

Patronage of Video Art: The Relationship of the Rockefeller Foundation and Nam June Paik

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Abstract

On October 4, 1965, Korean-born artist Nam June Paik bought his first Sony Portapak with a JDR 3rd Fund grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Introduced earlier that same year by the Sony Corporation in Japan, this device was the first portable video recorder with a dedicated camera. Paik's Portapak was among the first in the United States, which enabled him to play a central role in establishing video as a credible medium for artistic expression. By analyzing grants Paik received from the Rockefeller Foundation, this essay examines a three-decade-long relationship between the artist and the Rockefeller Foundation that enabled Paik to create groundbreaking works of art. This project will analyze how the social and financial capital of the Rockefeller Foundation equipped Paik with the knowledge and equipment to pursue his transnational projects linking South Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United States, among other countries, through his video, television, and satellite projects. The relationship Paik cultivated with Howard Klein, director of arts at the Rockefeller Foundation, reveals a complex dynamic of power, institutional interests, and global reach of works that Paik could not realize without the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. In this way, this essay will examine a series of correspondences, interviews, and proposals that reveal the commitment the Rockefeller Foundation officers, specifically Howard Klein, had in making Paik the pioneer of video art.

Introduction

In discussing the history of video art, one cannot circumvent Nam June Paik (1932–2006), a Korean-born artist who employed television and video technology to create his works of art, a practice that would make him one of the most well-known artists of 20th-century art. However, Paik’s impact on the field would not be possible without the institutional support of the Rockefeller Foundation, a private foundation and philanthropic organization based in the United States, that began supporting his projects upon his arrival in New York City in 1964. The relationship between Paik and the Rockefeller Foundation reveals the complexities of funding video art in the early days of the field, when the newness of the medium made it difficult for artists, curators, and art institutions to receive funding for it. Paik, who was a genius in securing funding for his innovative projects, and Howard Klein, director of arts at the Rockefeller Foundation, who believed in Paik’s projects, played a critical role in advancing the status of video art. They advocated for its presence in museum exhibitions, broadcasting stations, academic conferences, and other art spaces that helped boost video art’s status in the art world.

As observable from Klein’s diary entries, he described Paik as an “obviously brilliant” and “artistically sensitive” artist who “may be years ahead of his generation.”¹ Klein continued, “I can’t assess his potential value to art – who can? But here is a dedicated brilliant pioneer caught in the usual economic squeeze and made to suffer because of his daring originality. I would recommend we find some way of supporting his work.”² The early vision Klein had for video art, and the artist who would soon pioneer it, shows his deep understanding of the contemporary art scene. During his tenure, Klein was seen as “one of this country’s most innovative and influential patrons of the contemporary creative artists.”³ While other funding organizations hesitated to fund video art in the early days of the field, Klein’s vision and position within the Rockefeller Foundation enabled him to support video art and Paik, which turned out to be one of his most successful projects. Klein spent most of his tenure advocating for Paik and his innovative projects, as evident from the archival documents at the Rockefeller Archive Center. Klein continued to support Paik beyond his time at the Rockefeller Foundation,

consulting his successor on Paik's innovative artistic projects all the way until Paik's death in 2006. This intricate relationship between Paik, Klein, and the Rockefeller Foundation demonstrates a long-term commitment to making Paik one of the key players in the history of video art, which one could argue was a successful outcome as observable from many retrospective exhibitions, publications, films, and conferences that continue to transpire to this day. This essay will examine the initial grants Paik received from the Rockefeller Foundation, ranging from the WGBH Educational Foundation, Educational Broadcasting Corporation – *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, and Educational Broadcasting Corporation – *Bye Bye Kipling*, all indicating a long and complicated relationship between Paik and the Rockefeller Foundation. In examining these grants, this project will outline many instances when projects that are today considered groundbreaking works that pushed the boundaries of the field were almost not realized due to budget limitations. In these instances, Klein's confidence in Paik and his ahead-of-its-time ideas helped convince the Rockefeller Foundation to grant funding to Paik's works of art.

