

# Learning to Groove



Global Groove by Nam June Paik

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Contextual and Cultural Referencing in Art and Design  
Analysis of Contemporary Artwork: Thesis and Presentation

When television set owners all around the world were starting to embrace the medium as a source of entertainment and television manufacturers were starting to produce machines of lower costs and in higher quantities, Nam June Paik was contemplating his next big step in art with video art. He relentlessly pursued his dream of making video art a medium that would be appreciated by (other) artists as well as audiences. While the content of his work was largely affected by the rapidly growing consumption of media and culture in the United States of America, his aesthetic inclinations were driven by his previous work with the anarchic and erratic actions of the Fluxus movement in Germany. This is, arguably, the most visible in what was one of the first-ever video art tapes for broadcast, *Global Groove*, 1973. Technologically and aesthetically, it was groundbreaking in the way video art was being viewed and produced. By featuring a wide range of content, it was a complete television viewing experience across various cultures and ideologies within the confines of its duration of 28 minutes and 30 seconds.

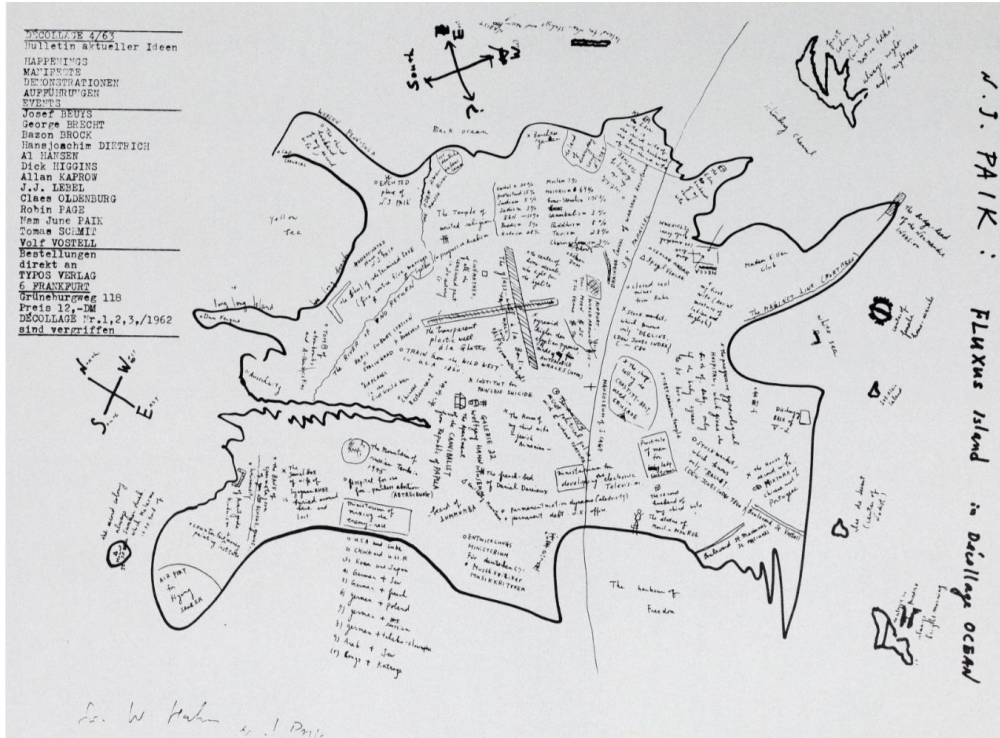


Image 1: Fluxus Island in Decollage Ocean. Ink on paper, 40 x 57 cm.

Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Paik, N. (1963).



Image 2: Paik during the installation of his video work Fish Flies on Sky,

Galeria Bonino, New York, Moore, P. (1976).

Paik was not only interested in the artistic capabilities of television but also had a deep interest in understanding the technology behind it in order to manipulate the medium to fit his needs and vice versa in some cases. His early meetings with engineers like Shuya Abe and Hideo Uchida in Japan kickstarted his work with video art. Shuya Abe in particular was one of Paik's closest collaborators. Together they designed the Paik-Abe synthesizer in 1970, a machine that played a pivotal role in the creation of *Global Groove*.



