A different view of television

International Sculpture Conference honors Nam June Paik as a ‘father of video art’

BY EVE MIRKELSON

at and beyond the periphery of the art world. His name is one that has been heard in recent years: German-born American artist Nam June Paik.

Paik’s work has been recognized in the arts world for decades, but he is admired for his ability to bring together different elements of technology and art, creating a unique and influential style.

Paik’s work has been exhibited in numerous galleries, museums, and art festivals around the world. His sculptures and installations have been featured in exhibitions across the globe, and his collaborations with other artists have helped to bring together different disciplines and media.

As a father of video art, Paik has been influential in the development of the medium, and his work continues to inspire artists and audiences alike. His contributions to the field of video art have been recognized with numerous awards and honors, making him a well-known and respected figure in the art world.
Nam June Paik honored

 Works such as “Candle TV” from 1975, which is not in the Pittsburgh show, composed of a single candle burning inside a hollowed-out TV set, strip down the television and remind viewers that its most basic function is as a light source. That is, like a candle, the TV is just a flickering light in your home.

“Candle Projection” at Wood Street Galleries makes a similar point on an even larger scale. The piece consists of nine projectors that transfer enlarged images of burning candles onto the walls of the third-floor gallery room. Each candle stands on an electronic device with a light sensor that, when the candle burns too low, elevates the stand so the flame remains in the light of the video projector.

So, despite the projectors, wires and cords streaming about, the room where “Candle Projection” is shown is entirely illuminated by the soft glow of candlelight. This ironic contrast of vices and is not uncommon in Paik’s art, and it conveys a certain irreverence for technology.

“Hello Elephant” and “HamElph,” the two premiering pieces in the Wood Street Galleries show, both fuse the antiquated with the modern by combining scuffed Buddha statues and antique-looking elephants with video recorders and TV sets.

The former, which is on a much smaller scale, depicts a walking elephant bearing a TV monitor on its back with a cross-legged Buddha atop the TV. The serene expression of the Buddha, Thiessen points out, is strangely akin to the placid expression of a person watching TV.

“HamElph” is the show’s most impressive installation and perhaps an accurate metaphor for Paik’s life and career. It’s a sculpture composed of three very different components—a massive wooden elephant, a pyramid of modern TVs and an old wooden cart laden with antique wooden TV cases.

The elephant—an oversized antique found in a Sophia shop—is mounted on wheels, and atop it, a monochrome, square chair enthrones the seated Buddha. Amazingly, a battered yellow and white Adriana umbrella shields the deity.

The Buddha and the elephant face a pyramid of “mountains,” or 15 color TVs (an arrangement Paik has used many times) that broadcast images of bright green frogs, among other things. Thiessen and Paik think there’s something lucky about frogs, so they’ve become a recurring theme in his works.

The lower cart at the other end of the sculpture, which is connected to the elephant with wires, is piled high with old wooden Zenith and Emerson TV enclosures, making a strange juxtaposition against the jet-black TVs of the pyramid structure.

The piece contrasts the new with...