



Nam June Paik, «Exposition of Music – Electronic Television», 1963

Prepared Pianos | Photography | Photograph: Rolf Jährling

Four 'prepared' pianos stand in the hallway of the house. Whereas John Cage temporarily modified pianos for the duration of a performance, Paik wholly reconstructed the instruments so that the public could carry out its own interactive experiments. The following description is by Tomas Schmit, one of Paik's assistants: 'the thing about the first piano is invisible but tangible: a board placed beneath the keyboard has jammed it, none of the keys can be depressed, much less produce chords; the second piano is lying on its back, its innards exposed; this one you play with your feet while walking over it (...). for all senses the two other pianos; our traditional item of cultural furniture, the piano, now a vehicle for a fairly total spectacle (...). awaiting the fingertips are all sorts of tactile things (on the keyboard): a cloth soaked in fat, spiky upturned drawing-pins, soft things, rough things, and so on. the capricious mechanics of the piano are used in three different ways: - i press a key, the key moves the hammer, and it strikes the string(s); some of the hammers are doctored by things placed on top of them, and on top of, beneath, or between many of the strings are all manner of objects (...). - i press a key, the key moves the hammer, and it moves whatever happens to be stuck to it or hanging from it; for instance: it makes an old shoe dangling over the lid rock bob up and down. - i press a key, and it squeezes something like a squeaking bellows mounted below it, or maybe an electric switch: there are three different types of circuits – pushbutton, flip-flop and dual circuits; examples: - when i press the cis", a transistor radio starts up; it goes silent as soon as i release the cis" key. - when I press the f, an electromotor screwed to the soundboard begins to agitate; it calms down when i press f again. - when i press the c, a hot-air fan begins to blow hot air on my legs; the button that makes it stop is hidden beneath the a'. in addition to the things listed above, several transistor radios, one or more film projectors, a siren (and other things?) are operated in these ways. one key switches off the entire room lighting for the room (and back on again if you manage to find it in the dark).' Dieter Daniels



Tomas Schmit noted that one of the four pianos – this picture shows details – lay 'on its back, its innards exposed; this one you play with your feet while walking over it.' Inside it is the violin that Paik trailed behind him on a string in the course of an action.



With the 'prepared' or sometimes destroyed piano, John Cage, Paik and the Fluxus artists launched an assault on the instrument of the European musical tradition and the symbol of the affluent middle-class home. Paik now transferred this treatment to the TV set, which in the 1960s replaced the piano as the most expensive item of furniture in the home. Paik's modifications suggest various possible attitudes of viewer to TV picture, ranging from object of meditation ('Zen for TV') to object of interaction ('Participation TV'). His notion of making viewers active participants rather than passive consumers foreshadowed the present-day discussions about interaction and multimedia as the mass media of the 21st century.



The project was a permanent work-in-progress subject to continuous changes brought about by visitors, by Paik and his fellow artists, as well as by technical defects. This was especially true of complicated constructions with pianos and TV sets. Tomas Schmit, one of Paik's helpers, noted: 'If something broke down, it was repaired; or replaced by another thing; or simply dropped.'



On occasion, the demarcation lines between family home, architectural practice and Galerie Parnass in Rolf Jährling's house no longer applied. In Jährling's words: 'Paik had occupied my entire house for his show. An Environment was created in the basement, and the tub in my mother's bathroom on the top floor had been transformed into a work of art – an armless window dummy lay there. She was in a macabre state, her head underwater, her legs and high-heeled shoes projecting out of the water.' Dieter Daniels



Tomas Schmit's observation of this special TV: '(...) the "kuba tv"; it is connected to a tape recorder that feeds music to the tv (and to us): parameters of the music determine parameters of the picture (...)'



The Fluxus artist Tomas Schmit, here seen sitting in the room full of TV sets, helped Paik set up the exhibition. Schmit's detailed description of the individual TV modifications makes it clear that the impression of chaos conveyed by the TV ensemble is deceptive insofar as the whole presentation was more like a laboratory with various experimental set-ups than a conventional exhibition. «eleven televisions in the room between the hall and garden; arranged – like the pianos – at random; one tv set is on top of another, the others are on the floor. the starting material is supplied by the normal tv programmes, but they are scarcely recognizable on most of the sets. (...): one of the tv sets shows a negative picture overlaid with a different one. the picture on another has been rolled up,

