Panels

Symphony for 20 Rooms (N.J. Paik, 1961), as a Source and Creative Tool for Practice-based Research on Digital and Hybrid exhibitions

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Abstract

This panel presents and discusses *Paik Replayed*, an interdisciplinary and practiced-based research project undertook at ECAL/University of Art and Design, Lausanne (HES-SO), Switzerland (2024–2028), and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF).

The study focuses on hybrid online exhibition formats, particularly for non-digital native artworks and the virtual revival of past historical exhibitions. Hybridity being defined in this context as the variable and evolving combination of digital and analog environments, media, displays and means of perception.

Central to the research and this panel discussion are Nam June Paik's electronic artworks and *Symphony for 20 Rooms* (1961), an unrealized exhibition score from his lifetime that serves as a curatorial framework for rethinking hybrid exhibitions "at a distance," beyond institutional walls. [1] Paik's vision of exhibiting media and non-media artworks in indeterminate "rooms", while incorporating instructions for their spatialization and participatory manipulation by an audience, resonates strongly with recent algorithmic and hybrid curatorial practices. The *Paik Replayed* research makes it a pivotal case study, allowing for observation and evaluation of the effects at play, not least on the works themselves, and their reception in unspecified and varied contexts.

Building on a 2021 preliminary prototype developed in collaboration with the Nam June Paik Art Center (KR), for an augmented reality (AR) exhibition "at home", and following a study on past and recent online exhibitions, the research project explores experimental hybrid exhibition practices, their conceptual and technological contexts, and impacts on both digitized artworks and audiences. By addressing challenges in digital exhibition design, the panel gathers curators, artists, and researchers to discuss issues, findings, share insights, and reimagine Paik's *Symphony for 20 Rooms* in a contemporary digital context.
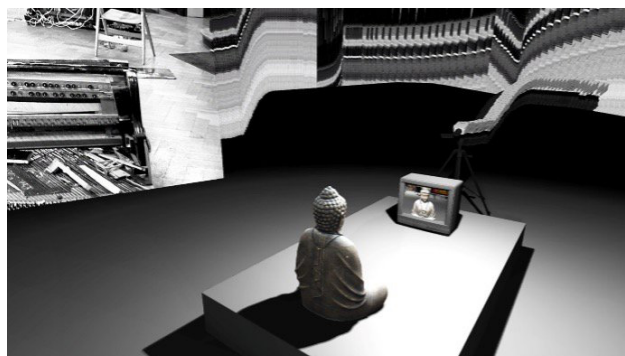
Figure 1. NJ Paik, TV Buddha (1974), digitally remade. Early tests for the digital transposition project (Re)Viewing Paik (2021) © ECAL / Patrick Keller.

Keywords

Nam June Paik, Practiced-based Research, Scores, Rules, Exhibition Algorithms, Digital Curation, Hybrid Exhibition, Automated Exhibition, Distant Viewing, Electronic Art, Artwork Digitization, Augmented/Virtual Reality and Metaverse, Audience reception.

Introduction

How would the reception of a body of non-digital native artworks be transformed by their transposition into an online or hybrid exhibition format? Does the work of Nam June Paik, pioneering and hybrid in nature, and his early exhibition scores resonate which such issues, and can they help inform them?

The *Paik Replayed* research project aims to answer these questions by combining knowledge in curation, art history and digital exhibition design. It investigates the transformative effects at play on analog and electronic

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[1] Mai, Melanie and Susanne Rennert, eds. *Nam June Paik:* *Music for All Senses*. Luxembourg: MUDAM, 2023.

artworks, originally created to be experienced in physical spaces.[2]

Nam June Paik's participatory works, including *Symphony for 20* Rooms (1961)[3], *Participation TV I & II* (1963, 1969)[4], *Electric Opera No. 1* (1969)[5], and *Video Commune: Beatles from Beginning to End* (1970)[6], serve as important references, sources of inspiration and potential means of understanding. These projects, which experimented with live broadcasts, participation rules, and early synthesizer technology, introduced the concept of presenting art to distant and indeterminate audiences.

