

# The First Non-Human Action Artist

Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik  
in *Robot Opera*

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## ORIGINALE ALL OVER AGAIN

Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik began their collaboration while Moorman was producing Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale* (*Originals*, or *Real People*) for her 1964 New York Avant Garde Festival. Written in collaboration with the artist Mary Bauermeister, *Originale* seemed to encompass the most radical developments in post-war composition: electronic sounds, the austere mathematical order of serialism, and the messy, veristic improvisations found in happenings. Moorman was relatively new at producing but well established as a wayward cellist whose interpretation of New Music exceeded the job description. Rather than interpret scores with fidelity to the composers' intent, Moorman began to read political or affective content into notation, ignored time brackets, and explored what I refer to as the meta-histrionics of simultaneously *being* and being tasked to *act like* a professional performer. This was especially the case in compositions that contained elements of indeterminacy. Moorman seized such work as an opportunity to redistribute musical assignments, past the point of re-authorship and into a transhumanist realm where even she and her cello were commutable.

Early evidence of Moorman's unorthodox approach can be seen in performances of John Cage's *26'1.1499" for a String Player* ([1955], 1960). Through an aleatory structure that calls for indeterminate sound sources, Cage intended the work to bring attention to nature's infinite and objective sonic field. Moorman began studying the score in 1963 and diaristically annotated it throughout her career, much to Cage's chagrin. Her self-referential style was more at home in later works by composers such as Paik, Philip Corner, Giuseppe Chiari, Jim McWilliams,

and Takehisa Kosugi who welcomed the way Moorman personalized and dramatized her role. The score for Corner's *Solo with . . .* (1963), for example, contains instructions such as, "strike that soloist pose" and "in general, act like a soloist." Moorman realized it by playing the perpetually late, often disheveled, obsessively annotating cellist that she was. She delayed the curtain rising and waited even longer to appear on stage before running off to retrieve her cello. She then fussed with the instrument and scrutinized the sheet music for an excruciatingly long time only to have music finally play out of a loudspeaker.

Rather than caricature an archetype or correlate recorded music with a faceless, neutral subject, Moorman presented herself as uniquely defined yet interchangeable with the musical apparatus. The ventriloquism anticipated an inter-subjective relationship with instruments and sound technology that became a constant throughout her career. Moorman's cello was *instrumental* to this radical mode of interpretation in all senses of the word. It was the object through which she performed musical labor and her partner in producing sound. It was the emblem that identified her role and a tool through which to navigate her discipline. In works where she appeared to transfigure or merge with her instrument, the familiar conceit that she "played herself" became literal and uncanny.

Undoubtedly, Moorman was attracted to how the roles in *Originale* are based on performers cast to play themselves. The *dramatis personae* reads like a who's who of the avant-garde. With surreal exceptions for a child, animal attendant, and newspaper seller, each cast member is a representative from an aesthetic field in which they made an "original" contribution, one both novel and philosophically bent toward authenticity in art. Combining the spontaneity of happenings with the precision of serial music, the score organizes their idiosyncratic actions into "timepoints" or "timeboxes," which are then read as notation. Stockhausen's electroacoustic composition *Kontakte* (1958–60) serves as a thread to unify the disjuncture between characters, competing sounds, and simultaneous activities. Moorman's production was to be *Originale*'s New York premiere as well as the crown jewel of her festival. To restage the work, she proposed New York counterparts for the twenty-one "originals" that appeared in the Theater am Dom performance in Cologne three years prior. She substituted the American poet, Allen Ginsberg, for Hans G. Helms and replaced the stage director, Carlheinz Caspari, with the happenings progenitor, Allan Kaprow. But for the role of "Action Composer," Stockhausen insisted that only Nam June Paik would suffice. "What's a Paik?" was Moorman's apocryphal response, betokening the humorous mix-ups between people and things in so many of their collaborations to come.

