

# video art

a brief history

# timeline

1939

\* Invention of Cathode Tube; Government sponsored technology

1941

\* NTSC formed (standards/licensing; also set up public broadcasting)

1958

\* 40 million t.v. sets in the US 1960

\* Nam June Paik emigrates to US

1963

\* JFK assassination pre-empts programming

1965

\* Sony portapak (could replay but not rebroadcast)

\* Bell labs uses computer generated imagery

1967

\* CPB formed

1969

\* PBS formed

\* WGBH (Boston) - unites scientists (MIT) and artists

\* KQED (San Francisco)

\* NEA funding

1970

\* 1st exhibition of video art (London)

1972

\* Satellite & Cable T.V. developed

\* WNET & Rockefeller fund

\* Time-base corrector available

\* could broadcast with greater quality

1973

\* Whitney biennial shows video art

1974

\* MOMA establishes 1st video department

1980s

\* Loss of funding to PBS & NEA

\* development of cable alternatives

\* MTV

1996

\* HDTV (Digital TV)

# The Emergence of Video Art

Video art is named after the video tape, which was most commonly used in the form's early years, but before that artists had already been working on film -- and with changes in technology Hard Disk, CD-ROM, DVD, and solid state are superseding the video tape as the carrier. Despite obvious parallels and relationships, video art is not film.

One of the key differences between video art and theatrical cinema is that video art does not necessarily rely on many of the conventions that define theatrical cinema. Video art may not employ the use of actors, may contain no dialogue, may have no discernible narrative or plot, or adhere to any of the other conventions that generally define motion pictures as entertainment. This distinction is important, because it delineates video art not only from cinema but also from the subcategories where those definitions may become muddy (as in the case of avant garde cinema or short films). Perhaps the simplest, most straightforward defining distinction in this respect would then be to say that (perhaps) cinema's ultimate goal is to entertain, whereas video art's intentions are more varied, be they to simply explore the boundaries of the medium itself or to rigorously attack the viewer's expectations of video as shaped by conventional cinema.

# Portapak: cost less & instantaneous

The Portapak introduced in 1967 was the first portable video recording device. The first Portapak-type video recorder was the Sony DV-2400 Video Rover, which allowed a single person to record video in the field.

The first "portable" video system, this two-piece set consisted of a large B&W camera and a separate record-only helical ½" VCR unit. It required a Sony CV series VTR to play back the video. Even though it was clunky and heavy, it was light enough for a single person to carry it around. However, it was usually operated by a crew of two - One shot the camera and one carried and operated the VCR part.

The introduction of the Portapak had a great influence on the development of Video art. Suddenly not only could rich production companies afford to make movies, but artists could experiment with an easier form of recording. You could play it back instantly instead of waiting to process film, and it was much more affordable.

The Portapak would seem to have been invented specifically for use by artists. Just when pure formalism had run its course; just when it became politically embarrassing to make objects, but ludicrous to make nothing; just when many artists were doing performance works but had nowhere to perform, or felt the need to keep a record of their performances; just when it began to seem silly to ask the same old Berkleean question, 'If you build a sculpture in the desert where no one can see it, does it exist?'; just when it became clear that TV communicates more information to more people than large walls do; just when we understood that in order to define space it is necessary to encompass time; just when many established ideas in other disciplines were being questioned and new models were proposed - just then the Portapak became available.

Prior to the introduction of the Sony Portapak, "moving image" technology was only available to the consumer (or the artist for that matter) by way of eight or sixteen millimeter film, but did not provide the instant playback that video tape technologies offered. Consequently, many artists found video more appealing than film, even more so when the greater accessibility was coupled with technologies which could edit or modify the video image.