Image 3: *Left to right: Fred Barzyk, Shuya Abe, and Nam June Paik with the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer at WGBH-TV, Boston, White, C. (1969).*

Paik had mentioned his artistic interest in television to John Cage in a letter in 1959. He went on to write extensive essays about his views and aspirations regarding video art and television in journals by Radical Software, PBS and WNET, to name a few. "Can we transplant this strange "ontology" of drug experience to "safer" and more "authentic" art medium, without transplanting the

inherent danger of drug overdose???" (Paik, 1970). Paik here was posing the question of creating a video based medium that offers a drug-like experience of participation with no gradation or ranking of any kind. He compares the experiences of consuming art vs that of consuming drugs in an elaborate but effective way. Paik's video synthesizer was one of the first steps ever taken to make those experiences similar without the dangers of drugs involved. He hoped to break the barrier between artist and audience. He believed that the rapid growing television and camera market was a great way to encourage the audience to wonder and (hopefully) try to create their own artworks without social and financial inhibitions, inhibitions that would previously deter people with fewer privileges and resources to become artists. "The tired slogan of "world peace" will again become fresh and marketable" (Paik, 1973). In the article titled, *Global Groove and the Video Common Market* in the TV Lab journal by WNET, Paik was passionately vocal about the need for a globally connected market that would allow an easy exchange of culture and information and this could possibly help reduce conflicts around the world.

David Loxton, director of The Television Laboratory at WNET, in an interview with Jonathan Price for an inhouse journal spoke about Paik's motivations as an artist to create an affordable instrument that wouldn't curb his ability to create visuals as close to his aesthetics as possible. In order to create the visuals that Paik desired, what the Paik-Abe Synthesizer essentially did was add all the bugs back into televisions that engineers had worked on removing ([Loxton, 1973](#)). WGBH helped make Paik's new venture possible by funding and supporting the project. When they completed their first synthesizer, Paik and Abe set out to experiment with it in the summer of 1970 in Boston. They ran a four-hour long broadcast of images they were creating in real time while using Beatles' as

the soundtrack along with participants who were invited off the streets to feature in the visuals ([Gill, 1976](#)). Their video synthesizer was one of the first of its kind to be used for broadcast television.

The Paik-Abe synthesizer was a true collaboration between the minds of a haphazard artist and an efficient engineer. While Paik scavenged for second-hand wires, television sets, and hardware parts, Abe worked on the complex schematics of the system (Kane, 2013). "A Paik/Abe video synthesizer which takes 21 inputs (for instance, so it can simultaneously take inputs from seven small Sony cameras, seven external sources, and seven audio sources); a colorizer encoder and a second color encoder which is separate output; and two image converters capable of xyz modulation" ([Godfrey, 1973](#)).

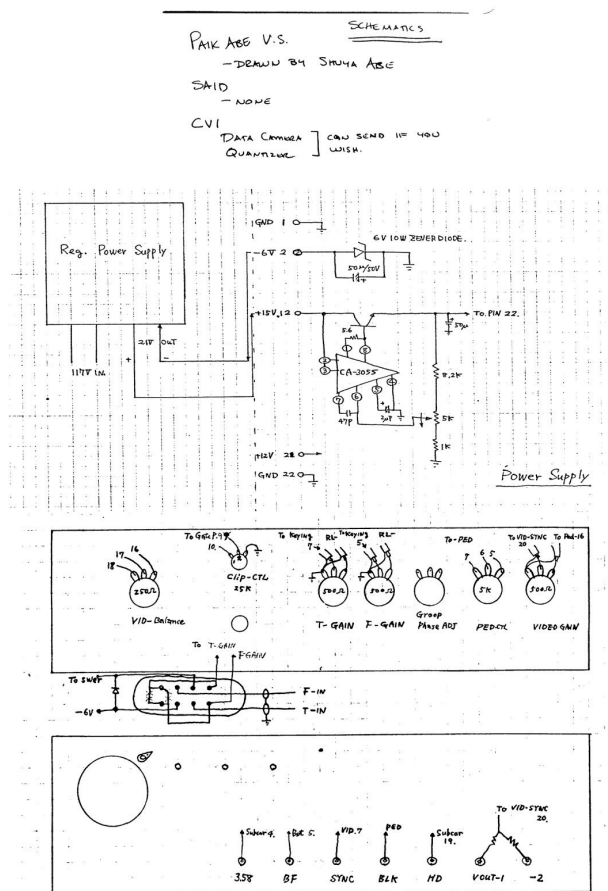


Image 4: Excerpts from Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer Schematics, Abe, S. (n.d.).

