

# Keitelman Gallery

## NAM JUNE PAIK BEHIND the SCREEN 07.11.2013 – 18.01.2014

The Keitelman Gallery is delighted to present an exhibition of the work of Nam June Paik, a key figure in the landscape of twentieth century art, whose significance in terms of the evolution of twentieth century art and society continues to assert itself.

Following on from an exhibition that was organised by the gallery twenty years ago – the Keitelman Gallery was one of the few Belgian galleries to have worked in close collaboration with the artist during his lifetime – this new show offers the opportunity to explore a series of striking pieces dating largely from the 1980s and 1990s.

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Amongst the works presented here, and by way of example of the strengths which underpin Paik's work in general and this exhibition in particular, is the major installation :

#### *Musical Clock* (1989)

This work can be considered one of the anthropomorphic altars which Paik's visionary gifts enabled him to bring into being. In the centre of the installation a clock, both head and heart, beats time with its pendulum. This beat is filmed in real time by a camera placed opposite, and broadcast on the television screens that cover the walls. Beginning with the clock, this vast network spreads out, evoking now two large arms open in a comic gesture, now a network of veins with blood circulating through them. This work can be understood as a metaphor of the western city whose entropic, narcissistic and productive energy never really stops. The clock, as it beats time, is like the conductor of an orchestra, its beat audible within everyone's head. Everyone must bend to it whilst carrying out their activities, living through their days. The combination of the antique clock and the more recent invention of the television is a way of highlighting the discrepancies which arise in a society that is based both on ancient resources and propelled in a crazy race towards technological metamorphosis, towards progress.

#### *Cage in a Cage in a Cage* (1989)

In the course of his career Paik was fortunate to mix with some of the great creative figures of the times, including poet and musician John Cage. Cage was particularly interested in oriental philosophy, seeking, throughout the sixties and seventies, to build a bridge between the eastern and western worlds. He envisaged a potential fusion between the two philosophies that might endow a deeper meaning to both civilisations. Such an ambition inevitably resonated with Paik's own, leading to his adoption of Cage as a central character, whose free spirit Paik celebrates through an absurdly humorous logic. By taking the literal meaning of the musician's name, *cage*, Paik shows how Cage makes bars, sets limits, to thwart his curiosity, impede his flight. He is as much within the cage as he is outside it: his spirit, untethered, floats freely. The tautology of the title of the piece (a cage in cage in a cage) is also a gentle mocking of the obsession with conceptual art that took hold in the 1960s, of which Paik's work is very much part. Practitioners of conceptual art tend towards an exploration of the conditions for the existence of art, its ontological basis; they thus underline the self-reflexive dimension of an artistic practice that brings art into the realm of philosophy, whilst at the same time also turning towards the movement of life, its principal and essential subject. Thus Paik shows how Cage, unlike some of his colleagues, was able to remain in tune with life, with its uncertainties, its chaos, its fundamentally anti-Cartesian dimension.

#### *Beuys as Indian Chief and TV eyes.*

Another charismatic figure whom Paik celebrates in his work is Joseph Beuys, who bursts forth like a devil from a box in this installation. Beuys, who declared himself to be an artist shaman, is another figure whose preoccupations strongly resonated with those of Paik, one of his closest friends. As an artist he was deeply concerned with politics, the environment, teaching. He not only tried to free himself of the associations that tend to be assigned to the artist in society, but he also and above all emphasised the mystical, almost occult, nature of art, which a rationalist society prefers to ignore. Paik was

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equally sensitive to this spiritual dimension. The animated, cinematic nature of his work gives them almost a ritualistic quality. There is something of the quality of an offering, a fetish object, in his sculptures. In this piece Beuys is shown alongside the coloured striations of a television set, in front of which is an African mask, imbued with a deep, silent spiritual charge.

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Nam June Paik has been recognised internationally as a major artist since the 1970s. His works are held in major collections all over the world, and many solo exhibitions of his work have taken place internationally, including a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1982, an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Tokyo in 1984, and a double exhibition 'Video Time, Video Space' at the Basel and Zurich Kunsthalle in 1991. With Hans Haacke he represented Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1993. A retrospective of his work was held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2000. More recent exhibitions were held in 2010 at Tate Liverpool and in 2012 at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington.

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