VIBRANT BEINGS

Twenty-first-century artists find visual exuberance in Buddhism, a religion too often viewed as somber and austere.

by Francesca Tarocco

Buddhism arose in northeastern India sometime between the late 6th and early 4th centuries BCE. It is often associated with meditation, philosophical questioning, and an ethic of compassion. The popular view holds that Buddhism rejects ritual, magic, and image worship, and is largely compatible with science. Yet this characterization is strikingly different from what the religion has historically meant to Asian Buddhists. And it fails to capture the vitality that many contemporary artists—particularly those working in digital media—find in that abundant tradition.

In Korean-American artist Michael Joo's 2005 installation *Bodhi Obfuscatus (Space-Baby)*, 50 live surveillance cameras in a geodesic halo and 100 mirrors and monitors fragment the serene face of a late 2nd-/early 3rd-century Gandharan statue of a standing Buddha. The statue's right hand, now broken off, was most likely originally raised with the palm facing outward, the gesture of reassurance. Aided by fiber-optic lights, the cameras cast a series of projections onto flat video screens that surround the sculpture, in a more or less direct homage to the Korean-born visionary artist Nam June Paik, the video-art pioneer who authored the concept of electronic wallpaper and created the 1974 installations *TV Garden*, a multiscreen literalization of its title, and *TV Buddha*, a seated Buddha statue perpetually contemplating its own image on a video monitor.

Joo's work is intimate and "very silent," he told the *Brooklyn Rail* in October 2022. "We had this carpeting and everything to deaden the sound as well.… The effect was to get you to focus on yourself, your own presence when you're in the space.… As one's eyes adjusted to the light, I wanted that whole image to be absorbed at once."

Previous spread, Michael Joo: *Bodhi Obfuscatus (Space-Baby)*, 2005, mixed mediums, dimensions variable.

Below, Nam June Paik: *TV Garden*, 1974/2000, approx. 30 video monitors, live plants, color video with sound, 29 minutes.

Opposite top, Mariko Mori: *Nirvana,* 1997, 3D video installation, dimensions variable.

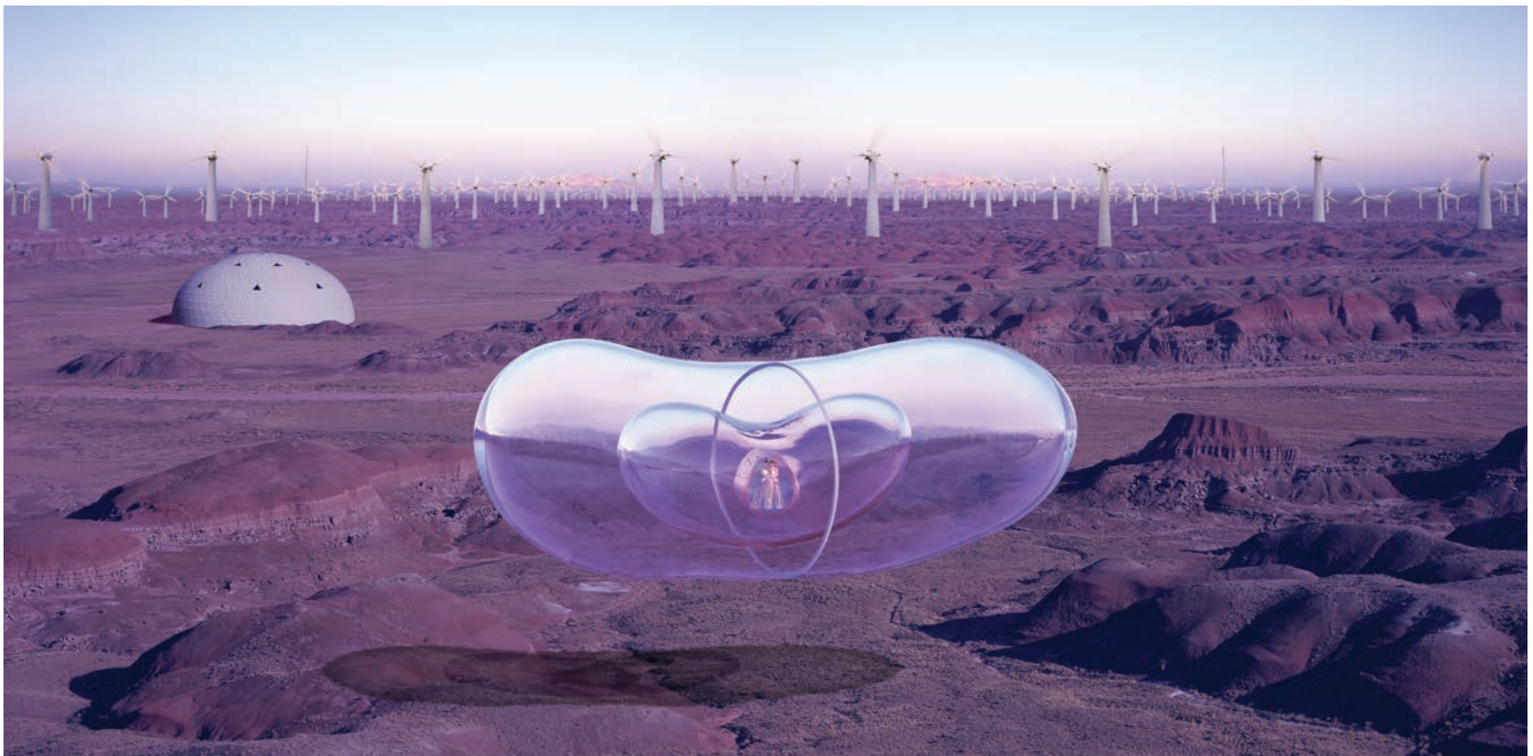
Opposite bottom, Mariko Mori: *Entropy of Love*, 1996, color photograph, glass, 10 by 20 feet.

