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Vision and Control from Two Ends of the Spectrum: Chuck Close and Nam June Paik

In viewing the Cool Contemporary and Collected exhibition at the Mint Museum, I was struck by a number of artists addressing the experience of sight and the ambiguities of perception. Tony Oursler's work *Invisible Green Link?* (2007), for instance, is a green splat with one blood shot eye blinking back at the viewer. Janet Biggs video, *Airs Above the Ground* (2006), lulls the viewer in with a rhapsodic melody, and it takes one a minute to realize what is odd in the image on screen. It is only some time after focusing on the young woman's movements and serene face that one notices the pool's floor is above her head. We are in fact seeing her upside-down. The questions raised by the duality observed-observer (as in Green Link) and the subjectivity of perception (as in *Airs Above the Ground)* lead to reflections on vision, perception and control. Most people rely predominantly on sight to make sense of the world and ultimately form judgments about what we see as 'reality.' How we perceive that reality and how much of it we actually see will necessarily generate different judgments.

The work that I saw then of the artists that are the subject of this paper, Chuck Close and Nam June Paik pointed to similar concerns. In *Dogmatic* (1996) Nam June Paik used television to openly comment on social control and the literally 'boxed in' reality we see on TV everyday; in the adjoining hallway Chuck Close's *Self-portrait/*

Spitbite/White on Black, from 1997 (and part of the Mint's permanent collection) succinctly asked: what is happening as our minds are interpreting an image? What influence do these images exact? This paper will discuss these two very different works as examples of the contemporary preoccupation with such questions. It will argue that both artists are effective in bringing these issues to the fore and that they approach them from very different angles: one more physical and individual oriented (Chuck Close), the other more conceptual and social oriented (Nam Paik). Close's pieces address more pointedly the physicality of the act of seeing; he is concerned with the origins of image in the (mind's) eye. Paik on the other hand focuses more on the mental processes, and the often distorted perceptions that result from the visual intake of information.

Chuck Close is a renowned painter, printmaker and photographer. Born in 1940, in his early career he became known for large hyper-photorealistic portraits, such as *Big Self Portrait* from 1967-68. After the seventies nearly all of Close's large paintings were grid based. Following a debilitating spinal blood clot in 1988 that left him a quadriplegic, Close was forced to make some changes in the way he produced art. He was slowly able to regain coordination and control of his upper limbs. In spite of this setback he has never relinquished control of his images, using a variety of prosthetic devices to accomplish his large and small scale works.

hi Close's large paintings there are three set ways of seeing: far, middle and near. It is in the middle range that a shift in perception, in reality, takes place. As Denis Pelli described in Science magazine, there is a "psychophysical" happening in Close's later paintings. In Pelli's study, participants were asked to note when the image of a modeled

nose bridge appears to "stick out" from the surface of several large Close paintings (Pelli).The distance in between seeing this portion of anatomy and it dissipating into flat unrecognizable form is a measurable demonstration of a duality in perception. This phenomenon has been exploited many times and not only in fine art. I am sure many of us remember the "Magic Eye" cartoons where a dimensional image would jump forward out of a pattern only after we learned to look past it.

But returning to Chuck Close: what is the cause of the allure these portraits hold? I feel it in some way rests on the fact that while they are portraits of known and often famous individuals, we see their images literally dissolve into another artist's marks *(Cindy II,* 1988, Kiki, 1993). In Close's *Self-portrait/Spitbite* this quality of dissolution remains and, with it, ambiguity. The separation of the valued dots leaves the viewer with questions about what they see. Is the image coming into focus or disappearing? Equally pertinent to today's concerns: is it manmade or generated technologically?

This latter question also hinges on the preoccupation with control, in particular the artist's control of his art. The dark field/ light image of *Self-portrait/Spitbite* is reminiscent of a television image. Light is projected from a cathode-ray tube and filtered through a phosphorus screen. Electromagnetic coils control the movement of this beam as it scans rapidly left to right, right to left moving down the screen as it goes. Our minds fill the tiny spaces in between pieces of light and the spaces of time between each successive image. "If you divide a still image into a collection of small colored dots, your brain will reassemble the dots into a meaningful image" (Brain). In Close's piece there is the same sense of light coming through a screen. There is also the feeling that the image is being formed right then, live, and moments from now the dots may move and change into a

different image, or no meaningful image at all; and that the artist is in minute control of our perception. With their networks of dots or colored ovoids these images have even given him the ability to determine the viewer's actual physical movements when observing the work. As we move out to see the larger picture, or up close to examine its abstracted surface we are repositioning out of necessity. In *Self-portrait/Spitbite,* the image's spacing gives it the same ephemeral quality of projected image of the television or computer screen. However, though Close acknowledges the reference to technology, pixels, and computer generated images that his work holds for some, he denies any intentional reference. "Some people wonder whether what I do is inspired by a computer and whether or not that kind of imaging is a part of what makes this work contemporary. I absolutely hate technology, and I'm computer illiterate, and I never use any labor-saving devices although I'm not convinced that a computer is a labor-saving device" (MOMA. org).