The aim of the research, following the pioneering work of Paik and the "online turn" at the end of the last century, is thus to understand whether offering remote access to a set of digitized artworks, through an advanced digital and immersive exhibition, facilitates their proper dissemination or modifies their nature and perception. We also investigate the presence of alternate digital copies of the same corpus on the network, or within existing datasets. By examining this seemingly uncontrolled extension of the online museum, we evaluate how it affects the accessibility, understanding, and circulation of the curated corpus of artworks.

Paik Replayed builds on the preliminary study of an AR exhibition "at home", conducted in partnership with the Nam June Paik Art Center (NJPAC, Korea) in 2021[7], while also drawing on insights from the Beyond Matter[8] initiative (ZKM | Karlsruhe, 2019–2023), which focused on digital and hybrid curatorial methods.

Research Issues

The research project is organized around a set of issues that lead into three interconnected phases, providing a broader context of where this panel discussion fits within the larger research scope:

Issue 1: Open Typology of Digital Exhibitions

This part of the study develops a comprehensive and open-ended classification of digital and hybrid online exhibitions, of both digital and non-digital native artworks. It focuses on strategies for digitalization, display, and audience engagement. While referring to Nam June Paik's work as a foundation, the typology draws on previous research works and recent advances in the field of digital art curation.

Issue 2: Experimental Exhibition Prototypes

This phase of the research, "in progress" when the panel will take place, explores practice-based approaches to digital curation, using *Symphony for 20 Rooms* as both a conceptual framework and a structural guide. It explores new ways of creating immersive, online digital exhibitions through AR. It aims to maintain a direct relationship with the artworks, in this case digitized in a variety of ways, and to attempt to include the notion of instructions within the works themselves.

The *Symphony for 20 Rooms* serves as a structural and conceptual guide throughout[9], so as the notion of "hybrid exhibition" (mixing of digital and physical environments, artworks, media and/or means of perception).

Issue 3: Audience/Context Reception Study

Planned for 2026, this phase evaluates how audiences interact with and perceive hybrid online exhibitions within different contexts of reception, especially the prototypes developed during Issue 2. Although still in the preparation stage, this part of the research aims to address critical questions about engagement, interaction styles, and the

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[2] Paik Replayed, "Research Goals," Paik Replayed, Lausanne: ECAL, 2024, accessed February 27, 2025, https://www.paikreplayed.org/2024/04/17/research-goals/.

[3] John G. Hanhardt, "Nam June Paik: Participation and the Cybernetic Vision," in *Nam June Paik: Global Visionary* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2012), 54–79.

[4] Nam June Paik, "Expanded Video: Projects and Experiments," in *Nam June Paik: Writings on Media Art* (New York: MIT Press, 2019), 95–112.

[5] Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

[6] Tate Research, "Video Commune: Nam June Paik and the Broadcast Medium," Tate Papers, no. 32 (2019), accessed February 27, 2025, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/video-commune-nam-june-paik.

[7] Davide Fornari, ed., *Mnemosyne: History and Research in Art and Design* (Lausanne: ECAL, 2022).

[8] ZKM | Karlsruhe, *Beyond Matter: The Digital Turn in Exhibition Practices* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Press, 2023).

[9] Nam June Paik Art Center, *Symphony for 20 Rooms: Curatorial Notes* (Suwon: NJPAC, 2021).

impact of different display formats on audience perception and their context. While concrete data is currently lacking, the researchers anticipate that audience feedback will play a crucial role in refining hybrid curatorial practices.

This step seeks to bridge the gaps in understanding how digital and hybrid exhibitions resonate with diverse audiences by capturing both qualitative and quantitative insights.

The three issues mentioned above showcase a set of stakes that will define the themes and focus of the panel discussion, with the ongoing Issue 2 being at the center of the exchanges. Based on their personal experiences as curators, or artists involved in the interpretation of *Symphony for 20 Rooms*, or as researchers in the Paik project, panelists share insights on the project's intentions, outcomes, thematic stakes, and curatorial challenges.

Panel Structure

The panel will be moderated by a representative from ECAL (confirmed). Panelists bring diverse perspectives, from curatorial insights to artistic interpretations and technical analyses, to provide a comprehensive and critical view of Paik Replayed's ongoing research.