That focus on the image is important. In Buddhism, icons and their associated practices are central to religious life: Images not only *represent* deities, they effectively *are* divine entities themselves, as art historian Stanley K. Abe argues in his study *Ordinary Images* (2002). Rituals and visual representations facilitate spiritual cultivation. Practitioners interact with sacred images by making offerings, writing poems, and conducting image-processions; material culture is as fundamental to Buddhism as traditional doctrines and texts.

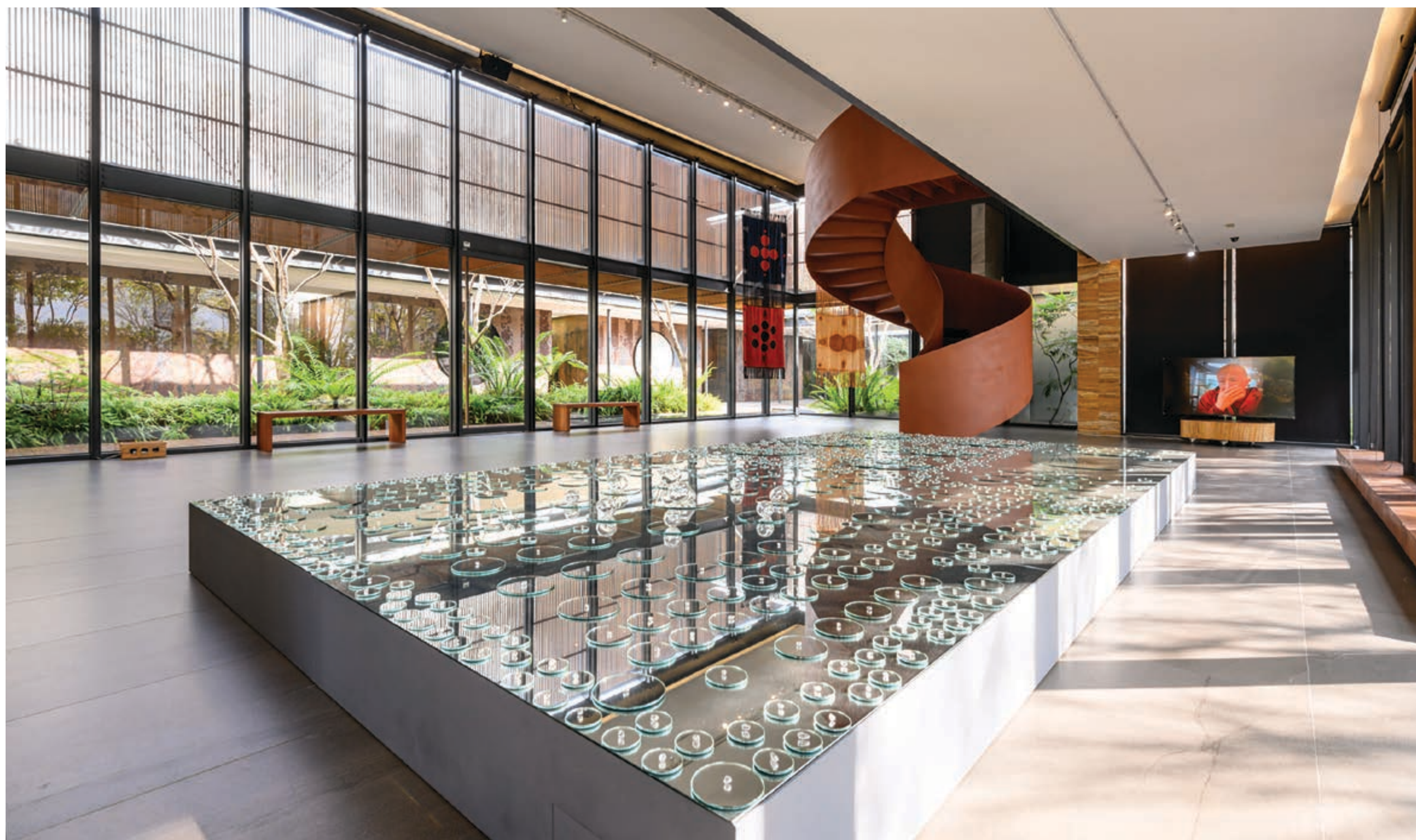
Buddhism is often said to be exceptionally austere. But while the Buddha's narrative certainly highlights renunciation, the religion is not necessarily somber. On the contrary, renunciation is often met with splendor: Heavenly flowers, jewels, rainbow light, and radiant gods populate the literature and the material expressions of the faith. Numerous contemporary artists revel in this dazzling visual richness. Mariko Mori, for example, often makes explicit reference to Japanese Buddhist iconography and ritual practice, which she considers part of her cultural heritage. Her video installation *Nirvana* (1996–97) requires visitors, who are admitted into the viewing space a few at a time, to wear 3D glasses in order to experience the work's otherworldly images, a blend of live-action sequences and animation. The heady scent of sandalwood, dispersed by an artificial breeze, drifts throughout to enhance the audience's immersive experience.

Meanwhile, Mori's glittering video avatar, clad in Buddhist-inspired futuristic regalia, floats above a pastel-hued body of water as a digital embodiment of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, Japan's most popular Buddhist deity, who hears the cries of all beings in distress. The avatar performs a ritual that reflects Mori's study of the mudra (hand gesture) sequences

This page: Courtesy Guggenheim Museum, New York; Previous spread: Photo Davis Thompson-Moss/Courtesy Asia Society, New York



Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York (2)



performed in liturgical contexts, a key component of Esoteric Buddhism. Her research focused on the Womb Realm mandala (*Taizōkai*) of the Japanese Shingon school, but the artist chose to create her own gesture sequence. Closely related to *Nirvana* is Mori's photographic series "Esoteric Cosmos" (1996–98), in which she evokes the popular deity Kichijōten, worshipped in Japan since the 8th century as the goddess of abundant harvests and good fortune. The digital avatar holds in her hand a wish-fulfilling jewel that features in many traditional Buddhist stories from both South and East Asia. (Buddhism spread across Asia through networks of overland and maritime trade routes between India, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and China.) The gem, tapered like the bulb of an onion, is believed to grant wishes and heal diseases.