# Portapak



# Initial Objectives of Video Artists

- \* How does T.V. appear visually and how can this be disrupted?
- \* Time has become shorter and more expensive. Thus explain concept/images in quick images/symbols.
- \* Alternatively, can work on idea of elongating time (either in reality or by suggestion)
- \* Also can insist on \*\*low\*\* production value (difference between cable/digital, mainstream t.v.)
- \* Big question is: "will viewers follow this?"
- \* Artists work with public access vs. mainstream t.v. and values
- \* Use Sony portapak to record performance art and to record conceptual methods of creation.
- \* Strong connection of video art to Feminist art (and some other traditionally "disadvantaged" groups)  
because they didn't have any rules yet and could experiment more freely.
- \* use of time/vision/sound
- \* awareness of each individual frame with image and sound
- \* obscure images and angles slows awareness (also in and out of focus)
- \* sound sometimes connected to image (i.e. foot stomping) sometimes not related
- \* relationship between screen frames (ex. Clapping)

# Initial Objectives of Video Artists

- \* this video disrupts sense of reality
- \* focus on individual parts of body not whole (back/face/hands/feet/legs)
- \* never see whole body
- \* face in front of vertical roll
- \* idea: broadcast through a signal; de-objectification of art
- \* frame vs. television --- traditional focus of framed art as a window to world
- \* challenges notion of time passing (t.v. wants you to forget about time or only in reference to what shows are on)
- \* slows down sense of movement frame by frame
- \* actually watching a tape of a monitor -focus on touch and feel but a \*\*visual\*\* medium.. see fabrics and patterns repeated designed to be frustrating and difficult -idea that the t.v. looks back at you (eerie)
- \* 1972 conceptual exercise with a vertical hold problem, looked at in very formal terms
- \* t.v. repetition of violence/sex; about the female body; disrupts our access to this image
- \* video art tries to disrupt our viewing patterns. Ask how revolutionary effects are managed and/or mitigated
- \* consider forms of display in/with video art. Work with ideas of exhibition and representation.

# Some Founders of Video Art

Nam June Paik

Bruce Nauman

Paul McCarthy

Vito Acconci

Martha Rosler

Bill Viola

Joan Jonas

John Baldessari

Dara Birnbaum

# Joan Jonas, Vertical Roll, 1972 (19:38)



Vertical Roll is a seminal work. In a startling collusion of form and content, Jonas constructs a theater of female identity by deconstructing representations of the female body and the technology of video. Using an interrupted electronic signal -- or "vertical roll" -- as a dynamic formal device, she dislocates space, re-framing and fracturing the image. The relentless vertical roll, which repeats throughout the tape, disrupts the image by exposing the medium's materiality. Using her body as performance object and video as a theatrical construct, Jonas unveils a disjunctive self-portrait. Subjected to the violence of the vertical roll and the scrutiny of the video mirror, these disjointed images of the body -- including a photographic representation of a female nude -- are even further abstracted and mediated.

# Bill Viola, The Reflecting Pool, 1977-79, (7:00)



Viola describes The Reflecting Pool as "a collection of five independent works which, taken as a whole, describe the stages of a personal journey using images of transition -- from day to night, motion to stillness, time to timelessness, etc. Each work explores specific video techniques and technologies, in combination with the spatial potentials of stereo sound."

In the title work, all movement and change in an otherwise still scene is confined to the reflections on the surface of a pool in the woods. Suspended in time, a man hovers in a frozen, midair leap over the water, as subtle techniques of still-framing and multiple keying join disparate layers of time into a single coherent image. Viola writes that "the piece concerns the emergence of the individual into the natural world -- a kind of baptism."

# Paul McCarthy, Black & White Tapes, 1970-75 (33:00)



This compilation of thirteen early black and white performance tapes from the 1970s reveals the nascent development of the themes, the raw physicality, and the performance personae that mark McCarthy's well-known later works. In several pieces, McCarthy uses his own body as a tool to examine the process of making art: He becomes a human paintbrush as he drags himself across the floor while holding an open can of white paint; he violently whips the walls and pillars of his studio with a large paint-soaked sheet. Often the artist uses his naked body, body parts, and body fluids in conceptual exercises. These performative acts can be overtly confrontational, as when he repeatedly spits directly onto the camera lens. Other pieces involve more subtle contradictions and inversions of objects, motion, light and shadow.