Paik's performances had been referred to as "action music" since 1959, the year he violently tipped over a piano in *Hommage à John Cage* (1958–59). For *Originale*,

he tossed beans into the air and onto the audience, slowly unrolled a ream of paper that was covering his face and used it to wipe his tears before screaming and throwing the paper at the audience. He played tapes of recorded music spliced with screams and radio programs, smeared shaving cream and rice on himself, plunged into a tub of water and then sat at a piano, playing for several minutes before banging the keys with his head. There was a specific musicality to Paik's Artaudian cruelty and iconoclastic rage against fine European instruments. Far from gratuitous, they redirected senses to the non-repeatable sounds that arise when objects are acted upon in an unpredictable manner. Incorporating these into *Originale's* score delimited his "authentic" acts to set and repeatable timepoints. If even head-banging piano keys and pelting the audience with beans could be contained by compositional order, the disposition proved exhaustible. Though audiences still felt rattled, his actions no longer fulfilled what he believed was an essential "yearning or angst for the nonrepeatable."<sup>1</sup> Paik's attention turned in two directions: reconfiguring electronics and formulating a strain of happenings where sounds would surprise people on the street.

Because Paik became known as one of video art's founding fathers, his pivot towards electronics tends to eclipse his sustained interest in performance. In his 1986 recollection, the shift was as precipitous as it was techno-centric:

March 1963. While I was devoting myself to research on video, I lost my interest in action in music to a certain extent. After twelve performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's "Originale," I started a new life from November 1961. By starting a new life I mean that I stocked my whole library except those on TV technique into storage and locked it up. I read and practiced only on electronics. In other words, I went back to the spartan life of pre-college days . . . only physics and electronics.<sup>2</sup>

But Paik was also actively envisaging how to transcend music's current state. He was tired of compositions that merely rearranged the traditional components of music without accomplishing what he referred to as an "ontological" revolution in the discipline. "The beauty of moving theater," as he called his new ontology, "lies in this 'surprise a priori,' because almost all of the audience is uninvited, not knowing what it is, why it is, who is the composer, the player, organizer."<sup>3</sup> As with Moorman's burgeoning interpretation style, such an arrangement confused professional roles and identities to dramatic effect. Thus, when beckoned to play himself in *Originale* all over again, Paik brought an animatronic doppelganger: *Robot K-456*. He had just finished assembling it out of junk parts with assistance from the artist and engineer, Shuya Abe. Now dubbed "the first non-human action artist," the robot served as Paik's sandwich board, understudy, and accomplice.

## OF FEAR AND FAILURE

It was not rare to see automatons in 1960s happenings. Consider “the sandwich man” in Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959); Pat Oldenburg’s benumbed expression as she is manipulated by Lucas Samaras in Claes Oldenburg’s *Voyages I at the Ray Gun Manufacturing Company* (1962); Carolee Schneemann’s appearance as a nude sculpture posed like Manet’s *Olympia* alongside Robert Morris in *Site* (1964); or the living doll in Marta Minujín’s *La Poupée* (*The Doll*) (c.1963). As early as 1962, Susan Sontag observed that the genre was populated by “anesthetized persons” and people treated like objects.<sup>4</sup> Absurdly enacting “meaningless mechanized situations of disrelation,” these automatons made happenings “a demonic [sic] comedy” à la Artaud. “You giggle because you’re afraid,” Kaprow explained.<sup>5</sup> Fear came from not knowing what would “happen” during such opaque and confrontational events. The threat of violence always loomed. Yet, what most frightened the art establishment was how the artist’s unpredictable and mechanically executed processes “hazard failure, the ‘failure’ of being less artistic and more lifelike.”

Moorman and Paik thus developed their partnership around an avatar of fear and failure. Treated like a living member of their ensemble and frequently malfunctioning, *Robot K-456* elicited nervous laughter while befogging distinctions between performed, programmed, and natural behavior. Commonly described as “skeletal” or with reference to Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, its exposed electronics belonged to the *démodé* and lowly wastelands of camp and mass consumption. In post-war art that aimed for a closer proximity to life, defunct, decrepit material frequently stood for the contemporary human condition. By reinvesting junk with aesthetic value, artists such as Oldenburg and Kaprow redefined culture as the mere production of expendable commodities. Their gritty environments and assemblages suggested that the cycle of possession and dispossession is precisely what makes us human and that to be human is to be sorely alienated from life.