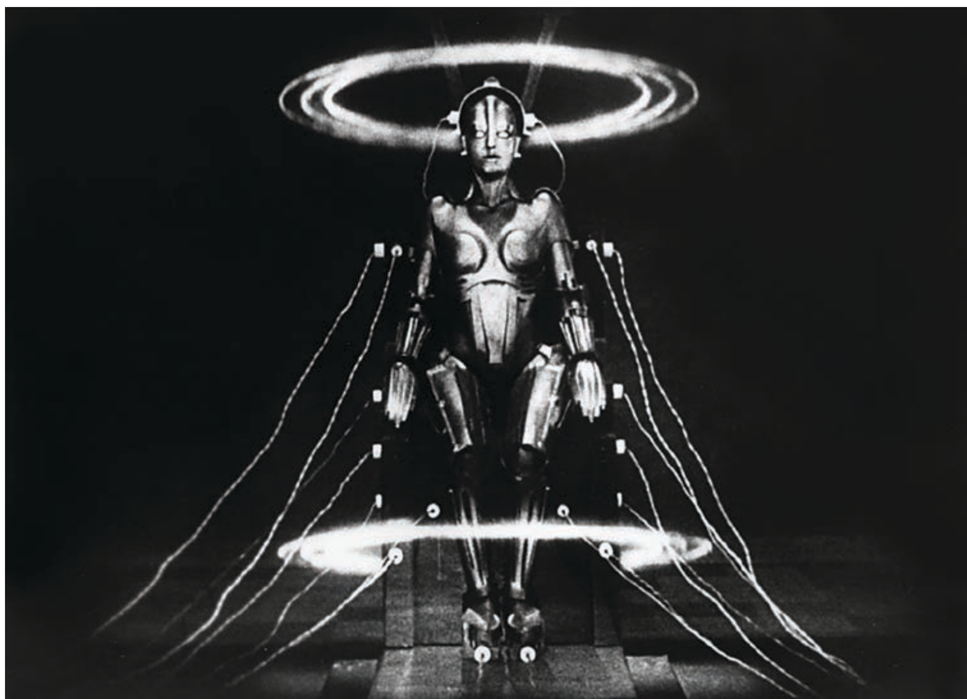
Above, view of Charwei Tsai's installation *The Womb & The Diamond*, 2021, handblown glass, mirrors, and a diamond, 10 by 19½ feet.

Below, handblown glass atop a mirror in Tsai's *The Womb & The Diamond*, 2021.

In her large-scale multimedia project *Mariko Mori Pure Land* (2002), the artist conjures a gleaming utopian dreamscape of abstract photographs and eerily lit scrim structures, which she presides over, on video, as an alluring young deity with green eyes and white hair, caressing a crystal ball. With its promise of rebirth for all, the Pure Land of the Buddha is one of the cornerstones of religious practice in China and Japan. But for historically informed viewers, the effect of Mori's work can be double-edged. Self-fashioning through art and modern technology, the artist follows in the footsteps of a notorious predecessor – the Empress Dowager Cixi of China, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, appropriated the then novel technology of photography to appear to her subjects in a divine guise. Known for her personal hauteur and unsparing policies (which were deadly to those who opposed her), the triumphant former concubine nevertheless presented herself as Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy.

This is just one of the many ways in which religious principles and accoutrements are often altered by the secular uses to which they are put. For many adherents, Buddhist religious practice consists of visually engaging with certain kinds of objects that render the sacred tangible and proximate, allowing one to communicate with otherworldly beings and sense their presence. The making of images bestows upon both artists and patrons

Courtesy Live Forever Foundation, Taiwan (2)



Left, Jhamsang: *Total Transformation of the Buddha*, 2016, pencil and pigment on canvas.

Right, Fritz Lang: *Metropolis*, 1927, 16mm film, 2 hours, 33 minutes.

From left: Private collection; Courtesy Everett Collection

boundless religious merit. Further, images instigate an encounter that evokes various sensory perceptions as well as emotional experiences within the worshipper. Unfortunately, while they are created for religious purposes in their original cultures, Buddhist icons and ritual objects are generally regarded as artworks or ethnographic objects in Western collections.