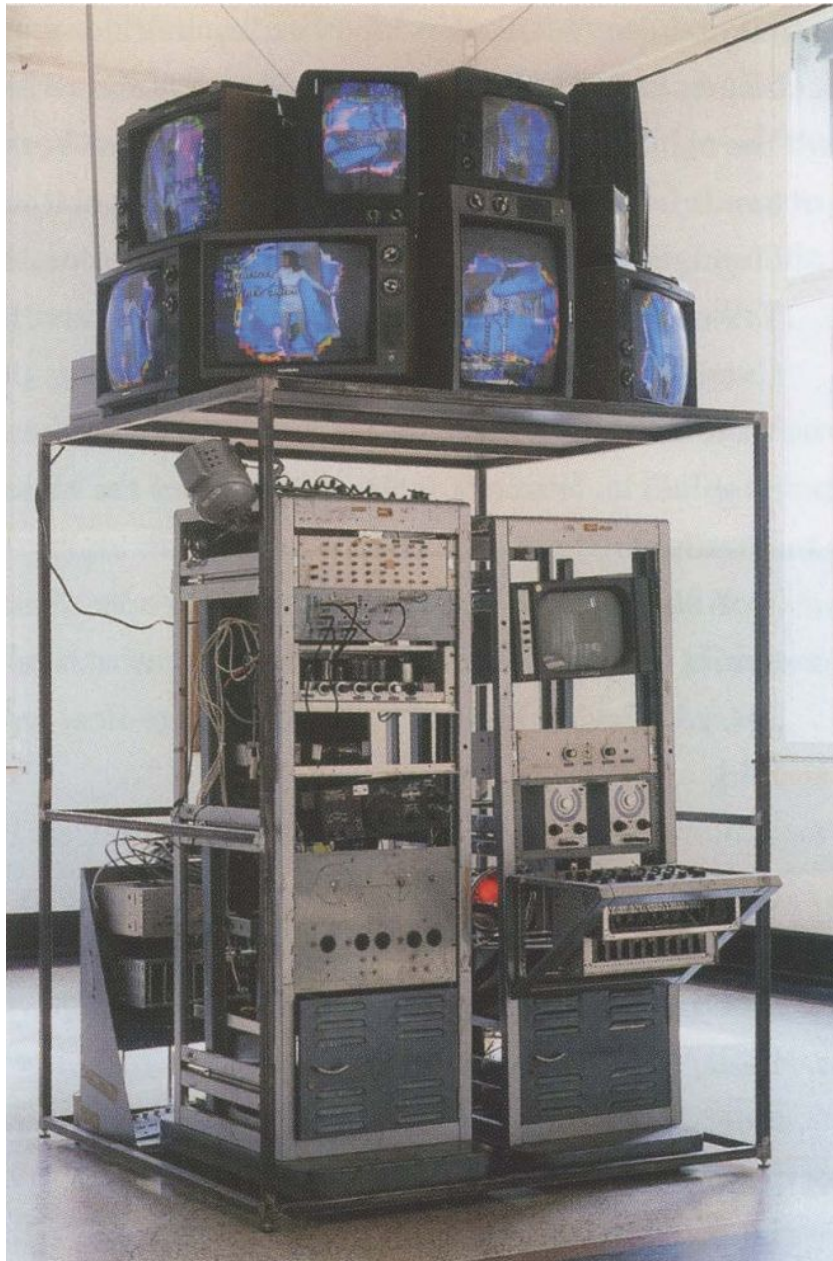


Image 5: The Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer (PAVS), 1969/92.

183 x 56 x 66 cm. 12 monitors, two video disc players.

Although it was a remarkable machine, it was known to be difficult to operate let alone control. Paik himself called it "a sloppy machine" while comparing it to himself and the way his art

making process functioned. "Eventually...after he (Paik) left WGBH in the early 1970s, artist Ron Hays arrived and developed a systematic method for controlling color and image synthesis patterns with the PAVS" (Kane, 2013). Several artists and institutions across the United States showed an interest in experimenting with the Paik-Abe Synthesizer. It is of no surprise that the success and popularity received by Paik's new machine helped him build long-lasting collaborations and associations with other artists.