- **Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás** (confirmed): Lecturer at UCL, research fellow at ECAL and former curator at ZKM | Karlsruhe, presenting findings from the Beyond Matter initiative and insights from Paik Replayed.
- **Prof. Patrick Keller** (confirmed): Associate professor at ECAL, discussing experimental methodologies, exhibition design and outcomes from the project.
- **Sooyon Lee** (confirmed): Curator at MMCA, reflecting on Paik's influence on contemporary curatorial practices and his relevance to the Metaverse.
- **Curator** (to be confirmed): Curator of The Last Consummate Second at the Nam June Paik Art Center·
- **Artist** (to be confirmed): Artist from The Last Consummate Second, offering perspectives on participatory artistic practices and their contemporary understanding of Paik's instructions within *Symphony for 20 Rooms*.

Objectives and Expected Outcomes

The discussion will focus on the practical challenges, the issues at stake, the role of distribution platforms and the technical and conceptual efforts required to develop digital exhibitions, while retaining Paik's vision as a potential driving force for understanding and reinterpretation. Panelists will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of digital and hybrid online exhibitions in making historical works relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences.

This panel is a vital component of the *Paik Replayed* research process, aimed at not just gathering insights but fostering meaningful dialogue on the interpretation and application of *Symphony for 20 Rooms* within digital and hybrid exhibition contexts. The insights from this panel are key to achieving this aim. The primary objectives are as follows:

- Gather feedback on digital and hybrid online exhibition models by soliciting insights from the various panel experts to enhance the methodologies and digital adaptations of non-digital artworks developed in the *Paik Replayed* project.
- Discuss the indeterminate context of reception of such online exhibition initiatives. Take benefit of having contributors from Asia and Europe to discuss such stakes.
- Advancing Research by contextualizing Nam June Paik's legacy within contemporary curatorial practices, particularly in fostering connections among geographically and culturally diverse art communities, in line with Paik Replayed's primary goals. Employ interdisciplinary insights from this discussion to inform the continued development of best practices for digital and hybrid curatorial models.

Through these objectives, the panel aims to investigate Nam June Paik's *Symphony for 20 Rooms* as a curatorial reference for exhibitions "at a distance," exploring its potential within digital contexts. By examining how digitized artworks, embedded with instructions for manipulation and viewing, can be effectively presented online, the discussion seeks to enhance understanding of Paik's pivotal role in art history while addressing the challenges of disseminating media art in virtual environments.

Panel Format

This session offers a dynamic blend of individual insights, interactive discussions, and audience engagement, focusing on the research phases of *Paik Replayed* while exploring its broader implications for digital and hybrid curatorial practices. The format is designed to foster meaningful dialogue and share actionable ideas with participants.

The session will begin with a brief introduction by the moderator, who will outline the panel's objectives and set the stage for the discussion. Each panelist will then present their insights and findings, highlighting connections between Nam June Paik's *Symphony for 20 Rooms*, their own research and creative processes, and the contemporary relevance of these intersections. These presentations will underscore the innovative approaches being explored and their potential to reshape curatorial practices.

The session will end with a Q&A, encouraging audience participation. Attendees can engage with the panelists, ask questions, and discuss real-world applications of the research, fostering insights and new perspectives on hybrid and digital exhibitions.

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Author(s) Biography(ies)

Erika Marthins is a research assistant at ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne (HES-SO). Previously, she was Communication Manager at Design++ ETH Zürich and a creative at SPACE10, IKEA's research lab. With degrees from ECAL and ETH Zürich, she founded Augmented Food Studio to create innovative, globally exhibited food experiences.

Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás is a curator, art historian, and author specialising in hybrid display forms and the intersections of technoscience, philosophy, and visual arts. She has curated exhibitions at institutions such as ZKM | Karlsruhe, lectures on curation and media practice at University College London, and serves as a research fellow at ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne (HES-SO).

Patrick Keller is an architect and co-founder of fabric | ch – a studio for architecture, interaction, and research that explores the intersection of physical and digital environments. He is an Associate Professor and Researcher in Media and Interaction Design at ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne (HES-SO) and the principal investigator of the research project Paik Replayed.