Myriad Tibetan *thangkas* (Buddhist scroll paintings) and other ritual objects found in museums and private collections today are there largely as a result of centuries of looting and, more recently, dubious business maneuvers. Some of the conflicts intrinsic to producing and distributing religious images under global capitalism are addressed in the work of Jhamsang, a classically trained *thangka* painter, and one of the younger members of the Gendun Choephel Artists' Guild in Lhasa. Jhamsang recently told scholar Leigh Miller Sangster that Tibetan artists should not be "photocopy machines" for traditional images, but instead should visually describe their emotions and ideas in the present moment. The artist's *Total Transformation of the Buddha* (2016) portrays a disturbingly voluptuous, multiarmed, monochromatic and deliberately gazeless and robotic goddess seated on a lotus flower. Jhamsang employed a traditional technique of fine black lines on a gold ground to construct a mechanistic deity, combining the language of manga and anime with an ironic vision of Tibet's technologized future under Chinese state capitalism. This Buddhist figure echoes the automaton, or *Maschinenmensch* ("machine human"), of Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, embodying themes such as the transition from the magical to the mechanical and the liminal status of robots between nature and art, familiarity and strangeness, ethnography and speculative engineering.

Born in Taipei in 1980, Charwei Tsai is another keen explorer of Buddhist visual and material culture. The pensive, often collaborative nature of her art is captured in a 2015 *Flash Art* interview with writer and curator Veeranganakumari Solanki, in which Tsai describes working at a temple in Singapore and a monastery in Australia: "Instead of bringing a work to hang on the walls, I wanted to create something especially for the site. So I wrote a Buddhist text onto a lotus plant and placed it in the corridor. People who are regular temple visitors reacted warmly to the work and saw the plant as part of the temple. They started to bring fish to feed it and prayed to the plant.… Another time … the work evolved into a ceremonial act where the monks and I wrote on the mushrooms together."

In her 2021 solo exhibition "The Womb and the Diamond," at the National Taichung Theater in Taiwan, Tsai presented a series of projects inspired by her own pilgrimages. The show's centerpiece, a flat, roughly 20-by-10-foot floor installation made with glass and mirrors, references the Womb Realm and Diamond Realm mandalas found on Mount Kōya in Japan, a sacred site established by the monk Kūkai (774–835). The exhibition also included a site-specific durational piece of calligraphic writing of excerpts of the Flower Ornament Sūtra (commonly known in Chinese as *Huayan jing*), one of the most influential Mahāyāna texts of East Asian Buddhism. In her attentive reenactments, the artist works with rice paper and pigments extracted from cinnabar, and minerals such as azurite and malachite – substances commonly employed in the Buddhist cave paintings of Central Asia.

For her artist's book *A Pilgrimage Through Light & Spells* (2012), published by the historical printmaking studio Idem in Paris, Tsai composed a short story about an imaginary pilgrimage through meditation, based on a series of black-and-white photographs captured with a broken camera. At various times in her work she has quoted the Heart Sūtra, arguably the most famous Buddhist scripture. Likely composed originally in Chinese, the text is remarkably succinct – one of the reasons for its success. No other Buddhist scripture

LuYang: *Delusional Mandala*, 2015, 3D animation, 16 minutes, 27 seconds.

Courtesy LuYang

has been more widely deployed for such a diverse range of purposes, from recitation to ritual copying to incorporation into exorcism rites (its most common use in Tibet). It is probably the extraordinary doctrinal depth of the text that proves so irresistible: a reflection on "emptiness" (*kong* in Chinese, *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit), it is often misrepresented as a sort of Buddhist Absolute to be approached through a *via negativa*, when it is in fact nothing of the sort. The textual and ritual practices evoked by Tsai's work open up a world of multiple and simultaneous meanings.

SCHOLAR MICHELLE C. WANG VIEWS EARLY Chinese Buddhist sculptures as part of a long history of artifacts and infrastructures that, by imaginatively positing nonhuman agents, have extended human capacities. Today, many religious teachers and students avidly embrace a global techno-Buddhism. Some specialists, as evidenced by Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria's multiauthored compilation *Digital Religion* (2013), contend that Buddhism, AI, digital media, and electronics technology occupy the same ontological sphere of knowledge and experience. Masahiro Mori even famously claimed in his manifesto-like book *The Buddha in the Robot: A Robot Engineer's Thoughts on Science and Religion* (1981) that robots have Buddha nature—the potential for attaining Buddhahood—and therefore deserve respect and compassion in their engagement with humans.