Left cadaverous, *Robot K-456* embodied the sense of deadened life and alienating obsolescence that permeates our built environment. Paik considered it “a Happening tool,” in service to an art of both shock and disrelation. “I thought it should meet people in the street and give one second of surprise. Like a quick shower,” Paik explained, “I wanted it to kick you and then go on. It was a street-music piece.”<sup>6</sup> To be kicked by the robot was to be incorporated into the performance. Being within the art and indistinct from its defining substance was to assume the status of a found object—one among others comprising the work of art and equally disposable. Moorman’s festival provided a stage as well as unscheduled opportunities to encounter Paik’s kinetic creature and be reified. The robot’s solo act was titled, *Robot Opera* (1964), but the title was thrown around loosely.

Between 1964 and 1965, a specific performance with Moorman, a concert of works by multiple composers or just Paik, and several street theatre promenades all carried that name. What *Robot Opera* more clearly designates is the operatic and sci-fi inflected style that both artists brought to their collaboration when the robot worked as much as when it failed.

From Monteverdi's early baroque *L'Orfeo* (*Orpheus*, 1609) to Mozart's classical *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*, 1791), there is a long tradition of musicians playing musicians in opera. Like Orpheus and Tamino, they are figures who move between the sensible world and the invisible noumena that govern them, using music as a source of agency. Music doesn't just express wrath in opera; it strikes the characters. It doesn't express longing so much as it issues pleas. Not unlike action music, it is a sonic performative that self-reflectively displays its own effect. In so doing, opera reflects relationships between prevailing conceptions of power and subjectivity. Musicologists and cultural theorists such as Gary Tomlinson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mladen Dolar posit that the tragically absolutist *opera seria* and democratically comedic *opera buffa* paradigmatically negotiate these relationships through role-reversal. Beginning with *Robot Opera* and continuing in works such as *Variations on a Theme by Saint-Saëns* (1964), *Opera Sextronique* (1967), *Mixed-Media Opera* (1968), and *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), Moorman and Paik interchanged with automatons and instruments as they too considered music's performance of subjectivity and its fantastical staging of power relations. And yet, all accounts of *Robot Opera* have looked past opera to extol Paik's aesthetic use of cybernetics. They parrot his quip that *Robot K-456* "humanized technology" as if it was a winning point in the Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debate," (July 24, 1959) which measured the happiness and prosperity of citizens by their countries' proliferation of new-fangled appliances.

