Reflecting on the successes and failures of his satellite artwork *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986), media artist Nam June Paik said, “I think sports and art can work well together. But I don’t particularly like the nationalism in sports. There’s too much of it.”

The push-pull of nationalism and globalism—with the role of sport in the balance—lies at the heart of *Bye Bye Kipling*, a live broadcast event that Paik conceived as a simultaneous making and unmaking of history. Paik wanted to create a hybrid sports-arts program the likes of which had never been seen before, while eradicating the real and virtual distance between nations caused by the legacies of colonialism, provincialism, and war. Just as he had sought to counter prognostications of techno-dystopia with his first large-scale satellite piece, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), his goal with *Bye Bye Kipling*—a dizzying compendium of split-screened, overlaid, tiled, cascading, and picture-in-picture image effects showcasing live transmissions of art, music, dance, and sport from three nations—was to offer an audiovisual rebuke to the titular British author’s infamous pronouncement about the fundamental irreconcilability of cultures: “Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” Through individual and institutional collaboration, *Bye Bye Kipling* would put the United States,
Japan, and Korea in literal and figurative dialog with one another, stretching across geographical, racial, and historical boundaries so that the participants and viewers of the program could collectively experience a virtual happening through what Paik dubbed “global television.” But Paik’s utopian aspirations ran up against the limits of representation, and his celebratory approach, however well-intentioned, could hardly overcome centuries of difference in the span of a single broadcast.

Paik’s insistence on the importance of communication across cultures reflected his biography. Born in Korea, Paik attended the University of Tokyo before moving to Germany and then the United States, which he made his home until his death in 2006. In many ways, Kipling marked Paik’s attempt to bridge the nations and cultures he had encountered in his life. He partnered with New York’s public television station WNET, the national networks of Japan and Korea, Sony, and other private businesses, as well as several philanthropists to broadcast the live television event, which ran on Japanese and American television concurrently for an hour and a half (the Korean broadcast aired four days later). Even at that length, the program was an overstuffed affair. Paik paced the program like a long-form music video crossed with an alternate-universe variety show, producing a series of segments that suddenly shifted people and locales, seemingly without logic or coherence. The effect was to highlight Paik’s surreal juxtapositions, evoking the early cable television viewing experience of hyperactively flipping through channels in hopes of finding something interesting. Cultural luminaries from the worlds of art, music, dance, fashion, and sports crowded a New York City nightclub and a Tokyo shopping plaza, among other locales. The artist Keith Haring, composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, rock icon Lou Reed, architect Arata Isozaki, soprano Dora Ohrenstein, performing as a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble, fashion designer Issey Miyaki, and cellist and longtime Paik collaborator Charlotte Moorman, as well as Kodo drummers and Kabuki dancers, all made appearances.

Sensation is Bye Bye Kipling’s privileged mode—duration, boredom, resilience, striving, taking chances, and falling short—a condition that surely describes both the experience of making and receiving the broadcast itself. By turns messy and exhilarating, Bye Bye Kipling was eventually edited down into a significantly leaner 27-minute single-channel version by Skip Blumberg, who also contributed a man-on-the-street style documentary on contemporary Korean life to the program. In one of the most visually provocative scenes, images of the predominantly African American Alvin Ailey dance company, outfitted in futuristic garb by Miyake, transitioned into the white powdered visages of the butoh dance troupe Sankai Juku. These bodies moved in choreographed motion, but were not the bodies usually seen on Japanese and American television, respectively. Tacit connections also tied the two groups together—Japanese dancer Masazumi Chaya had been dancing with Alvin Ailey since moving to the U.S. in 1970, and by the time of Bye Bye Kipling, he had been promoted to the company’s assistant rehearsal director. Meanwhile, Sankai Juku had made its sports-themed debut on American soil two years prior to the broadcast, at the Los Angeles Olympics Art Festival.