WGBH Educational Foundation

In 1970, Paik came up with the idea of creating a video work that would thematize global communications. While he was not aware of it at the time, this video work would become one of his most well-known projects that would propel his career to global fame. The role Rockefeller Foundation played was decisive in this process as its financial backing enabled Paik to create this groundbreaking video. Paik began developing his global video work in the early 1970s at WGBH, Boston, where he collaborated with television producers and engineers on many of his art projects. Michael S. Rice, director of television programming at WGBH, Boston, wrote:

WGBH will assign Fred Barzyk to view this material and, together with Nam June Paik, to edit it into a form suitable for presentation locally. The object will be to give American viewers a vivid sense of television as it is produced and seen in another country. Assuming the material is good and can be assembled in an understandable and attractive way, we will give it the necessary airtime on WGBH-TV and offer it for broadcast on other public television stations as well.⁴

The sentiment of sharing global cultures with the public in the United States became of the main drivers of Paik's transnational projects, as later will become evident in his satellite projects funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. While *Global Groove*, Paik's first video work thematizing global communications, would not be complete until 1973, the initial grant Paik received from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled him to begin working with engineers, producers, and television broadcasting stations that would support his project until its completion. As a recipient of the Rockefeller Foundation grant, Paik became a full-time artist-in-residence at WGBH, Boston, where he began working on his global video work, among other video and television projects.

Produced in 1973 in collaboration with engineer John Godfrey at WNET's Artists' Television Laboratory, Paik created *Global Groove*, a video work presenting a comprehensive view of culture that characterized Paik's approach to disseminating video art through public television broadcast. To Paik, the work transformed the broadcast studio into an experimental venue for global dancers, musicians, and performance artists to reach wider audiences beyond the museum galleries. In 1973, when Paik was producing *Global Groove*, he voiced a dream of a global network of artists that would be listed in a *TV Guide* "as thick as the Manhattan telephone book," which would open a new avenue of interlinking artists across national borders. The visuals of *Global Groove* showcased how broad Paik's transnational reach was in this video and how his work presented an alternative to the strictly controlled public programming. In this way, Paik achieved the vision of Canadian philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who prophesied the power of electronic media and its impact on communication, writing about how the "globe itself can never again be more than a village."⁵ In creating the video work, Paik had many collaborators like Navajo performance artist Cecelia Sandoval and Korean choreographer Suck Ok Lee, who used *Global Groove* as a global stage to present the rich and diverse cultures of their communities through Paik's transnational networks. While *Global Groove* was one of his earliest works thematizing global communication, it was only the predecessor to the rich multi-channel projects that would connect and expand his transnational networks of video art, all of which would be supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Good Morning, Mr. Orwell (1984)

On January 1, 1984, employing the satellite technology to link the public broadcast station in New York with the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Paik broadcasted *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* to twenty-five million people across the world. As the title suggests, this work is a rebuttal of George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*. However, Paik employed satellite technology as a liberating medium capable of crossing borders and bridging cultural gaps instead of surveilling the public as Orwell imagined in his book. As a result of his astounding vision for *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, Paik had a range of artists join the project, including Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Salvador Dalí, Charlotte Moorman, Joseph Beuys, and John Cage, among others, who used this platform to perform their avant-garde performances to the global audience across national transmissions. In a grant proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation, Paik wrote the following:

Among the commemorations of 1984 as the Orwellian year, one being proposed by WNET-TV will address the issue of "Big Brother" usage of television. A satellite telecast is scheduled for January 1 which will be not a scholarly overview or commentary on the work of George Orwell, but a kind of affirmative rebuttal by a group of international artists of the predications by the prophetic writer about the negative uses of television. Because the telecast will be relayed by satellite, certain Iron Curtain countries may be able to receive it. This, in the minds of the conceptualizers of the project, is an important demonstration of the potential of this world medium to express, through the work of artists, the idea of personal freedom of thought and expression – two of Orwell's central concerns.⁶

By choosing the year 1984, Paik wanted to both challenge Orwell's well-known prophecy and prove that television, and transnational broadcast television in particular, can help promote intercultural exchange between nations. Instead of using television for surveillance, Paik's project aimed to cross borders and provide trans-cultural exchange of music, art, poetry, sports, and performance. As a result of its global representation and reach, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* was selected as the "World Communication Year Event by the United States Council for World Communications Year."⁷ To achieve this designation, Paik worked alongside many institutions and

individuals to help support his most expensive project. As Paik previously noted in his writing, he understood that the grant from the Rockefeller Foundation would set him up for success, regardless of the funding allocation, as other institutions respected the Foundation and the projects it financed. By securing Foundation support, Paik knew other funding bodies would join, which was the case as museums, national broadcasting companies, technology companies, and others would support his projects.