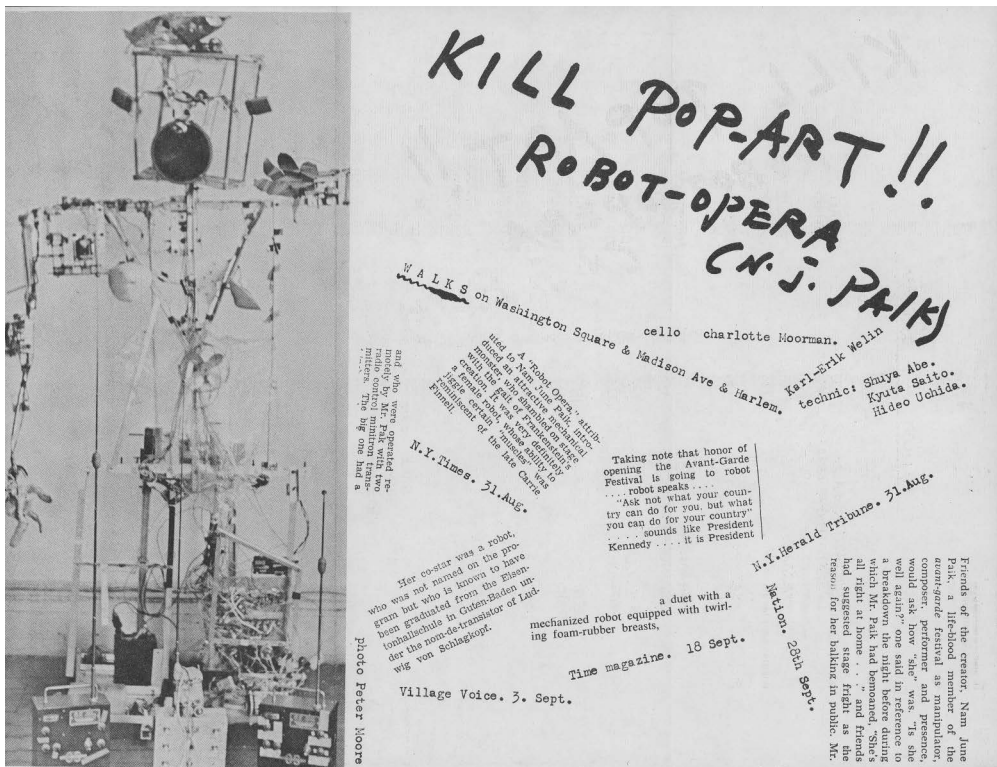
Predicated on Paik's "desire to humanize technology," the recent *Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot* exhibition at the Asia Society (September 5, 2014–January 4, 2015) typifies this tendency.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition was widely received as an attempt to cement Paik as the grand patriarch of video art and all the electronic media that have become mainstream. Greeting visitors at the entrance, *Robot K-456* was positioned as a prototype for Paik's subsequent robot-shaped sculptures, which are studded with his famous video montages but immobile. At the same time, Moorman was repeatedly recast as "Paik's muse." Thus, *Robot Opera* (among other collaborations with Moorman) was said to "underscore [sic] Paik's interest in humanizing technology by using Moorman's body, often in various stages of undress, as a canvas onto which the artist attached his prominent electronic sculptures."<sup>8</sup> The Asia Society's teleological claims shift attention from the multiple, meaningful events that constitute the work of art to the single, accession-numbered artifact.

*Robot K-456's* actions go unanalyzed, which in turn glazes over the work's social satire, bypasses the theories and traditions that occupied the artists' thoughts, and grants Moorman as little agency as the non-living figure she played beside. This is a strange fate for a thing made to move not just through space but through the fluid genres of happenings, street music, and opera. It is a strange catchphrase to describe reification, resurrection, and transhumanist role-playing.

A year after *Becoming Robot* closed, a recuperative exhibition opened. Organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art and traveling to New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, *A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s* drew upon the Charlotte Moorman archive treasure-trove at Northwestern University to prove that Moorman was not art material, but an artist and a powerful impresario. Yet where *Robot Opera* was concerned, the visual nature of performance documentation and display did little to restore her contribution or the robot's musicality. Although the curatorial team made great efforts to pepper the installations with footage, scores, and other explicating ephemera, dependence on Peter Moore's photo-documentation couldn't help but halt movement and silence sound. Attending to what was operatic about the *Robot Operas* darkens the sunny notion of humanized technology but illuminates the context. It reminds us that the trailblazing experiments integrating technology into performance were often wary of the militaristic, capitalist, and otherwise dehumanizing implications, even as they reveled in the baroque spectacle of new power sources. For while the machine's kinesis demonstrated the commodifiable marvels of modern science, operatic motifs mocked the instrumentalizing effect of the Cold War's proxy contests.