# Vito Acconci, Undertone, 1972 (30:00)



One of Acconci's most compelling works, *Undertone* is a confrontational attempt to engage the viewer in an intimate, ultimately perverse relation with the artist. Acconci sits at the end of a long table, arms hidden underneath, facing the camera/viewer. Looking down, he begins a hypnotic monologue as he tries to convince himself that there is a woman under the table rubbing his thighs, or, alternately, that it is only himself rubbing his thighs. "I want to believe there's no one here under the table ... I want to believe there's a girl here." Then, in a direct address, he implicates the viewer in this fantasy: "I need you to keep your place there at the head of the table. I need to know I can count on you...." Coercively positioning the viewer as both voyeur and accomplice, Acconci defines himself through the spectator as psychological other: "I need you to screen out my lies, filter out the lies from the real point of view."

# Martha Rosler, Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975 (6:00)

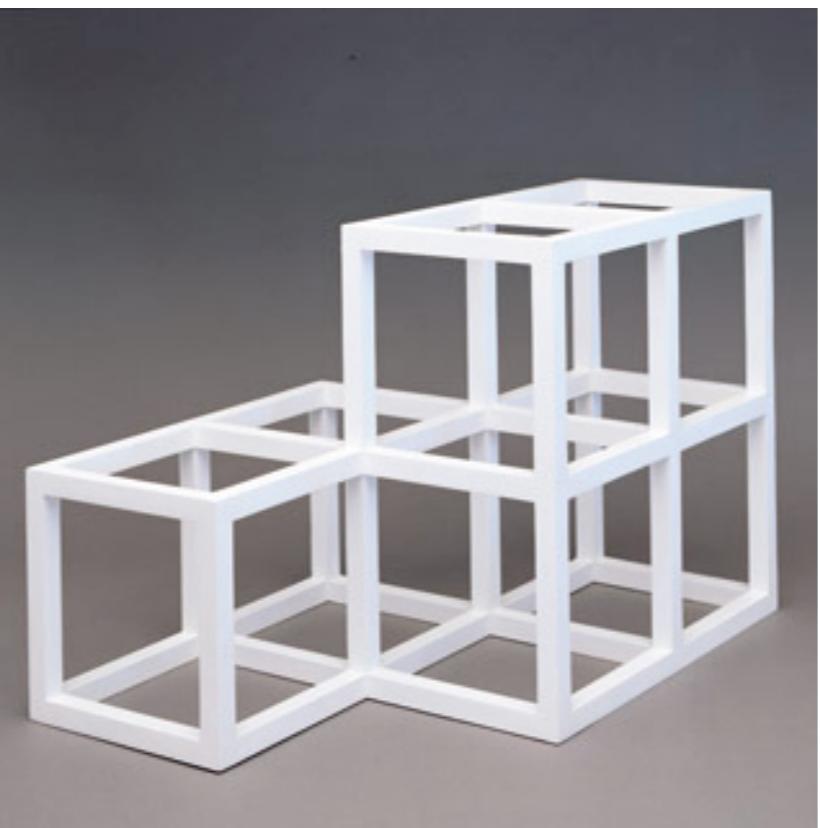
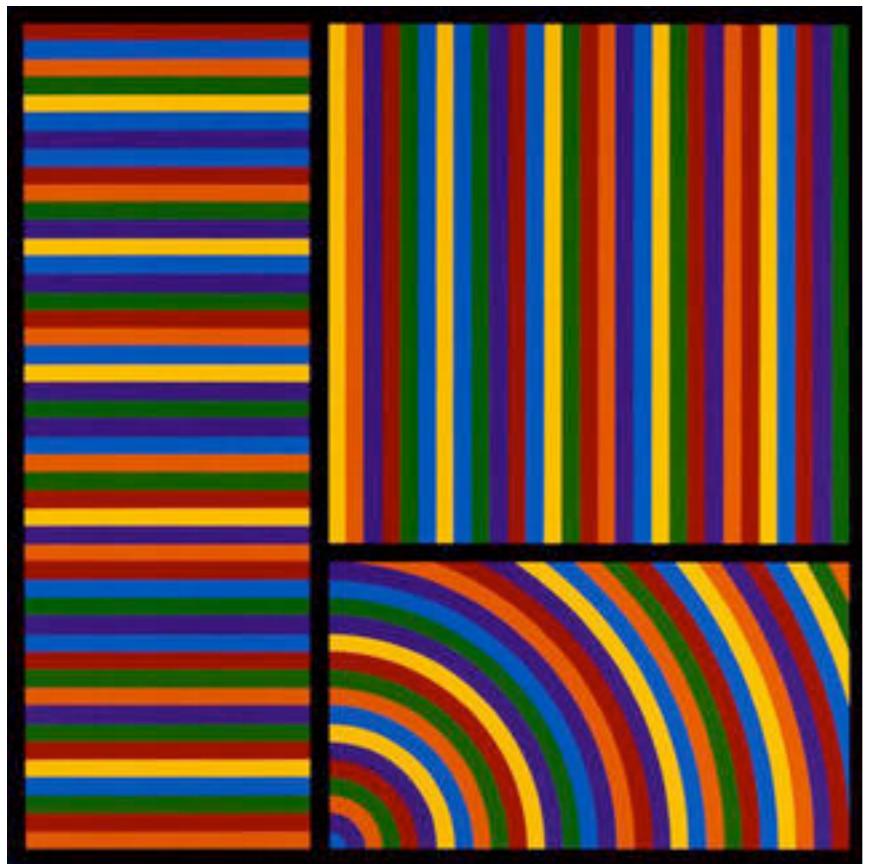