Some of Kipling’s other visual hand-offs were of a more literal nature: in one sequence, Paik and Sakamoto tossed around Paik’s Video Ball, a tactile sculpture outfitted with cameras, switching between vertiginous views produced by the object and more stable compositions of the two friends and collaborators playing catch. Segments were linked together with pre-recorded flashes of Paik’s kinetic video synthesis—bursts of shifting color patterns, superimpositions, chroma-keying, and video matting. Paul Garrin similarly contributed kaleidoscopic video material to these interstitial transitions, and John Sandborn’s CGI spaceships and floating robot heads provided a whimsical sense of expanded scale to the already global event. Veteran talk show host Dick Cavett, who served as the event’s master of ceremonies, did his best to stay on top of the unpredictable and often haphazard proceedings, showing off some conversational Japanese and exasperation at the program’s numerous technical gaffes in equal measure.
Anchoring the telecast was real-time footage of Japanese long-distance champion Takeyuki Nakayama running the marathon at the 1986 Asian Games in Seoul. Nakayama was so far ahead of his competitors that he appeared to be running entirely alone, a metonym of sorts for the footage itself, which was the only coverage of the games that aired on American television. Paik intended to conclude the telecast with the end of the race, what he envisioned as a “co-crescendo” in which Nakayama’s triumphant entrance into and final lap around the Seoul Olympic Stadium would be accompanied by a soaring, propellant live score performed by the Philip Glass Ensemble. By conjoining art and sports, East and West, in real time, Paik believed he could carve out a space of cultural commonality.

Paik referred to this simultaneous finish as “a double climax.” In a 1988 essay about his satellite work, Paik explains that, for Kipling, “An electric orgasm was one intention of the broadcast. My idea was by achieving this, I could go beyond what Leni Riefenstahl has done, whose sports art has been defined as the best.” Here, Paik shows a bit of his own competitive spirit, seeking an ecstatic release from the historical influence of Olympia (1938), Riefenstahl’s expressive documentary of the 1936 Berlin Olympic games, which, despite being bankrolled by the Third Reich, set the template for all of televised sports to come. Riefenstahl’s use of slow-motion, aerial, and underwater photography, her construction of elaborate sideline tracking systems to seamlessly follow the action on field, and her multi-angle coverage of single events all helped cement the visual grammar of mediated athletics in the 20th century.

With Bye Bye Kipling, however, Paik seemed less interested in interrogating spectacle than with reconfiguring it. He was surely also thinking of the huge audience share—and unapologetic jingoism—of NBC’s recent coverage of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games. That telecast time-shifted events to play to a wider viewership, while Paik wanted to shift the emphasis in his piece to “oneness” and oneness, de-emphasizing the importance of any single event in favor of eliciting empathy from a global audience, one that was viewing different actions from around the world at the same time. So when...
**Kipling** assigns equal importance to rock music, Japanese dance, and experimental theater—as well as international sport—we can register Paik’s attempt to dismantle both hierarchy and difference. Sport, like music and dance, provided Paik with a means of speaking to an audience he normally did not address, as well as a way of illustrating universally legible themes of competition, perseverance, and success.

But one of the most powerful achievements of Paik’s satellite piece was deceptively simple, and that was showing people from other nations to viewers who had never seen them on TV. American television in 1986 did not show many images of strong Asian bodies, and it rarely does so today. One need only recall the media furor surrounding “Linsanity,” the highlight-reel-worthy play of New York Knicks’ guard Jeremy Lin in 2012, to recognize how desperate fans of different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds were to see an Asian athlete lionized by popular culture. Watching Nakayama’s solitary struggle to break the marathon world record (he didn’t) as American announcers marvel at his dominance remains undeniably thrilling. But it also carries international competition’s familiar collapsing of individual heroics with national symbolism—the recognition that these athletes, regardless of personal ambition, also serve as proxies for their entire country. This synecdochal papering over of difference, in terms of class, ethnicity, race, and opinion, also serves as proxies for their entire country. This synecdochal papering over of difference, in terms of class, ethnicity, race, and opinion, obscures both historical context and dissent.