## INSTRUMENTAL SUBSTITUTIONS

To the extent that "humanizing technology" derives from Paik's well-known (and Moorman's slightly less known) interest in cybernetics, it should be read as a duplicitous statement. Later in his career, Paik would even append it with the disclaimer, "I make technology ridiculous."<sup>9</sup> The same conclusion could be reached by considering what he called "the common denominators" between Norbert Wiener, Marshall McLuhan, and Cage. In addition to mixed-media, indeterminism, and the "simulation or comparison of electronics and physiology" Paik considered Henri Bergson's "conception of TIME" to be an important link within "the relationship of aesthetics and cybernetics."<sup>10</sup> Contrary to mechanistic perceptions, this is time conceived as a vital continuum. It is lived duration, wherein disorder is merely an order that one did not expect, much like indeterminism, entropy, and failure. For this reason, Bergson (like Sontag) considered automatism to be the essential well-spring of comedy and a biting form of social critique. Whether mechanical impositions on fluid temporality, involuntary



Top: Nam June Paik's flyer for the premiere of *Robot Opera* at the 2nd Annual New York Avant Garde Festival, August 30–September 13, 1964. Photo: Courtesy Charlotte Moorman Archive, Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries, Evanston, Illinois.  
Bottom: Installation view of the exhibition *Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot* at Asia Society Museum, New York, September 5, 2014–January 4, 2015.

changes to rigid actions or ideas, or the appearance of puppets and replicas, “the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine,” Bergson wrote.<sup>11</sup> Far from reconciling humans and their inventions, “humanizing technology” functioned like role-reversal in *opera buffa*. As Dolar explains, it is a fantasy that opposes the status quo by presenting a new subjectivity within a new temporality. “Its weapon,” he writes, “is to ridicule . . . those who do not prove worthy of participating in the common humanity.”<sup>12</sup>

Like a candidate on the campaign trail, *Robot K-456* stiffly waved, bowed, tipped its hat, and “spoke” by playing audio tape recordings of speeches, most notably, John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address. It could also twirl its breasts, gyrate its pelvis, and “defecate” a smattering of dried, white beans akin to those Paik often tossed on stage. Before bringing it to New York, Paik removed its sandpaper and flint penis, inspiring inside jokes all the more. Writing, “the Robot’s shit is white in shapes suggesting vitamins, deodorants and the droppings of deer; the penis is the shadow of a finger; the vagina that of a whale,” Cage understood the robot through nature and drugstore metaphors, along with metonymies for Paik’s entire body of work.<sup>13</sup> (The shadow calls to mind Richard Moore’s iconic photograph of *Zen for Film* [1962–64] while the whale’s vagina evokes the instructions for *Danger Music for Dick Higgins* [1962].) In other words, *Robot K-456* was both a biologically and culturally concocted figure, a portrait of the artist himself. Because Paik threw beans at the audience during *Originale* and instructs the performer to do the same in *Simple* (1962), the robot’s excretion of beans also suggested that it was taking over Paik’s job. Indeed, Paik had hoped it would.

Jokes about workers replaced by their tools or made robotic tapped an anxiety circulating since the dawn of industrialization. The rapid and round-the-clock demands of insatiable productivity had long required conformity to the mechanical movements of industrial machines while new technologies threatened to replace laborers altogether. In the 1960s, computational machines presented similar ultimatums. Concurrently, an influx of minority and women workers (not unlike Paik and Moorman) pressurized the American job market and reignited a Marxist discourse on how capitalism objectifies. But where production was seen as the agent of transfiguration between humans and objects under capitalist economics, malfunction was the agent of transfiguration within the *Robot Operas*. Emerging from a “renewed ontology” where “surprise a priori” unidentified participants, *Robot K-456* was all but designed to stop working and it contributed to the confusion of roles desired by Moorman and Paik when it did.