The content Paik included in *Global Groove* was an important precursor to a lot of his later works including performances, installations and other videotapes. It featured dancers, musicians, artists, commercials as well as some found footage. "What we need... would strip the hieratic monism of TV culture and promote the free flow of video information through an inexpensive barter system or convenient free market" (Paik, 1970). He desired to create a barrier-free flow of communication via video as a medium and television as the vessel. This is well documented in the footage of *Global Groove*. By including characters and visuals from across many cultures and placing them under a Paik aesthetic that affects them all visually, he had produced a piece of broadcast television that would be relatable and entertaining to viewers of all ethnicities and walks of life.

It is only appropriate to begin by talking about Paik's many favourite collaborators that worked closely with him throughout his career. John Godfrey, who was the Supervising Engineer at the TVLab during Paik's residency at WNET, played a pivotal role in the production of *Global Groove*. He seemed to have a special connection with Paik and was one of the few people who could truly comprehend Paik's instructions during the production of *Global Groove* ([English, 1973](#)). Patricia Mellencamp in *The Old and the New: Nam June Paik* (1995) talks about Paik's regular collaborations with artists like John



Cage, Merce Cunningham and Charlotte Moorman in his works. She comments on the fact that Paik had close connections with personalities who were both artists and critics. Their critiques revolved around the minimalist aesthetics of the artworks they talked/wrote about. "Paik's work possesses an extraordinary clarity wherein complex ideas are made simple, simply delightful. This luminous and prodigious output can come only from discipline. When Paik spoke of his friends, it was the same discipline he admired" ([Mellencamp, 1995](#)).



Image 6: *Charlotte Moorman with TV Cello*, Haar, T. (1971)

*Global Groove* opens with Russell Conner's voice: "This is a glimpse of a video landscape of tomorrow when you will be able to switch on any TV station on the earth and TV guides will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book." This is precisely what Paik predicted would happen with television as a medium in the future. The clips used in *Global Groove* include various scenarios or 'shows' that make it seem like a legitimate television programme. There are multiple sequences of dancers, right from tap dancing to traditional Japanese dancing. There are also clips focussing on individuals like Cage and Ginsberg performing their respective pieces on camera from earlier projects Paik did with them. Paik included a Pepsi ad from Japan without any distortions or manipulations. When the clips switch between these very different formats and aspects of videos, it mirrors the feeling of switching channels on an actual television set. It reflects how television can bring out the most indecisive versions of people. Given the fast-growing and fast-improving quality as well as quantity available today, it's not too far-fetched to say that Paik's predictions essentially came true. Elements like pop culture, advertising, social/political situations all played a part in making *Global Groove* what it is. No matter where you come from, *Global Groove* presents a universal picture of the consumption of television and other media.



Image 7: Navajo Indian musician, Cecilia Sandoval, in *Global Groove*, 1973

The tone of *Global Groove*, like a lot of his other works, is largely humorous. As Hanhardt wrote in [Nam June Paik \(1932–2006\): Video Art Pioneer](#), "...his use of humor is a subversive strategy, meant to draw you in and give you new ways to see and experience the world." With *Global Groove*, Paik managed to introduce an audience to multiple cultures and visuals that many in those days were not open to understanding. During the Charlotte Moorman interview with Jud Yalkut in *Global Groove*, she mentions that the fact that most classical cellists are not pleased with the idea of changing or modifying the design of the classic cello. When she says this, the camera shifts to focus on the cellist, Alan Schulman, who accompanied Moorman's *TV Cello* performance. He played the classic cello while Moorman performed on the TV cello, a performance and instrument created by Paik. The focus of the camera shifting from Moorman to Schulman definitely is a well thought out editing move to create a brief moment of humour. Further into the video, there is an excerpt from *The Tribute to John Cage* also by Paik, where Cage is seated at a table while reading out anecdotes from a piece of paper. The excerpts used were handpicked to make those sections humorous along with the inclusion of audio

being picked up from the people behind the camera laughing at these stories. The stories he reads out are unusual given the setting of the frame. One would expect that setting to be used for a more serious and possibly intellectual talk.



Image 8: John Cage in *Global Groove*, 1973

Paik's aesthetics inspired a whole new generation of artists working with video. Factors like timing, distortions, sequences, etc. helped create this characteristic style for Paik. Going back to the idea of how his time as a part of the Fluxus movement affected his visual sensibilities, this can especially be seen in *Global Groove*. The Fluxus movement was essentially an alliance of like-minded artists who openly rebelled against the perceived institutions and trends in high culture via performances, installations and music (Hanhardt, 1982). In his video works, Paik created a world within itself full of erratic and seemingly random cuts, which were all justified by the Fluxus ideology of going against established norms and finding one's own style of art making. His frequent use of television as a medium, however, was where he made his work different from that of many Fluxus artists who would often change their medium of art.