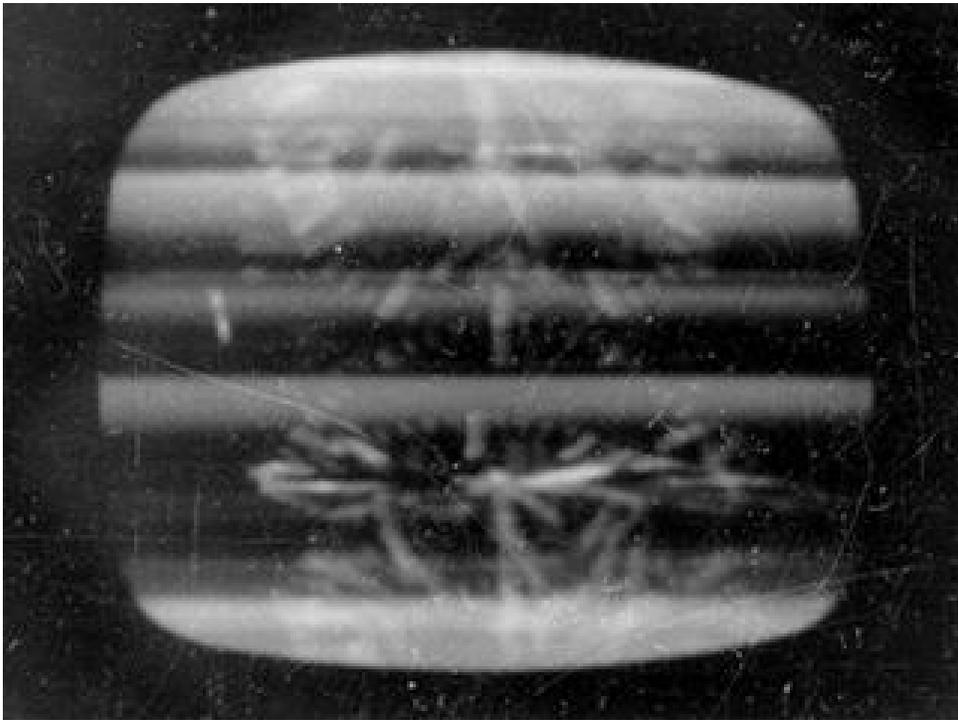
so to speak, into a cylinder round the vertical centre axis of the screen. in what paik calls the most complicated case there are three independent sinusoidal oscillations attacking the image parameters. the group of two: the lower one has horizontal stripes, the upper one vertical stripes (the upper one actually shows the same picture as the bottom one, but is on its side as opposed to its feet). a single, vertical, white line runs through the middle of the screen of the zen tv. one set lies face-down and shows its pictures to the parquet floor (paik said today: «that one was broken»). in the top eight tv sets the picture composition (in television, the term picture also includes a temporal dimension) is derived from more-or-less pre-defined manipulations of the set's electronics, in the four bottom sets the manipulation is such that external influences determine the picture: one of the four is connected to a pedal switch in front of it; if you press the switch, the short-circuits of the contact procedure bring about a fireworks of instantly disappearing points of light on the screen. another set is hooked up to a microphone; anyone who speaks into the mike sees an explosion of light dots similar to the other set, but a continuous one this time. the «kuba tv» is the most extreme; it is connected to a tape recorder that feeds music to the tv (and to us): parameters of the music determine parameters of the picture. finally (on the top storey) you have the «one point tv» that is connected to a radio; in the middle of its screen is a bright point whose size is governed by the current volume of the radio; the louder the radio, the larger the point, the quieter the radio, the smaller the point becomes.» Dieter Daniels

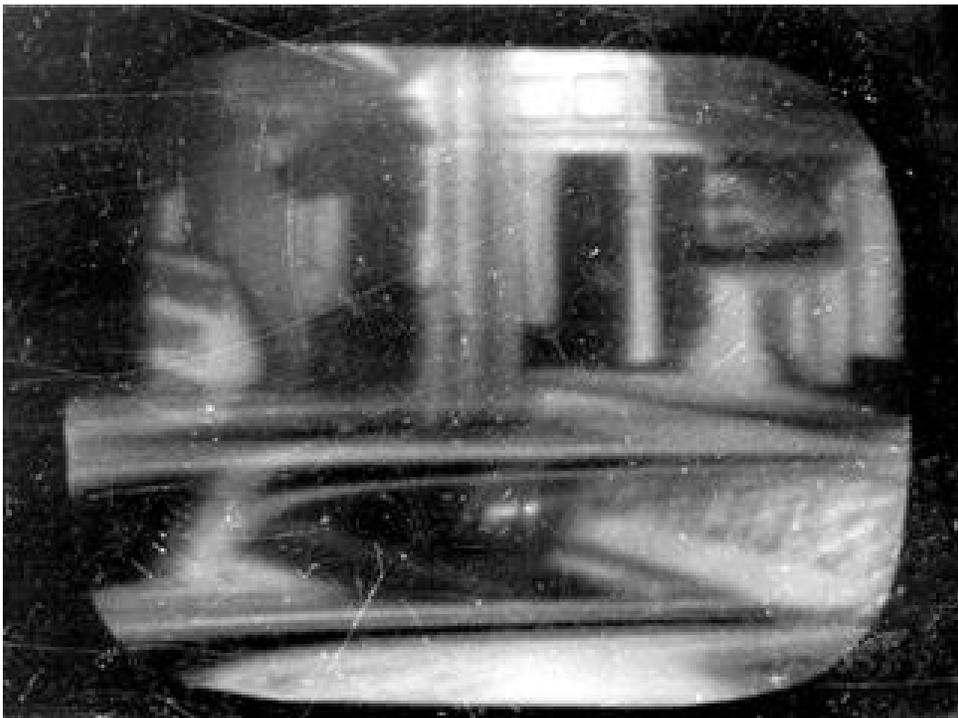


In the leaflet publicizing the exhibition, Paik refers to K. O. Götz and his experiments with programming electronic painting – 'My interest in television was largely stimulated by him' – and to 'Vostell's idea (Décollage TV)'. Although he mentions by name fellow-artists with similar interests, he was careful during the one-year run-up to the show to keep his TV experiments under wraps, so that nobody could steal his concept. Dieter Daniels



This 'prepared' piano accompanied Paik on important stations of his early career. Bought second-hand in Cologne in 1958, Paik worked on and with it for several years, for instance in his 'Hommage à John Cage', Cologne, 1960. Having been wrapped by Christo in the interim, it was presented along with three others at Paik's first major show in Wuppertal. It is the only surviving piano of the four, and can now be seen in the Museum of Modern Art, Vienna (formerly Collection Hahn, Cologne). However, the museum does not offer visitors the opportunity of trying out the interactive qualities peculiar to the exhibit. Dieter Daniels







Three works of the »Exposition of Music-Electronic Television« from 1963 in a reconstruction for the exhibition «Video-Skulptur aktuell und retrospektiv,» Cologne.

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