The robot was scheduled to play a duet of Stockhausen’s notoriously complex *Plus-Minus* (1963) with Moorman during an *Originale* timepoint. Glissandos



would be played by Moorman; pizzicatos by the robot—but it broke down and was replaced by Paik on piano. “Stage fright” was the explanation printed in reviews.<sup>14</sup> Substitutions and transfigurations continued throughout their European tour the following spring. Somewhere along the road, *Variations on a Theme by Saint-Saëns* became a piece in which Moorman sat on a kneeling man, draped in a transparent plastic robe, with the endpin of her cello in the mouth of a man lying face up on his back. Mid-way through playing *The Swan* from Saint-Saëns’s *Carnival of the Animals* (1886), Moorman would turn from acting like her cellist self to portraying the swan, submerging herself in a barrel of water and returning to complete the composition dripping wet. Whenever *Robot K-456* was functioning alongside Moorman, the piece was referred to as *Robot Opera*. While Moorman played the music until she became the music, the instrumental robot would jerk to life.

In addition to this arrangement of human seat, human endpin stopper, swan human, and robot musician, Moorman and Paik were to perform her increasingly radical interpretation of 26’1.1499” at *24 Stunden*—also referred to as *24 Hour Happening* or *24 Hours* and lasting that long at Rolf Jährlings’s Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, June 5th through the 6th. Playing Paik as a “human cello” was one of Moorman’s earliest and most presumptuous annotations to Cage’s composition. The sequence begins with Moorman ironically reciting a list of children’s pledges to be well-behaved before executing a rapid series of blunt cello and non-cello sounds on objects of her choosing. Shortly thereafter, she puts her cello aside and Paik—bare-chested—steps in as its surrogate. He crouches down facing her, holding a string taut across his back. Although they maintain a steady, serious composure while she pantomimes, their bodies emit intimacy. With her arms around an “objectified” man and the man between her legs, Moorman’s perfunctory body mechanics materialize when they should fade into the invisible substrata from which sounds arise.

Cage accurately disparaged that the sequence “favored actions rather than sound events in time.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, by redirecting the performance toward the performer’s musical training and embodied being, Moorman favored the agency that music has in opera and the social satire that *opera buffa* proffers though cases of mistaken identity. Mistaking a human for an instrument makes a biting analogy between discipline as a professional field and discipline as late capitalism’s repressive rules of conduct. Prefaced by the children’s pledge, it equates musicians with their instruments, workers with the tools of their trade, and musical scores with other edicts issued to restrain or normalize behavior.

During *24 Stunden*, actions reshuffled even more roles and instruments than Moorman’s annotated score intended. As Gisela Gronemeyer recalls,

Nam June Paik's body, as a human cello, was an important part of Moorman's interpretation of the piece. As part of their first European tour, the duo participated in the famous twenty-four hour Fluxus Artists event at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. But when the time came for Cage's piece to be performed, Moorman was fast asleep—she had taken tranquilizers to calm her nerves. And when she woke up at 2 a.m., she performed the piece without Paik.<sup>16</sup>

According to Paik, a *Midsummer Night's Dream*-type series of role-reversals turned the performance into a satire of their own affinities:

Charlotte and I wanted to play a piece by John Cage, but shortly before we were due to begin, Charlotte fell into a sleep from which she was reluctant to awake, no matter how much I shouted and shook her. At my wit's end, I pretended to sleep while playing La Monte Young's piano pieces. Charlotte woke up at 2 in the morning, and they tell me she delivered a wonderful performance.<sup>17</sup>

Consider the operatic logic: Paik is supposed to perform as Moorman's instrument but she breaks down, psychologically and then physically. Paik proceeds to imitate Moorman by pretending to sleep. At the same time, he is staging the musical effect of Minimalist compositions, which were perceived as so powerfully boring, they could even put the musician to sleep. When Moorman wakes, Paik is absent (perhaps really sleeping) and so she substitutes his human body for the real instrument. As in *opera buffa*, these transpositions make fun of cultural expectations while modeling the possibility of more equitably unfixed and interchangeable subjectivities. And much like *Robot K-456*'s earlier bout of stage fright, the performers' internal indeterminacy rebels against the protocols of production.