Indeed, the meticulous and labor intensive processes Close uses for his prints may be just as foreign to the public as the personas these images represent are familiar. A spitbite plate is a type of aquatint. In a traditional aquatint the plate is masked with a fine layer of resin. The areas not to be toned are stopped out with a solution of hard ground, and then the plate is put into an acid bath for varied amounts of time, in order to reach the value desired in printing. In spitbite aquatints the acid is painted directly onto the surface of the plate which, according to author Terry Sultan allows, "for more nuances in grays. Spit is used to add viscosity, holding the acid in place" (Sultan, 77). Close himself acknowledges the technical obstacles that these images overcome in their creation. "It is hard to believe that I made these (spitbite self portraits) without the use of a computer

program. In fact I was doing something that is really very similar ... Digitizing tones and values and leaving them as a string of numbers is very close to how computer scanning works. (However) We make art the old fashioned way, very much by hand." And then he adds, "And everything is coordinated by eye, by me..."(Sultan 79).

For Close, something would be lost in a physical process like printmaking or painting if the artist placed himself behind a computer screen rather than an easel. His works are already once removed, being derived from photo maquettes. He takes all photographs himself and is equally obsessive about their quality and style as he is about the works that result from them. Even as he collaborates with others, as in a master printmaker's shop, Close retains control of the process (in addition to the image). We find this to be true throughout Close's career. More recent paintings and prints contain a tightly ordered crystallographic balance, where the entire surface shimmers with minute movements and no one area of focus supersedes another. Lyle Rexer refers to a statement in which Close mentions Polaroid as a way of overturning the hierarchal order of the portrait as it gives the image an all over focus rather than, in Close's words, privileging "certain kinds of information" (Close, Holman V). His series of daguerreotypes from the early 2000's offers a foil to this point. Daguerreotypes are one of the earliest forms of photography, in which a positive image is made by exposing a silver coated copper plate made light sensitive through fuming it with iodine vapor (Close, Holman VII). Close used a modernized version the medium for a group of artists' portraits accompanied by praise poems from poet Bob Holman (in an artist book). These images, diminutive in scale, feature a highly detailed focus, reminiscent of his earliest hyper-realism works. The range of vivid and intense clarity is limited to a very narrow depth of field, beginning just

after the tip of the nose and ending just past the apex of the cheekbones. This focus totals around two inches deep in relation to the face. In two dimensional form this narrow layer is what the viewer finds him or herself trapped in, exploring the detail offered by each pore and wrinkle. These works are a counterpoint to the Polaroid but the intent is the same: controlling the viewer's gaze.

Nam June Paik expresses differently similar processes and concerns. Often classified as a video or electronic artist, his treatment of television has always stepped beyond the applications favored by traditional video artists. Paik was born in Korea in 1932, later moving to Hong Kong and then Japan in flight of the Korean War. In the late fifties in Germany he studied Music at Munich University and at Freiburg Conservatory. After working with John Cage at the studio for experimental music in Cologne, in 1963 he participated in the Expostion of Music/ Electronic Television at Galerie Parnass; which was the first gallery exhibition to include television monitors (Nam June Paik Studios).

Paik was a founding member of the Fluxus movement which explored the democratization of art and emphasized its accessibility to everyone. Members sought to demonstrate the interconnectedness of various arts and media and undermined art as a consumerist or commercial undertaking (artnotart.com). hi light of his background in Fluxus and musical performance, it is safe to assume he prefers to address as large an audience as possible. And his works do openly engage in social commentary.

Paik's television sculptures are a hyperactive meeting point between sculptural object and virtual image. Each sculpture's relationship to the information it projects is

an essential part of the piece's success. Considering Paik's early background in musical performance and later in performance art, it is perhaps not surprising that many of his forms are meant to be representations of people active in these fields. Works like *Merce,* from 1987, inspired by Merce Cunningham the modern choreographer, or *Cage,* created in 1990 after Paik's mentor, minimalist musician John Cage, demonstrate Paik's continuing relationship to the body of artists who helped shape him. His facility in making the connection between actual person, object of the television console, and television imagery may derive from his earliest experiences with the medium. Paik's first pieces were performance based works that addressed the meeting of music and technology as seen in *Listening to Music through the Mouth* (1963) (Hanhardt, 48). With Cellist Charlotte Morman he began to explore the potential for television's relation to an individual as well as an audience. Television alternately became the garment or the instrument that the musician used in *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes, 191* \ (Hanhardt, 67). The line between sculpture, video, performance and music blurs in this work.

Paik's own awareness of the "experience of observing" is something he never loses consciousness of. And we are reminded here of Brace Nauman's *live taped video corridor,* 1969-70 which depicts the act of observing oneself in a space and simultaneously observing the space empty of oneself. This gives the viewer consciousness of the present reality while simultaneously showing a previous reality. Neither condition: the present act of seeing nor the awareness of a previous absence, could occur without the viewer. Paik's use of televised image, as evidenced in *Dogmatic,* is a way of bringing our attention to seeing as a central act of perception.

As Hanhardt says, "the act of looking, the experience of observing, was foregrounded in pieces that located film and video within everyday acts and fundamental properties of the medium" (Hanhardt, 103).