The editing language used in videos would forever be changed thanks to Paik's experiments with the Paik-Abe Synthesizer (eai.org, 2000). Chroma-key or blue box effect was used to edit out shapes in order to superimpose them over images of themselves or even other images. This helped to create several densely layered frames of mesmerising visuals. Paik was very careful with how he used these effects and made sure to create a rhythm in his editing that would capture the viewer's attention without causing him/her to get "bored". "As the cameras pick up her image and feed it through the cable, Paik and Godfrey filter it through Paik's own invention - a video synthesizer - where it is recolored and reshaped. The result is dazzling. The dancer seems to be floating on backgrounds of pure color which change with the sounds she is making" ([English, 1973](#)). Diane English was a producer on *Global Groove* and she wrote her first-hand experience on set with Paik and the technicians behind the show. In the passage above she describes the sequence of events that lead to the visual effects used in the video specifically referring to the meticulously choreographed dance by a Korean fan dancer. Basically, the dancer performs while a camera captures her, these images are picked up and fed through cables into Paik's video synthesizer where the images are distorted and recoloured. The images are also affected by the sounds made by the dancer.



Image 9: Charlotte Moorman in *Global Groove*, 1973

Paik was well aware of the drawbacks that came with using the Paik-Abe synthesizer, so for some sequences in *Global Groove* he resorted to using another video synthesizer, the Rutt-Etra Synthesizer. "In another sequence, the Rutt/Etra synthesizer was used to generate groups of geometric shapes which multiply and divide themselves to highlight the concept of "shapes-within shapes." The Paik/Abe synthesizer created abstract and amorphous images or "the shapes we find in our imaginations" and added pure rather than mixed colors" (English,1973). Although this description was written about a different video project which was being made during Paik's time at WNET, these visual effects can easily be recognised in *Global Groove* as well. While the Paik-Abe synthesizer added colours, distorted and manipulated the images, the Rutt/Etra synthesizer was used to add shapes, patterns and other animations to the visuals.

Besides Paik's stylistic use of visual distortions and manipulations, his careful use of timing and spacing while editing were also unconventional. *Global Groove* features several sequences that switch from fast to slow, abrupt to gradual cuts throughout. They gave his videos a sense of eclecticism and erraticism that were otherwise not seen elsewhere in mainstream videos.

David Ross in an essay titled *Nam June Paik's Videotapes* expanded on Paik's ability to create a balance between the 3 states of the human mind – normal wakefulness, sleep/dream state and heightened consciousness which is connected to all forms of ecstasy whether it's induced chemically, physically or even spiritually. Wakefulness is linked to Paik's use of real-time images while the dream or sleep state is linked to the less rational constructions of the images often showing an extended sense of time. Both of these states are associated with the "regular" life cycle of an average human being. The third state of heightened consciousness supplements the first two states using vivid colours and movement that seems to be born out of the images used in the first two states but in an apparently random order.



Image 10: *Nam June Paik Poster*, Vasulka Archives

Throughout his career, Paik did not only use televisions as sculptural elements but also delved deep into the technology behind them to manipulate them for his artistic needs and over time his art went beyond what the general norms would dictate of artists like him ([Asbury Brooks, 2014](#)). Paik famously said that he wanted to “humanize technology” and his work with Charlotte Moorman especially is evidence that he succeeded. Today, artists are embracing new technologies as and when something new is introduced. He managed to make technology a less formidable factor for artists and audiences alike.

Nam June Paik not only radically affected video art consumption and production but also affected the way future generations would end up pursuing video art with a sense of individuality and



innovation. His art making process was entirely motivated by his own thoughts and ideas along with the people and places he surrounded with himself with. "In Paik's art and ideas, technology does not determine but enables a dynamic remix of media and an opportunity to expand beyond the artificial boundaries established by critics and art historians to package the accepted interpretation of art" ([Hanhardt, 2006](#)). His artworks, which were highly based on technology, were very human in nature. *Global Groove* asks the viewer to look deeper and beyond their television screens by enticing them to keep watching and absorbing the multilayered collage of content that it was. The visual aesthetics used are a call to focus and unfocus all at once and to find what's important behind it all. Pulling together his experiences from Germany and then America, he was able to create a piece of art that would truly encompass his ideology.

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