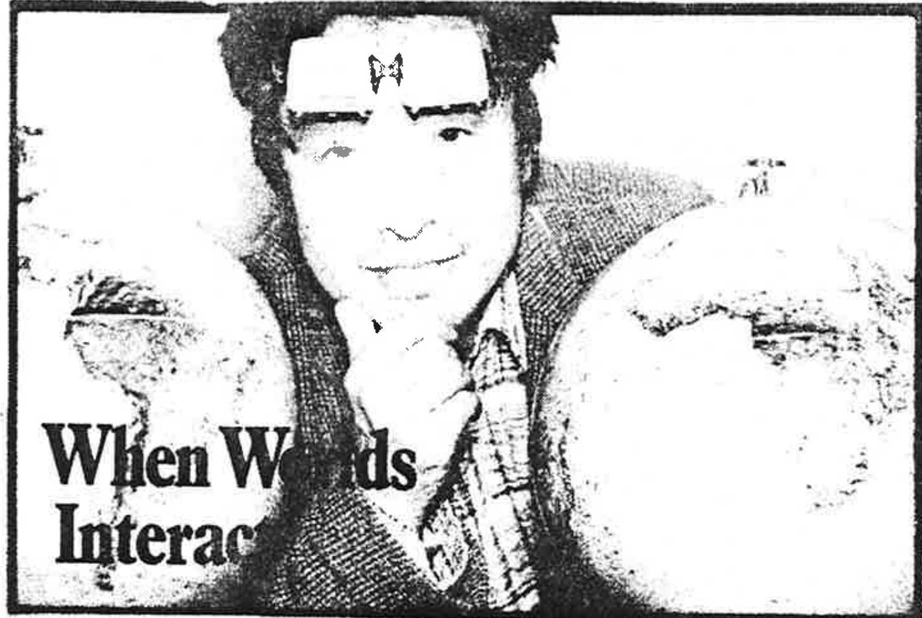
By Arlene Zeichner

Nam June Paik's *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, touted as a celebration of the "positive uses of interactive television," was screened nationally on public broadcasting stations on New Year's Day, 1984. Most of the estimated five million viewers paid scant attention to the interactive premise: they tuned in to see one or another of the featured galaxy of art starts—from old hands John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allen Ginsberg to younger pros Laurie Anderson and Oingo Boingo. For these performance fans, the show was a disappointment: the segments were short, the sound muddy, the picture imprecise, and the performances too often lackluster. Video fans, hoping to watch a Paik masterpiece in the making, were most disappointed; they complained that the egg belonged on Paik's face and not—as televised—on Big Brother's.

In fact, Paik has nothing to be embarrassed about. He's a postmodern version of a misunderstood artist, transposed from the dark corners of a dusty attic to the chaotic confines of a video control room. It's the audience that should blush. They just didn't get the innovative crux of the show: *interactive performances*, made possible by a unique wrinkle on live satellite transmission, a TV technology usually reserved for sports and news broadcasts. Even fewer viewers understood that PBS's version of "Good Morning Mr. Orwell" was only one half of the show—the other complementary, but not identical, half was being created simultaneously in Paris. Clearly, a technical explanation was needed and should have been supplied as an introduction to the broadcast by PBS. (Surely it would have been more helpful than host George Plimpton's explanation that Paris was a place where "real men do eat quiche.") Luckily it's not too late for informed viewers to see the "interactive" show—a current installation at the Kitchen lets viewers watch both the New York and Paris versions simultaneously on two screens.

Of course, Paik's vision of interactive



KERI PICKETT

TV has little to do with the standard brand. (Although most TVs can only be used as receivers, real interactive TV systems allow for limited transmission of information; their use is most often confined to home shopping, polling, and banking transactions.) Paik conceives of interactive TV as a conduit for artists—both performers and video producers—who exchange ideas and then present a show to the viewing public. The script for "Good Morning Mr. Orwell" called for New York and Paris performers to do their acts before the TV cameras, as dual satellite links between the cities almost instantaneously transmitted and received the televised proceedings—the Paris show would be sent to New York and received there four seconds later, the New York show sent to Paris and received there four seconds later. Technical crews in each city would record local events, mix the local acts with those fed from the other continent, and then add special visual effects—multiple screens, zooms, compressions. Thus, the one-hour transmission was slated to feature an almost continuous audio and video mix of New York and Paris performances. This live mix Paik dubbed interactive TV.

Unfortunately, things did not go according to plan. A subdued John Sanborn, the usually manic video producer who worked on the New York show, explained, "Though it was all planned and rehearsed, once the first thing went it was like a tumble and every nightmare that could happen in live TV happened." The nightmare included a satellite that went down, a poor video signal even when it was up, and stagestruck crews that mistimed effects and missed cues. Indeed the only successful interactive performance was dancer Merce Cunningham's. After yet another technical error, Cunningham began to dance, his staccato movements counterpointed by a video backdrop featuring Spanish musicians playing a tango as words on the bottom of the screen told a tale of the pacifist Orwell in Spain. The dance ended with Cunningham's dance with himself. This unusual duet was accomplished by sending the New York transmission to Paris and back. He then watched an eight-second-delayed version of his dance on studio monitors, and could adjust his real-time dancing to it.

The interaction in the editing room did not produce the promised mix of New York and Paris performers. Explanations vary; they include technical difficulties and problems with artist egos—a few New York performers didn't want their work to be interrupted. As a result, the New York tape has little continuity; it's an often displeasing crazy quilt of competing visual styles—ranging from the straightforward documentary camera work used to record Laurie Anderson and Mitchell Kriegman to the razzle-dazzle technowizardry of John Sandorn and Dean Winkler's visualization of Philip Glass's composition *Act III*. If only there had been a single guiding hand in New York!

Paik himself opted to edit the Paris version. Its many competing images are held together by Paik's musical manipulation of the editing deck: various images go in and out, are compressed and extended, and are made to travel across the screen. The effect is a virtual visual symphony, a rhythmic layering that makes the viewer swing along. The Paris tape also includes long segments devoted to the performances of Urban Sax, a not-to-be-missed jumpsuit-clad group of 80 musicians who give a very funny rendition of being lost in space, and additional footage of Joseph Beuys, who proposes pants with the knees cut out as a guard against materialism. Beuys's quixotic ideology (not quite politics) stood out in a show markedly light on social criticism. Though the imminent arrival of 1984 has provoked many apocalyptic fantasies, Paik's paean to the new year was more about technological fun and games than about techno-totalitarianism. Maybe that's as it should be. Paik is a man who is known for having said, "I make technology look ridiculous"—and human. In a sense Anderson spoke for him when she said, "I liked the times things messed up between New York and Paris . . . because it was so human and then it didn't seem to be so canned. That was interactive TV. It forced people to do something when the machines went down." ■