For Chinese new media artist LuYang, who disdains conventional gender categories, Buddhism is a way to probe the relationship between body and mind, and question the nature of reality and the self, while hopefully exploring the possibility of rebirth in the digital world. Growing up with a Buddhist grandmother, the artist developed a keen interest in Buddhist imagery, various notions of salvation, and cutting-edge technology. In a 2020 interview in *Radii*, LuYang expounded on a recent avatar, Doku: "In the virtual world, I was able to do things such as choosing my own gender-neutral body and creating an appearance that reflects my own sense of beauty, which are not possible in real life. I consider Doku as my digital reincarnation.... He is me but someone else at the same time. Just like the Buddhist concept of *ālaya-vijñāna* [storehouse consciousness], he represents a stream of consciousness which lingers in different worlds and different selves." LuYang's installations—filled with video projections, flashing signs, and interactive arcade stations—interlace anime and otaku cultures, religious iconography and computer gaming, neuroscience and biotechnology.

In *LuYang Delusional Mandala* (2015), a hectic and darkly ironic meditation on medicine and technology, viewers witness the misadventures of a CGI character with LuYang's face. In one uncanny scene, the character is skinless and boneless, with lungs, heart, stomach, kidneys, and intestines exposed. The image was inspired by a classic Buddhist meditation practice: intense contemplation of the impurity of the body. Previously seen only as the CGI protagonist of the videos, LuYang's avatar is here both the supreme being in the artist's personal cosmology and a tortured creature reminiscent of the patchwork corpse brought to life in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Lu's video-game installation *The Great Adventure of Material World* (2017) features themes of post-human life that have long been explored in cyberpunk circles.

LuYang: *The Great Adventure of Material World–Game Film*, 2020, video, 26 minutes, 22 seconds.

Courtesy LuYang

Works in the “LuYang Delusion” series, saturated with Buddhist iconography and doctrine, take their cues from the artist’s research into neuroscience. Reflecting especially the influence of behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, they speak to LuYang’s simultaneous refusal of and fascination with social control. In one, *LuYang Delusional Crime and Punishment,* the artist’s avatar is born from a 3D printer and goes on to suffer various hellish torments. Indeed, most of LuYang’s digital productions have involved manipulating humanoid characters, while more recent works, such as *Doku: Digital Alaya* (2021), with its androgynous figure dancing on multiple screens against multiple environmental backdrops, employ other forms of choreographic manipulation such as live motion capture.

The Material World Knight is the main character in several of LuYang’s artworks, most recently *The Great Adventure of Material World – Game Film* (2020). Based on the eponymous video-game artwork *The Great Adventure of Material World – Game* (2019), the 26-minute film replicates a video game’s structure and visual themes in several ways. It is divided into nine episodes that function like game levels but also suggest a Buddhist primer of sorts. (Predicated on the ascension of awareness toward greater and greater spiritual purity – although every being is vulnerable to repeated setbacks – Buddhism posits six realms of reincarnation, seven stages of enlightenment, and 31 levels of existence.)

At the end of each episode, the Knight enters a portal to reach the next episode, where he meets new enemies and NPCs (non-playable characters) who provide him with new knowledge and help him acquire new weapons. The film also includes scenes from the video game in which characters have conversations or deliver monologues, as well as scenes based on fighting game play. In one scene, the boy-hero is poised in a face-off against a skull-headed villain among the ruins of a retro-futurist city.

LuYang was born in Shanghai in 1984, the same year that Nam June Paik broadcast his telethon-like work *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* from a series of satellite-linked television studios in several locations worldwide. Unlike Orwell, Paik saw television as a progressive platform enabling geographically and culturally distant viewers – as well as participants such as John Cage, Laurie Anderson, Charlotte Moorman, and Allen Ginsberg – to gather together productively. Despite their many differences, LuYang appears to be driven by similar yearnings. Paik, who experimented with TV monitors, broadcasting, synthesizers, and robots, was one of the first artists to use video as an art form. Today, LuYang professes to “live on the Internet,” a genderless space of boundless freedom and possibility. Both artists, while engrossed in Buddhist practices and ideas and infused with a longing for a transhumanist realm, also serve as keen witnesses to our thoroughly mediated lives. ●

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