Semiotics of the Kitchen adopts the form of a parodic cooking demonstration in which, Rosler states, "An anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated 'meaning' of tools with a lexicon of rage and frustration." In this performance-based work, a static camera is focused on a woman in a kitchen. On a counter before her are a variety of utensils, each of which she picks up, names and proceeds to demonstrate, but with gestures that depart from the normal uses of the tool. In an ironic grammatology of sound and gesture, the woman and her implements enter and transgress the familiar system of everyday kitchen meanings -- the securely understood signs of domestic industry and food production erupt into anger and violence. In this alphabet of kitchen implements, states Rosler, "when the woman speaks, she names her own oppression."

# John Baldessari, Baldessari sings Lewitt, 1972 (12:35)



In an ironic intersection of two systems -- arcane theoretical discourse and popular music -- Baldessari sings a tract by Minimalist artist Sol Lewitt. Introducing this performance by noting that "these sentences have been hidden too long in exhibition catalogues," Baldessari sings Lewitt's forty-five-point tract on Conceptual Art to the tunes of The Star-Spangled Banner and Heaven, among other songs. Baldessari's witty "art aria" functions as a meta-conceptual exercise.



## Sol LeWitt, b. 1928



LeWitt is linked to various movements, including conceptual art and minimalism. His media were predominantly painting, drawing, and "structures" (a term he preferred, in opposition to sculpture). LeWitt's frequent use of open, modular structures originate from the cube, a form that influenced the artist's thinking from the time that he first became an artist.