In both *Plus-Minus* and *26'1.1499"*, role-reversal occurs when a body is no longer able to function according to program. The substitutions suggest that bodies are both expendable and internally powered by a force that is contrary to that which governs its performance. These attributes are characteristic of what Tomlinson refers to as "postmetaphysical opera" and contends was a development that delivered the operatic tradition into the modern age. In such psychologically charged performances, subjects interact "within a flux of forces that determine and dissolve bodies. It is an opera that stages not the invisible soul and its myths, but the subject's embodiment of its most basic, forceful drives," he writes.<sup>18</sup> Although still aligned with fantasy and the scrim of confusion that dreams drape over scenarios, sleep in Moorman and Paik's postmetaphysical operas is not a device to vindicate the otherworldliness of the supersensible. Rather, in keeping with Tomlinson's nomenclature, it is grounded in the intersubjectivity, non-universalist

psychology, and political sociology of the mundane—and it proves to be an important actor within everyday power struggles.

Amidst global trends towards round-the-clock consumerism, increased working hours, constant surveillance, and interminable control, art critic Jonathan Crary, has recently argued that

In its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in production time, circulation, and consumption, sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe. The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, freed from a morass of simulated needs, subsist as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism.<sup>19</sup>

The economic history supporting Crary's conclusion chronicles the forces of corporeal dissolution that postmetaphysical opera takes as its plot. He explains that when industrialization first replaced artisanal, craft labor, workers could derive a sense of personal accomplishment from operating machinery despite the increase in tedium and repetition. Because their satisfaction diminished with the dawn of large factories, modern cultural values encouraged workers to identify with machines and take pride in emulating their efficiencies. The machine identification in Moorman and Paik's work is a grotesque illustration of this effort. However, by imagining the machine to be recklessly unreliable and personified with subconscious desires, such identification does not guarantee a more instrumentalized work force. Rather than dutifully industrious, the subjectivity they assume is uncanny, unconscious, and dreaming. As Crary's argument makes clear, therein lies kernels of resistance. Dreamers cannot be fixed in binaries that erect impermeable divisions between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, or, one can infer, the subject and the instrument.

But how evasive or disruptive were the artists' failures to perform when indeterminate surprises and redistributed roles are what constitute music's renewed ontology? "They thought it was a great Minimal piece," joked Paik, acknowledging the impossibility of failing to produce art within the happening's round-the-clock conflation of art and life.<sup>20</sup> The satisfying resolution to these unpredicted calamities confirmed Kaprow's maxim that "when something goes 'wrong' [in happenings], something far more 'right,' more revelatory, has many times emerged."<sup>21</sup> This type of resolution reveals absolutism in *opera seria* because the power structure remains in place despite role-reversals. For example, exchanges of deific acts by humans for humane acts by gods or kings ultimately reinforce the ruler's supreme power. The role-reversals in *24 Stunden* similarly revealed an inescapable governing system, suggesting that the contemporary paradigm

is comparably absolutist. Yet the disruptive, Bergsonian humor also mocked the system's rigidly mechanistic temporality, turning tragedy into a punch line.

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL VIEW

Another comically thwarted disruption occurred during the performance of *Robot Opera* at Galerie René Block's *Sixth Soirée* in Berlin on June 14th. After Moorman played *The Swan*, Robot K-456 lead a procession towards the Berlin Wall and attempted to enter East Berlin through the Brandenburg Gate. "Oh god, we had such trouble here!" Moorman recalled,

We were at Brandenburg Gate and we nearly got put in the Russian prison. The Russians, English, and the Germans all control this. . . . The Robot took a walk and I played cello and god did they come out with their machine guns after us!<sup>22</sup>

A British news report was as unamused as the authorities who saw the artists through their crosshairs:

Pop Art in Berlin. A robot, broadcasting what is pompously described as "instructions to humanity." Can we be so lacking as we need a machine to give us guidance? Anyway, the robot needed a bit of guidance itself.<sup>23</sup>

