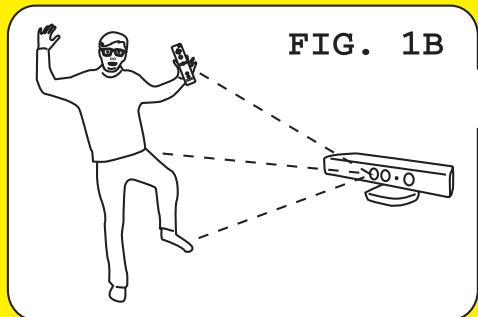
As Heather Corcoran wrote in the online discussion: “FACT [is] only a few blocks down the road from Tate, where you can see artists tinkering with technologies in ways that would make Nam June Paik smile almost every day here. [...] we show artists and artworks that are the living legacy of his work and are set up for presenting work that is interactive and participatory. There are far fewer works here but you can crawl under *Laser Cone* and flick through his video catalogue. And a group of young people have made an installation in response that lets you magnetize some TVs and play TV instruments.”

This split between the two venues raised a question on the discussion list about whether it is correct or appropriate, curatorially, to ask viewers of Paik’s work to choose between “the participatory” or “the object”—and what to do when objects that were intended to be participatory can no longer be so because of their age, value, the collector’s instruction, technical demands, etc. At the conference, the director of the Paik archive at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, John Hanhardt commented that when he curated Paik’s first major museum exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1982, Paik’s collaborator Charlotte Morman was in the gallery at least once a week to play *TV Cello*; now we have to make do with the video documentation. Just as Paik’s *Zen for Film* (1962-1964) is not shown in its original film incarnation but looped on DVD, his sculpture *Random Access* (1975), in which visitors can run a tape head over the unfurled magnetic audio tape adhered to the wall, was ‘unplayable’ by museum visitors. Jon Ippolito, a former curator at the Guggenheim who was involved in Paik’s major exhibition there in 2000, wondered whether “convenience

Mar. 6, 2011

JEREMY BAILEY

APPARATUS FOR THE DISPLAY OF AUGMENTED REALITY 3D PRIMITIVE
SKELETON WITH REACTIVE PHYSICS FOR DANCE ON THE INTERNET





Nam June Paik, *Zen for TV*, 1963-1975. © Estate of Nam June Paik
Photo : © MUMOK, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, ehemals Sammlung Hahn, Köln.



Media Lounge at FACT, as part of Nam June Paik exhibition 2010. The Television will be Revolutionised 2010. Freehand and Young Tate in collaboration with Dave Evans. Photograph copyright: Stephen King.

rather than fidelity was the motivating factor for such curatorial decisions." He went on to comment that, "as the decades march on and those of us who knew Paik first-hand start pushing up daisies, the way curators display his pieces will be the primary way people understand his vitality." This leaves us all the more concerned with the contexts in which curators work and whether a museum's emphasis on the materiality of art is going to be the best way to ensure a legacy for media art or not.

Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is Canadian and a UK-based curator and co-chair for Rewire: The Fourth International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology taking place in Liverpool in September 2011. Her book, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (co-authored with Beryl Graham) is available through MIT Press.

Notes

- 1 Disclosure: this discussion took place on the academic mailing list which I co-edit New-media-curating@jiscmail.ac.uk through my work with the CRUMB research centre for curators of media art, and I acted as chair of the conference.
- 2 The remit of FACT is in part to collaborate and commission new work. See www.fact.co.uk



Kristin Lucas, *Skewed Color Bar Test Pattern (with Skewer)*, 2011. Screengrab from a live remote performance for the Nam June Paik conference, FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology). Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of Nam June Paik at Tate Liverpool, Room 1 'Post-Music'. Photo by Roger Sinek, Tate Liverpool 2010.

Nam June Paik in collaboration with Norman Ballarda *Laser Cone*, 2001/2010. Installation view at FACT (Foundation for Art Creative Technology). Photographer: Stephen King.



Peter Appleton, *Laser Link*, 2010. View from FACT (Foundation for Art Creative Technology) to Tate Liverpool. Photographer: Stephen King