# Dara Birnbaum, Technology Transformation, 1978-79



Explosive bursts of fire open *Technology/Transformation*, an incendiary deconstruction of the ideology embedded in television form and pop cultural iconography. Appropriating imagery from the TV series *Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum isolates and repeats the moment of the "real" woman's symbolic transformation into super-hero. Entrapped in her magical metamorphosis by Birnbaum's stuttering edits, *Wonder Woman* spins dizzily like a music-box doll. Through radical manipulation of this female Pop icon, she subverts its meaning within the television text. Arresting the flow of images through fragmentation and repetition, Birnbaum condenses the comic-book narrative -- *Wonder Woman* deflects bullets off her bracelets, "cuts" her throat in a hall of mirrors -- distilling its essence to allow the subtext to emerge. In a further textual deconstruction, she spells out the words to the song *Wonder Woman* in Discoland on the screen. The lyrics' double entendres ("Get us out from under ... *Wonder Woman*") reveal the sexual source of the superwoman's supposed empowerment: "Shake thy Wonder Maker." Writing about the "stutter-step progression of 'extended moments' of transformation from *Wonder Woman*," Birnbaum states, "The abbreviated narrative -- running, spinning, saving a man -- allows the underlying theme to surface: psychological transformation versus television product. Real becomes Wonder in order to "do good" (be moral) in an (a) or (im)moral society."

## Bruce Nauman , Stamping in the Studio, 1968 (62:00)



For this work, Nauman pounds out rhythms with his feet that increase in complexity as he paces his studio, beginning with a steady one-two beat and advancing to a syncopated ten-beat phrase. As he stamps back and forth across the studio, he moves diagonally and in spirals.

# Nam June Paik

In 1964 Paik moved to New York and continued his explorations of television and video, and, by the late 1960s, was at the forefront of a new generation of artists creating an aesthetic discourse out of television and the moving image. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Paik also worked as a teacher and an activist, supporting other artists and working to realize the potential of the emerging medium. He created interactive video works that transformed the viewers' relationship to the medium. With these first steps began an astonishing effusion of ideas and invention that over the next 30 years would play a profound role in the introduction and acceptance of the electronic moving image into the realm of art. Merging global communications theories with an irreverent Fluxus sensibility, his work in music, performance and video explored the juncture of art, technology, and popular culture. Paik spent his life seeking new, imaginative and humanistic ways of using the technologies developed during the 20th century. Some themes he explored in his work are: bringing the past and the present together; issues that arise from new technologies; the role of artists in helping us to understand the changes around us; breaking down the barriers between "high" and "low" art; bringing together art and everyday life; combining visual art and music. He was also interested in using technology toward globalization, with satellites and the Internet. "With satellites covering activity such as armed conflict, global awareness can bring enough viewer sympathy to halt these conflicts. International cultural works, with input from many nations, can also help bring the world together, showing diverse and seemingly 'opposed' cultures, such as indigenous and contemporary populations; and glimpses of everyday life in cultures usually seen as very different from one another, emphasizing our commonality. We can also see commonality in various times - the union of art and technology in previous times, such as ancient Egyptian pyramids, and other Egyptian technical know-how, such as mummification and pigment-making. East and west, racial, religious and national boundaries can hopefully be overcome with these technologies."

Nam June Paik



Magnet TV, 1965. Television and magnet; black-and-white, silent; variable dimensions.

Nam June Paik



TV Clock, 1989 version. Twenty-four manipulated color televisions; silent; variable dimensions.

# Charlotte Moorman & Nam June Paik



Charlotte Moorman performing Paik's Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes (1971) at Galeria Bonino, New York,