These "instructions to humanity" were but one of Moorman and Paik's campy winks to science fiction. Cagean scores performed cacophonously with souped-up instruments resembled the complicated yet ascetic charts and inscrutable machines signifying advanced knowledge in movies about warring worlds, body-snatchers, humanoids, and puppet people. And in sci-fi as in *Robot Opera*, anxiety about the instrumentalizing effects of modern life was coupled with anticipation of our collective extinction. Sontag makes this claim for sci-fi in "The Imagination of Disaster," written the year *Robot K-456* debuted. In it, she fleetingly compares the genre with happenings on the grounds that both revel in images of havoc. Although her comparison ends there, the rest of her analysis describes how the most popular form of cinematic terror balances reminders of nuclear catastrophe with indications that the threat is so present, it has become mundane—while the monotony of life has begun to terrify.

In Sontag's analysis, sci-fi's "technological view" of destruction values and empowers scientific invention over people. Typically, scientific inventions (terrestrial or from another planet) either cause catastrophe or save the day. Whether or not the enemies of civilization resemble human figures, they are depicted as impersonal, rigid, and lacking in what Bergson would call "life's supple nature." Where previ-

ous horror stories made metaphor of transformations that unleashed the animal bloodlust inside us, post-war horror showed people transformed into machine-like and obedient technocrats or characterless automaton slaves. These narratives normalize “unremitting banality and inconceivable terror,” while moralizing the “humane” use of science.<sup>24</sup> The persistent cry that *Robot Opera* “humanized technology,” echoes the genre’s pop ethics and similarly looks past human agency to the power of things. If *24 Stunden* presented a technological view of workaday tedium and the *Sixth Soirée* glimpsed the provocation of catastrophe, what then, is the moral behind this shibboleth?

Here let us recall that *Robot-K456*’s “instructions” most frequently took the form of Kennedy’s inaugural address, oration that performatively enacted a regime change, a “new endeavor, not a new balance of power” befitting a self-reflective, renewed musical ontology.<sup>25</sup> Its objective was to stay tensions with the Soviet Union by requesting peace while evoking the absolute supremacy of American technology and the impossibility of peacefully opting out of capitalist democracy. Intended for a world audience, it spoke of cultural-commercial innovation and the arms race as the two sides of America’s ambivalent sword. Deterrence would only work if its spectacle of power was in no way mistaken as illusion. With that as its aria, *Robot K-456* accordingly displayed its own power in a manner that was both theatrically spectacular and an expository display of real technology. However, contrary to Kennedy’s vision of art as the alternative to mutual destruction, Paik asserted that artists were drawn to technology because “technology can bring disaster. That is, technology can fail.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, so could a purely technocratic foreign policy, and so Kennedy’s “ask not” concluded the speech with a call for the self-sacrificial, deific behavior that a humane god rewards with peace and prosperity in *opera seria*.

The last time Kennedy’s voice had been heard outside the Berlin Wall, he called it an “offense against humanity” that evinced “the failures of the Communist system.”<sup>27</sup> Now heard again, the president had been dead for over a year. The U.S. had just begun sustained bombing of North Vietnam and invaded the Dominican Republic. Representing the forces powering both the animatronics and global politics, *Robot K-456*’s human voice was technology’s achievement alone, antagonistically broadcast as it advanced drone-like towards the iron curtain. Here was our *deus ex machina*, come to resolve the Cold War’s tragic plot. Here was the “surprise a priori” of a hazardous attempt to save humanity.

## NOTES

1. Arata Isozaki, “A Conversation with Nam June Paik,” in Toni Stooss and Thomas Klein, eds., *Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space* (New York, NY: H.N. Abrams, 1993), 125.

2. Quote reprinted in John G. Hanhardt and Nam June Paik, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 2000), 34.

3. Nam June Paik, "New Ontology of Music," in *Postmusic, The Monthly Review of the University for Avant-Garde Hinduism*, FLUXUS publication, 1963.

4. Susan Sontag, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, [1966] 2001), 273.

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27. These quotes are from what is known as Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech, delivered on June 26, 1963.

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