By the time of **Kipling**, however, Paik had completed his transformation from being branded a “cultural terrorist” for his incendiary action music pieces, such as **Étude for Pianoforte** (1960). One performance of the piece took place at artist Mary Bauermeister’s studio in Cologne, with John Cage and electronic composer David Tudor in attendance. Paik played bits of Chopin, filed a paper in a folder, leapt from the stage into the audience, cut Cage’s tie with scissors, and shampooed Tudor’s hair, all before returning to the piano to intermittently play more Chopin and Stravinsky, bang his head on the keys, lie on the floor screaming, and jump up to write on the blackboard “Are you a gentlemen (sic)?” By the time of **Bye Bye Kipling**’s airing, however, *New York Times* television critic and Paik champion John J. O’Connor deemed him to be “perhaps the least threatening of avant-garde artists.” In his desire to reach the broadest possible audience with a message of global uplift, Paik missed an opportunity to mount a more sustained critique of nationalism and the limits of mediated representation.

Regardless of the artist’s intention, the harsh realities of nationalism bookended **Kipling**’s airing. Five days before the start of the Asia Games, five people were killed when a North Korean spy set off a bomb behind a vending machine at Gimpo International Airport. Furthermore, Paik’s focus on the figure of Nakayama and invocation of Riefenstahl together point towards an obscured history, one that demonstrates the potential power of sports as a site of political protest. In the 1936 Berlin games, two Koreans, Sohn Kee-chung and Nam Sung-yong, took gold and bronze in the marathon. They competed under the Japanese flag, however, as Korea was occupied by imperial Japan at the time. In a lineage that now includes Tommie Smith and John Carlos symbolically dressing and raising their fists in support of black civil rights, poverty, and labor during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and, more recently, Colin Kaepernick and other football players taking a knee during the “Star-Spangled Banner” to protest police violence against people of color in America, Sohn refused to acknowledge the Japanese anthem as it played during the medal ceremony. *Dong-A Ilbo*, a Korean newspaper, doctored the photo of Sohn, removing the Japanese emblem from his uniform. This additional act of defiance enraged the Japanese powers in Seoul, and eight staffers from the paper were imprisoned and the newspaper was barred from publishing for the better part of a year. For Korean audiences, **Bye Bye Kipling**’s valorization of a Japanese runner, taken with the perception that footage and celebrities from Japan and the U.S. had dominated the broadcast, had unintentionally opened up what Paik later described as “the old wound of discrimination,” historically experienced by Korea.

Though there were flashes of contemporary Korean life showcased in **Bye Bye Kipling**—young people sailboarding on the Han River, a snippet of a destructive avant-garde performance piece—the program’s
representation of Korea was largely restricted to historically resonant images, such as newsreel footage of the Japanese occupation. Even the footage from then-present-day Korea seemed mainly to depict a nation stuck in the past, featuring people in ceremonial garb taking part in a ribbon-twirling “farmers’ dance,” or others playing juldarigi, a tug-of-war contest featuring dozens of participants manipulating two enormous rice-straw ropes. In his writings, Paik recognized that satellite art was a form of electronic tourism necessarily tinged with a traveler’s romanticism of the other. It is therefore surprising to see him romanticizing his homeland’s culture. Perhaps he was far enough removed from Korea—both in terms of geography and personal history—to have himself inadvertently returned there as an electronic tourist. Of course, by its very nature, tourism is a piecemeal and often surface-level encounter with another city or nation’s people, terrain, and culture. Paik probably realized that attempting to mediate centuries of history between East and West within a single television show was an outsized, even hilarious goal, and an altogether impossible undertaking. The outcomes of such an experiment are certainly harder to recognize than the runaway victor of a marathon, though Paik’s insistence on foregrounding representation on the level of the individual, the communal, and the national speaks to a utopian desire to radically transform the conditions of the present through telepresence. Changing nations’ perceptions of one another requires more than ebullient, real-time recognition, however—the development of future empathy also rests on an acknowledgment of the hegemony, imperialism, narratives, and xenophobia that shaped the past.