# Nam June Paik



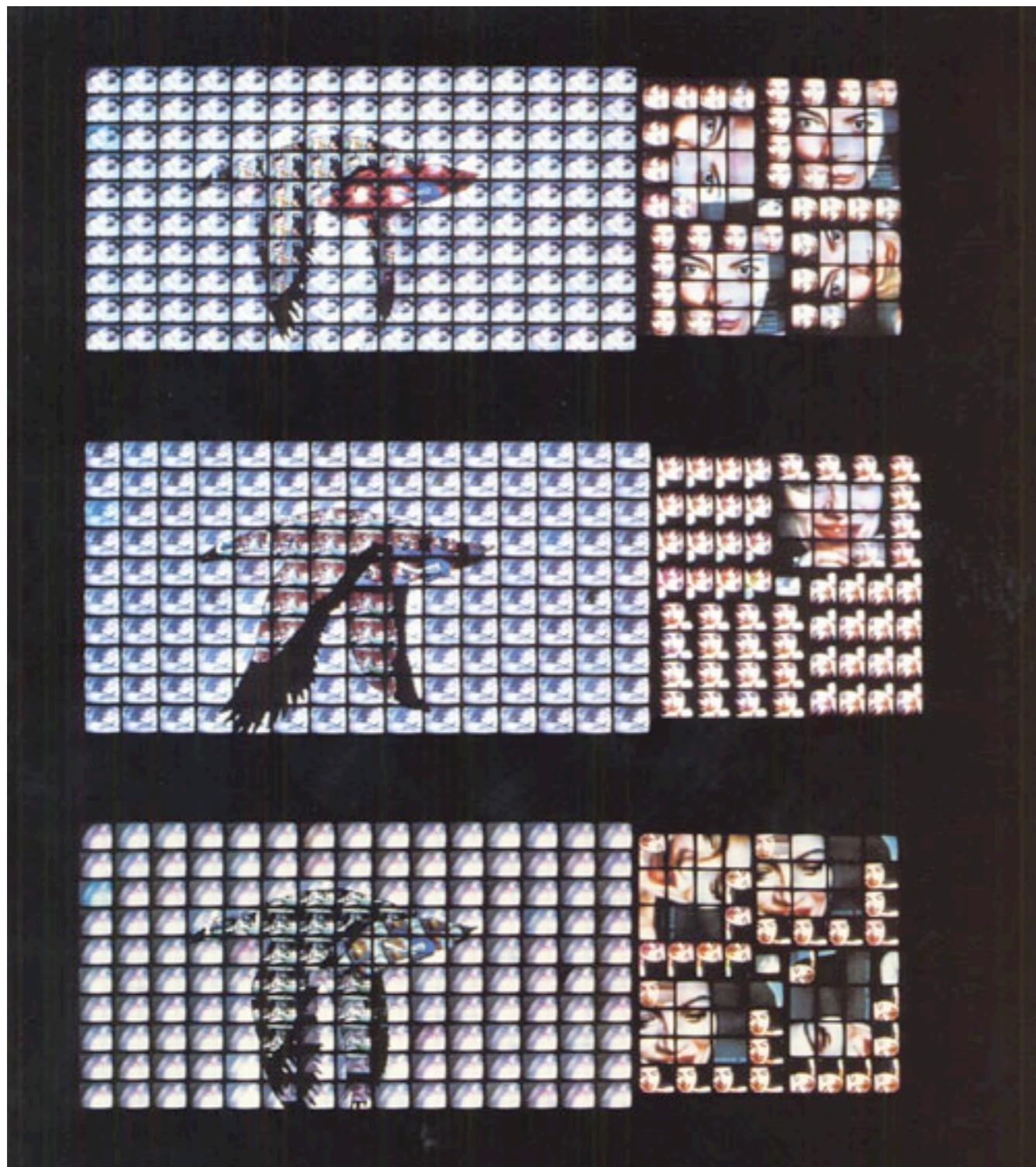
TV Buddha (1974) Closed Circuit video installation with bronze sculpture

