

# Big Time

Nam June Paik is an elephant among artists.

## RETROSPECTIVE and HANNIBAL

By Nam June Paik

Wood Street Galleries // Downtown  
Through July 28: Phone 471-5605

To call Korean-born Nam June Paik a giant among video installation artists would almost be understating it: He practically pioneered the form. In the early '60s, when most people were still unpacking televisions in their living rooms, Paik was already raiding the televisual landscape, cracking open picture tubes, giving TVs bodies and putting them up for display. As sculpture.

Today, this doesn't sound so radical, and Paik's role in the art world has changed. At its core, however, his art has not. His latest exhibition at Wood Street Galleries, which with the exception of "Candle" features all new and never-before-seen works, shows he has followed the path John Irving once famously described as leading toward artistic success: "Get obsessed and stay obsessed."

Here you will find what you'd expect: televisions. And lots of them. You won't find lasers — a recent Paik obsession, which figured heavily into the Guggenheim retrospective of his career last year. But you will find elephants, a symbol that seems to be slowly replacing the Buddha as Paik's iconic element of choice.

Paik introduces this shift in imagery with "Hello Elephant," the latest variation on his TV Buddha, which has been circulating through his art in some form for almost 40 years. Paik takes the figure of the Buddha (which in most incarnations sits in front of a TV watching its own live video image), stacks it atop the television, crowns it with a bright yellow umbrella, and places the whole burden on the back of an elephant sculpture. The video camera points at all of these elements (including the television) to create a loop of video feedback.

As with all of Paik's Buddhas, there is a sense of the infinite, cyclical nature of self-reflection, and a suggestion that television has greater potential than as a mere instrument of escape. But the elephant adds another layer of complexity: as a symbol of strength, progress and endurance, the animal seems to be carrying this technology forward. No longer is the sculpture static; now it suggests a progress, an optimism, that Paik has long been trying to communicate in his work.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the show's most ambitious piece, "Hannibal," in which a wooden elephant, saddled by televisions, appears to be pulling a carriage of TV monitors by video cables. The monitors display videos of the Alps, a nod to the original story of Hannibal, the Carthaginian general who

crossed the nearly insurmountable mountain range with the help of his elephants.

Paik's work has remained playful, optimistic, a little humorous. And this is what continues to set him apart from most video artists, who often use video's potential to either nauseate us or smooth representational edges.

"There's nothing slick about his work. He's a very earthy artist," says Murray Horne, the director of Wood Street Galleries. "We associate [the video image] with video machines, Hollywood, but he's the antithesis of that." // DAN ARP

## SCULPTURE NOW: ART + PERFORMANCE = TECHNOLOGY

By various artists

Pittsburgh Center for the Arts // Shadyside  
Through July 2: 361-0873

The big difference between *Sculpture NOW* and, say, the Renaissance statues standing in the court of the Louvre is this: At the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, you don't have to be content to look, nod and move along. You can also play.

An excellent contribution to the city-wide International Sculpture Conference, *Sculpture NOW* covers a range of original work: "Temple Icons," by Lucartha Kohler, is a traditional collection of green glass towers assembled with concrete and arranged like a simple religious site. "Triangle Price," by Adrienne Heinrich, consists of two triangles sculpted out of thick colored rubber (the hypotenuse of each measures about a foot). Tiny found objects float dreamily inside, such as plastic planes, a miniature knight, and the face of a clock.

But the pieces that will grab the most attention are the ones you can touch and tinker with — the "performing" pieces, as the title suggests. Lisa Moren's vaguely titled "The" is stationed in a dark room, where a still digital picture of a man holding a microphone is projected against the wall. Visitors are given their own microphone, and as they speak (yell, sing, blow air), the image moves, giving the picture

life. John Freyer's "All My Life For Sale" is a website that connects to Ebay. Freyer has offered many of his more worthless household possessions to bidders, such as a flask, a box of taco shells, spoons and a phone directory to Iowa City — all of which are arranged neatly on a glass bookshelf. Freyer hasn't sold much, but of course that isn't the point.

Less technical is Maria Barbosa's "Bananalligraphy," a coded message written on the wall in dried and painted banana peels. Using a postcard to translate, visitors can puzzle out Barbosa's cute thank-you note to her favorite fruit. Other simple and large-scale sculptures are scattered outside on the PCA grounds.

The two most provocative works stand at opposite ends of the exhibit: Dennis Childers' "The Door to Tomorrow" is a weathered old door stuck against the wall. Three tiny TV screens are embedded in the wood, showing Dubya Bush, Bill Clinton and a flickering eye, respectively. You can slip on a pair of headphones and listen to the loud, calamitous techno-noise, offering a grim, chaotic auditory premonition of the future.

The second is "Record Player from a Bicycle," built in 48 hours by Mark Dixon and Chris Huggins (you can watch a time-lapsed video of its construction on an adjacent TV). An LP record fixed to the bicycle's front wheel spins as you crank the pedals. Using a needle and paper cone as an improvised gramophone, the voice of an old singer hums faintly from the wheel. Not bad for 48 hours. // ROBERT ISENBERG



Nam June Paik's  
"Hello Elephant."