Bye Bye Kipling (1986)

On June 24, 1986, Klein signed a pre-grant approval for the Educational Broadcasting Corporation to enhance the “American Public’s Understanding of International Affairs through the Arts and Humanities.”⁸ This project, just like *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, demonstrates the willingness of the Rockefeller Foundation to support another transnational satellite work by Paik as the Foundation understood the value of a “two-way communication” that could offer “unique opportunities to foster cross-cultural understanding.”⁹ Following the success of *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, Paik produced *Bye Bye Kipling* by using the same technology to link up the United States, Japan, and South Korea. By featuring interviews with the United States artist Keith Haring and Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, and United States performances by Philip Glass and the Japanese Kodō Drummers, among other performances, Paik employed the satellite transmission to open a two-way, interactive communication channel between three countries that have complicated history. As the pre-grant document states:

In addition to the various live events, the program will include pretaped segments: video art pieces and mini-documentaries about Asia and the Pacific Basin. The goal is to give Americans the opportunity to look at the people of Asia from a new perspective and perhaps break down some of the old stereotypes as well.¹⁰

The sentiment outlined in the pre-grant approval by the officers of the Arts and Humanities Division demonstrates their deep understanding on the contemporary issues Paik was trying to address in his cross-cultural satellite transmissions, in particular, the issue of xenophobia following the end of World War II. The bombing of

Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service on the United States effectively did two things: 1) it plunged the United States into World War II; and 2) it embarked on a reactive campaign against Japanese Americans, forcing them into internment camps, and making them prisoners within their own country. However, the anti-Japanese sentiment did not have limitations only to the Japanese immigrants, it also expanded to other Asian communities in the country.¹¹ This issue continues to affect the Asian communities in the United States, as observable by the ongoing anti-Asian crimes across the country. Paik, an Asian man living in Western Europe and North America post World War II, understood these politics, which explains his motivation to connect different parts of the world in the hope of starting a conversation between hostile nations, with the result of showing similarities between their people and cultures. As a result of his vision, Paik produced *Bye Bye Kipling*. By connecting South Korea, Paik's home country, and Japan, Paik's temporary residence following the onset of the Korean War in 1950, Paik hoped to begin a conversation to resolve the multigenerational history of disputes. While his project had unrealistic goals, it did shed light on the complexity of the issue that continues to this day. In March 2023, the government of South Korea introduced a new plan to resolve historical disputes with Japan by compensating Koreans for forced labor under Japan's 35-year colonial rule, which demonstrates the historical relevance of *Bye Bye Kipling*.¹²

The budget for producing *Bye Bye Kipling* was \$452,207, with the majority of funding originating from Korean Broadcasting System (\$180,000), Fukui Television Broadcasting (\$40,000), Dentsu Incorporated (\$90,000), Soloway Gallery (\$60,000), and the Rockefeller Foundation (\$50,000), with smaller amounts from other institutions.¹³ As observable from the budget, the significant amount of funding came from South Korea and Japan, which demonstrates the relationship both countries had with the artist who by that time had become the key figure of video art. On the other hand, the United States institutions also provided a significant amount to the project, but it was nowhere close to the amount of funding from Asia. This interest in supporting *Bye Bye Kipling* indicated the willingness of two countries to use a transnational project made by a world-renown artist such as Paik to open their cultures and capital to the rest of the world, especially the United States that had become a key player in the region following the end of World War II.

Hosted by Dick Cavett in New York and by the Japanese rock musician Ryuichi Sakamoto in Tokyo, *Bye Bye Kipling* was broadcasted live on a Saturday evening from Club 4-D, New York's then newest and most popular night club, through WNET/New York, a Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), jointly with the Korean Broadcasting System and Asahi National Broadcasting of Japan. Paik chose to be in Tokyo for the broadcast from where he coordinated the entire program from a production truck.¹⁴ As the Rockefeller Foundation grant documents reveal, Carol Brandenburg, executive producer of *Bye Bye Kipling*, was one the key figures that served as liaison between Klein and Paik, helping both achieve their vision. In her letter to Klein on June 5, 1986, Brandenburg wrote:

I'm pleased to enclose copies of commitment letters I have recently received for the Korean and Japanese sides of BYE BYE KIPLING co-production. Within a week or two, I should have final confirmation of the Japanese parent -whom we expect will be Asahi, as noted in Mr. Fujiyoka's letter. With your Rockefeller \$50,000 grant, and guarantees from Samsung and the Solway Gallery, our total project funding is now in place. I'm working with PBS to prepare an announcement for Sue Weil to make at the national press preview of fall programs in Los Angeles next week. I know you'll be happy to hear that our first confirmed 'talent' is Philip Glass, with the Philip Glass Ensemble. They will perform twice during the broadcast. As always, Nam June and I are deeply grateful to you for your support, both personally and on behalf of the Foundation.¹⁵