This process of seeing-perceiving-conceptualizing implies, necessarily, issues of control, which Paik approaches as he explores television's tendencies to adopt the methods of propaganda. His work highlights not just the artist's control over his medium, but also, and particularly in the case *of Dogmatic,* broadcasters' and television personalities control over content. There is a conversation taking place on television, but for Paik, the question is: is it a monologue? As early as 1969 one senses his fundamental distrust of the medium of TV. In Marita Sturken's essay "TV as Creative Medium: Howard Wise and Video Art" he is quoted as saying:
"The real issue...is not to make another scientific toy, but how to humanize the technology and the electronic medium, which is progressing rapidly- too rapidly" Nam June Paik, 1969 (Hanhardt, 114).

In 1984 (appropriately) Paik created *Good Morning Mr. Orwell,* which linked participants from across the world through a telecast via satellite transmission, curiously showing the potential for television to be a global forum for artists (Hanhardt, 230). He and other early electronic/ video artists saw television as a way to bring artistic expression to the masses and provide a true democratic medium for information. But the title of this work alert us to the fact that the actual implications of broadcast television's one way style of communication had by then already dawned on Paik. Twelve years later, with a piece such as *Dogmatic,* he makes a more personal

attack on the authoritarian monologue that had become the voice of broadcast television.

Dogmatic is rooted in a long Paik tradition of using vintage consoles from the early days of television and pairing them with a flurry of contemporary visual information. There are two small screens through which a deluge of images is delivered. The piece is a pun centered on the animism of a "dog" made from hammers, two vintage television cabinets, one 13" color television, one 8" color television, microphone, two vintage telephone earpieces, one channel original Paik video (Mint, Current Exhibitions). The television cabinet comprising the "head" of the dog is a Motorola VT71 from 1947. The body portion's cabinet is from 1948 from DuMont, the model name being "Dog House" (American Television Sets). This use of the model called Dog House is another example of the layering and fine detail which make his video works so rich.

The video itself draws on previously broadcast images of televangelists, various presidents, and violence against civil rights activists, among a plethora of other visual information. Symbols of Christianity, Judaism, Communism, African masks, and a close up of a barking German Shepherd are interspersed between footage of George Bush Sr., Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Jesse Jackson, Jim Bakker, and Pat Robertson. The vast majority of the figures are shown clutching a microphone in their hands - the TV console dog's tail. The people Paik has chosen to single out exert too much control or are subjected to too little supervision. What results is the spouting of dogma of a religious or political nature.

Paik is challenging the monopoly of broadcasting companies over television, both as a medium and a domain (Hanhardt, 15). What changed since the 1969 comments he made on the need to humanize technology is tactic. In 1996 he makes it blatantly clear he is using the broadcasters' own dogmatic style of propaganda to challenge them, an idea further emphasized by the use of hammer feet, a literal interpretation of the type of browbeating the dog is both subjected to and capable of.

The dog *of Dogmatic* is a symbol of manipulative control and dogma. A close-up image of the German shepherd ferociously barking and growling, interrupting the personalities' silent monologues occurs throughout. Footage of police brutality using these dogs against civil rights activists is shown. Paik juxtaposes the TV console pet and the televised police dog, both symbols of manipulative control. The non-threatening pet dog, along with the television set, has its place in the center of the home, the living room. Paik's comments on the potential role of television in the home are illuminating in this respect. Again in Marita Sturken's essay we hear him say: "I would suggest "Silent TV Station".... What I am aiming at is TV version of Vivaldi... to soothe every hysteric woman through air, and to calm down the nervous tension of every businessman through air..." (Hanhardt, 114). The type of animal who fits this description is an emasculated projection of his keeper. The work as a whole addresses television itself as a medium of control exerted by the same powers that send dogs and police out to restrain members of the protesting public.

As one watches image after image in rapid succession one feels that, as is the case with Close, there is here conscious control of production and reception of the work. All of the material is passed through Nam June Paik's filter, sped up, each

image interrupting another. Some images, particularly those of symbols are set in a tiled format, an echo of his huge video set installations. Here, however, the format is much more intimate, direct and personal.

Paik's statement on silent, soothing TV station, suggests unprovocative visual imagery. Posing no challenge and no threat, this type of imagery would allow the viewer to stay in control. But instead the works challenges us to consider how vulnerable we are to the projections of others and how scenes taken from the white noise of our lives, decontextualized and sped up, can be used to manipulate the viewer. The viewer is not in control. The way information and opinions are presented invariably shapes their reception. As Bill Viola noted in a 1992 interview "whoever controls the rules of conversation controls the conversation" (Hills, 422).

Paik's art thus becomes provocative, the opposite of 'silent TV.' The control he exerts over his own medium, the way he carefully calibrates the viewers' responses is profoundly different from that of TV: TV obscures while art (his art) illuminates.

Close's and Paik's work highlight different aspects of vision and control, pointing to a polar challenge and dichotomy which makes art invigorating. For me, the works *Selfportrait/Spitebite and Dogmatic* are good illustrations of this.

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