

The Premature Birth of Video Art

by Tom Sherman

It is said that the late Nam June Paik was the George Washington of video art. Paik, a Korean-born artist, educated in Japan and Germany, is given credit for recording and exhibiting the very first work of video art in New York, NY, in 1965. As the familiar story goes, Paik purchased the first Sony Portapak delivered to the U.S. on October 4th, 1965. That afternoon he charged the battery and got the Portapak working at a Sony dealership, jumped in a taxi and got stuck in a traffic jam caused by a visit from Pope Paul VI, shot twenty minutes of video out the window of the taxi, and then showed the recording to his friends at the Cafe a Go-Go in Greenwich Village that evening. That, according to the myth, was the birth of video art.

Nam June Paik was a brilliant, creative force and his work in performance, video, television, sculpture and installation is legendary. Paik was a huge figure in 20th century art, arguably ranking with artists the stature of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, and Carolee Schneemann. But with all respect to Paik, this mythic version of the birth of video art doesn't ring true.

The date of Pope Paul VI's visit to New York is correct. The Pope was addressing the United Nations on birth control and the evils of war on October 4th, 1965. It was Paul VI's first visit to New York, and in fact the first visit by a Pope to the Western Hemisphere. Nam June Paik could have shot video of the Pope's motorcade, but he would have had to have done it from the window of a building, as the first battery-powered Sony Portapak, the CV-2400, wasn't released until 1967. Sony had released the Model CV-2000, "the most portable video tape recorder ever designed," in October of 1965, but the CV-2000 weighed 49 pounds and operated off standard 110AC power.⁽¹⁾ In other words, the CV-2000 was relatively compact and portable (it could be thrown in the trunk of a car for transportation), but it did not run off batteries and was not truly portable. The CV-2000 needed to be plugged into a wall socket and could not have been adapted to run off batteries. Paik could have shot the traffic jam out of the open-window of a building (the tape is lost, so camera angles cannot be analyzed) and then transported a CV-2000 by taxi to the Cafe a Go-Go for his screening, but this isn't how the story is told.

Some have speculated that Paik had access to an earlier version of the Sony Portapak (the CV-2400), sent to him from Japan... Shigeko Kubota, Paik's wife, told Skip Blumberg she thinks that Nam June's older brother sent him a CV-2400 from Japan in 1965. This does not appear to be a possibility, as Shuya Abe, Paik's long-time friend and Tokyo-based engineer-collaborator on the Paik-Abe synthesizer, told Blumberg that the CV-2400 Portapak ⁽²⁾ was released in the U.S. first, not Japan, in 1967.⁽³⁾ Sony's product archives back this up. There were no battery-powered Sony Portapaks available in 1965.

So the myth of Paik's first work of video art appears to pre-date its own possibility. While Paik undoubtedly was a pioneer user of portable video equipment, he probably shared the original moments of video art with other artists, including Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Les Levine, and Juan Downey. The mythic story of Nam June Paik shooting the first Portapak-generated video art out of the back of a taxi in 1965 is apparently just that, a myth.

1. The Sony CV-2000 was listed on the Sony product sheet in 1965. This was a console model, a studio recorder/player, advertised as having true portability, weighing only 49 pounds.

<http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/tools/ttool.php?id=53&page=1>

2. Sony introduced the CV-2400, the first generation of 1/2", reel-to-reel, truly portable videotape recorders in the U.S. in 1967. The DVK-2400/VCK02400 was the first CV-series portable, battery operated system. (source: Sony product literature, dated 11/1967)

<http://www.experimental-tv-center.org/history/tools/ttool.php3?id=54&page=1>

3. Skip Blumberg spoke with Shigeko Kubota and Shuya Abe about these matters at memorial services for Paik in 2006, while shooting "Nam June Paik: #1 Video Artist," his recent video tribute to Paik.

Thanks to Skip Blumberg and Sherry Miller Hocking for their correspondence regarding some of the details at the heart of this historical query. I am solely responsible for questioning the factuality of this story, and welcome information that supports or undermines this challenge of the myth of the birth of video art.

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