As evident from the letter, a lot of changes occurred since the pre-grant approval. In particular, the funding structures of the project kept changing, but all involved expressed great interest in joining Paik's cross-cultural projects that opened new channels of communication across the globe. The opportunity to participate in a project of this scale certainly was of interest to Klein, as it both supported Paik and the Rockefeller Foundation's mission of promoting "the well-being of mankind throughout the world."¹⁶

Conclusion

The impact Rockefeller Foundation had on Nam June Paik's projects was pivotal in making his works feasible, especially in the early days of the field when funding was scarce and difficult to obtain for new forms of art like video art. Supporting his initial projects, such as *Global Groove*, Howard Klein, and the Rockefeller Foundation, played a vital role in attracting other institutions to Paik's innovative ideas that were difficult to understand then but have become groundbreaking works that continue to have a significant impact on the history of video art. Although the financial side of works of art is often overlooked, this project reveals the complexities of creating video art and other time-based media works, such as his satellite projects. In understanding the complexities of funding his projects, this essay reveals a layer to his works through the financial side of enticing institutions to support them and shedding light on the approach he crafted to attract their support. In this way, the intricate relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation and Paik not only demonstrates how his works changed to satisfy the vision the Foundation had in supporting his works but also how Paik changed them to receive their grants. As a result of this relationship, Paik created a series of works such as *Global Groove*, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, and *Bye Bye Kipling*, all of which would become his well-known works of art.

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¹ Typed interview entry of Howard Klein regarding his meeting with Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik, Rockefeller Foundation records, Officers' Diaries, RG 12, F-L (FA392), Box 243.

² Typed interview entry of Howard Klein regarding his meeting with Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik, Rockefeller Foundation records, Officers' Diaries, RG 12, F-L (FA392), Box 243.

³ John Rockwell, "Howard Klein to Leave Rockefeller Foundation," *The New York Times*. 22 September 1986, 11.

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- ⁴ Letter from Michael S. Rice, Director of Television Programming at WGBH, Boston, to Porter A. McCray, Director, Asian Cultural Program, JDR 3rd Fund, Asian Cultural Council records, WGBH Educational Foundation, Boston, TV Project, Nam June Paik, Box 627, Folder 5.
- ⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 298.
- ⁶ Educational Broadcasting Corporation, New York, Good Morning, Mr. Orwell, Support of the Creative Person, December 19, 1983. Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.9-SG 1.13 (A83-A87), United States- - Humanities and Arts, Subseries R, Box R2335.
- ⁷ WNET/Thirteen Press Release for “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell” – A Live New Year’s Day Satellite Spectacular Featuring Performers from New York and Paris—To Air Nationally over PBS Sunday, January 1 at Noon, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.9-SG 1.13 (A83-A87), United States- - Humanities and Arts, Subseries R, Box R2335.
- ⁸ Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling, Pre-grant approval outlining the project by Nam June Paik, signed by Howard Klein, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ⁹ Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling, Pre-grant approval outlining the project by Nam June Paik, signed by Howard Klein, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ¹⁰ Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling, Pre-grant approval outlining the project by Nam June Paik, signed by Howard Klein, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ¹¹ Stephanie Hinnershitz, *Japanese American Incarceration: The Camps and Coerced Labor During World War II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 6.
- ¹² Yamaguchi Mari, “Japan to Reinstate South Korea as Preferred Trade Nation from July 21 as Two Sides Improve Ties,” *AP News*, June 27, 2023, sec. World News, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-south-korea-trade-dispute-export-control-china-f43cf2a0cb43605f6f4626e5985abf7b>.
- ¹³ Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling GA-AH8635, Final Financial Report, July 1, 1986, through July 31, 1987, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ¹⁴ Bill J. Gee, “Bye Bye Kipling, Hello Columbus,” *Cine Vue*, a publication of Asian Cinevision, January 1987, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ¹⁵ Handwritten letter from Carol Brandenburg, Executive Producer, WNET/Thirteen, to Howard Klein, June 5, 1987, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Bye Bye Kipling, Rockefeller Foundation records, Projects, SG 1.17, Arts and Humanities, Box 142, Folder 804.
- ¹⁶ Eric John Abrahamson, *Beyond Charity: A Century of Philanthropic Innovation* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 2013), 75–76.