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Nam June Paik Exhibition Opens at Asia Society in New York

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Sept. 4, 2014 2:42 p.m. ET



'Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot' opens Friday at the Asia Society in New York. Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

Robot K-456 is a star of the show at Asia Society's new exhibition devoted to the late artist Nam June Paik, though during a recent visit to the museum, it remained encased in a wooden crate, waiting to make an entrance after a long trip from Berlin.

"The great thing about robots," said Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society, "is that they don't need to breathe."

The 6-foot-tall automaton and many others like it feature in the Paik show, opening Friday, focusing on a multimedia pioneer who got his start in the 1960s but whose influence is still being felt.

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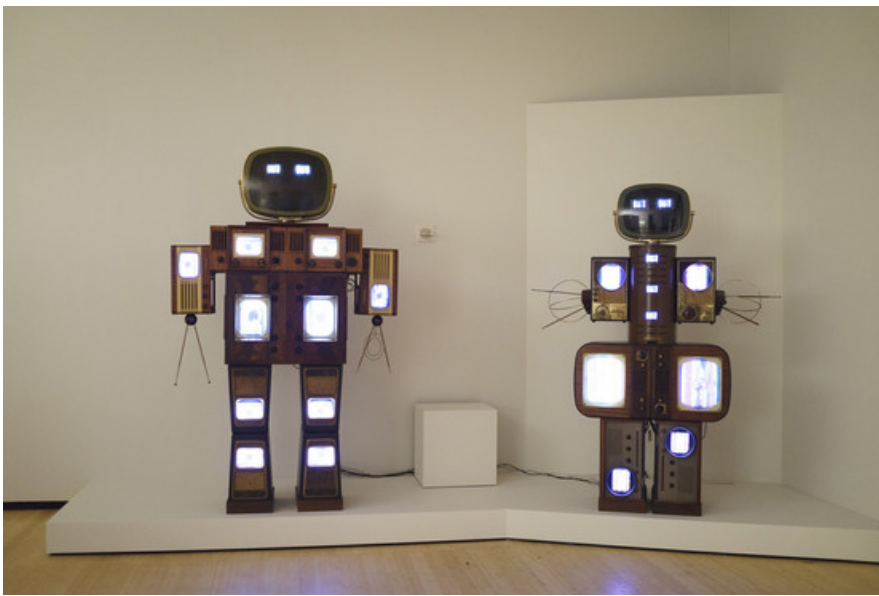


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'Family of Robot: Father,' left, and 'Family of Robot: Mother,' part of Paik's Asia Society show. *Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal*

Yoko Ono, a peer of Paik's from the early years, cited his work's use of "then-new media as material to build fourth- and fifth-dimensional sculptures," she said. "Nobody has done it before him, nor after."

Many of Paik's works are inspired by a mix of utopian and dystopian ideas of the modern technological age. Robot K-456, for example, earned part of its art-historical notoriety in 1982, when, in a staged event outside the Whitney Museum of American Art, it was carted out to Madison Avenue and hit by a car.

Also a founder of video art, Paik experimented in the early years of television with placing magnets and signal-scramblers inside TV sets to make ordinary broadcasts look like transmissions through a funhouse mirror. He took to the airwaves as well with projects for public TV, including a show and artist-residency program called "TV Lab" for New York's WNET.



'It was simply an idea to create robots to be one of us,' Asia Society's Melissa Chiu said of Paik's creations, several of which are on view in the exhibit. *Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal*

"He was a wild tinkerer," said Ms. Chiu, "and was always thinking, 'What is the artistic application of this? How can it be unleashed in a creative way?'"

Through early ties to the Fluxus movement, Paik, who died in 2006 at the age of 73, worked with musicians, dancers and others hip to the age of happenings in New York.

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With Charlotte Moorman, he presented events such as "Opera Sextronique," for which Ms. Moorman played cello in a bikini adorned with flashing lights. He worked for decades with the choreographer Merce Cunningham and the musician John Cage.

"He was a composer, an engineer, a performance artist—he spoke and created so many different languages," said Kenzo Digital, an artist who grew up with Paik as his great-uncle. "That definitely influenced a lot of work trying to find a hybrid medium, and that applies to the way that people work now."

Ken Hakuta, the executor of Paik's estate (and Mr. Digital's father), said, "If he was around today, he would probably be hanging around Google. He is very relevant to today's technology and the internet. He said one day everybody will have their own TV channel. That is YouTube, right?"

There is a heart to Paik's work, despite its focus on technology, said Michelle Yun, Asia Society's curator of modern and contemporary art. "A big point of the show and the works we selected is that he really did want to humanize technology and create a personal way to connect."

A number of his works "are about the risk of letting humanity be overridden by technology," she added, "and that you have to remember that humanity comes first, to build a bridge and ensure that technology doesn't override the human instinct for the human condition."

Some of that sentiment is wired into Paik's robots, which, more than machines, are characters full of faults and foibles.

"Are robots really the future?" Ms. Chiu asked. "Some of the robots he created had human functions but didn't do much else, so they talked and walked and defecated but didn't actually do anything as robots to help our lives. It was simply an idea to create robots to be one of us."

His first creation of the kind, Robot K-456, is especially resonant in those terms.

"The robot doesn't work very well," said Mr. Hakuta. "He didn't want it to be the perfect butler in your hotel room. This would be a very imperfect one that would spill your drinks, and that's what he would want."

*["Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot" opens Friday and runs through Jan. 4, 2015, at Asia Society, 725 Park Ave.; 212-288-6400.](#)*

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