# Nam June Paik



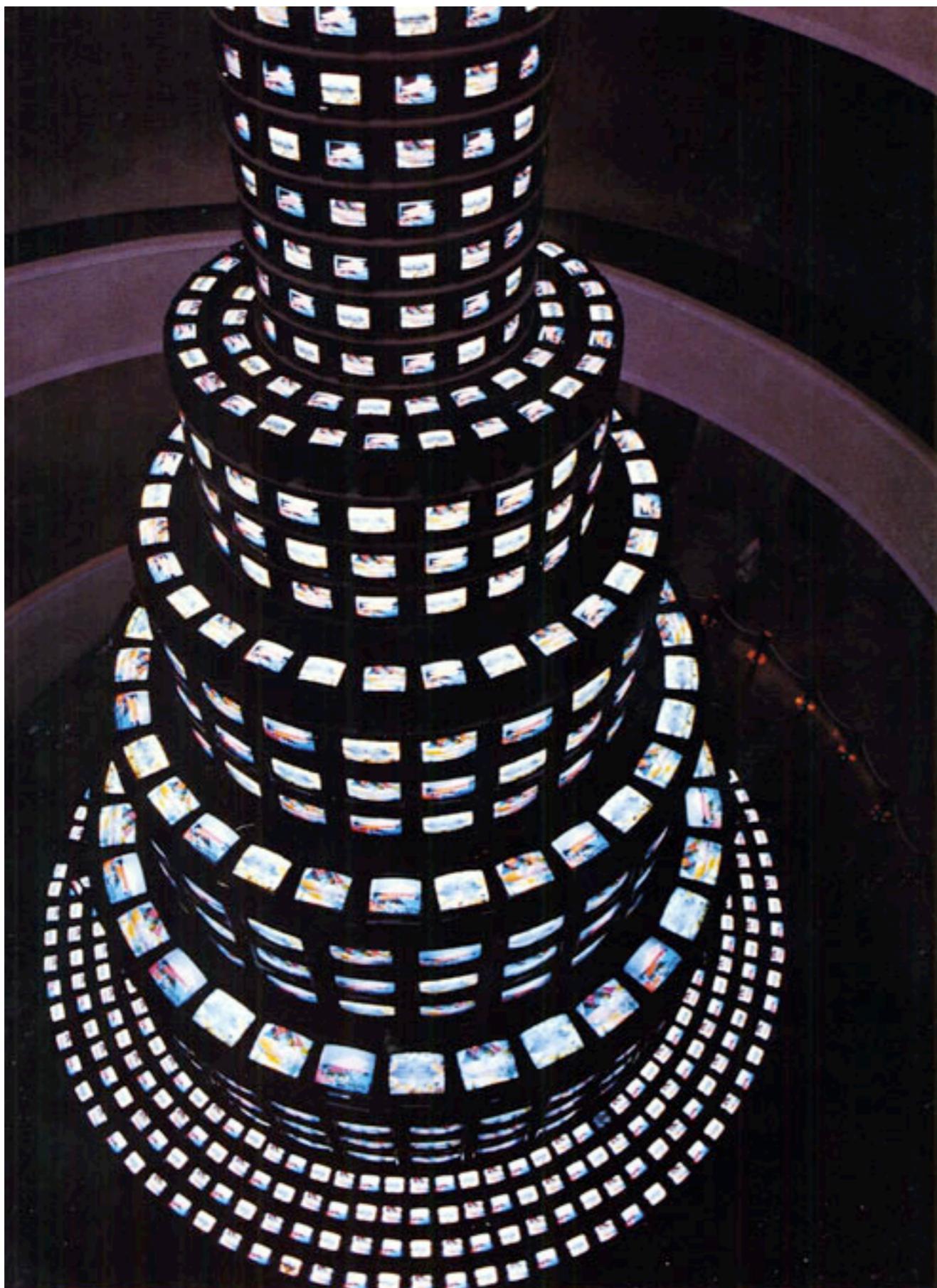
'Video Flag' by Nam June Paik, synchronized video playback on 70 CRT monitors, 1958-1969, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, D. C.)

# Nam June Paik



Megatron/Matrix \*(1995) Eight channel computer driven video installation with 215 monitors, color, sound. Megatron: 126x270x24 inches. Matrix: 128x128x24

Nam June Paik



The More the Better, (1988) Three channel video installation with 1,003 monitors and steel structure; color, sound; approx. 60 ft. high.