Of the numerous artists working today from the vantage point of interculturalism — not only borrowing motifs and ideas from any number of cultures outside their own, but also living and working within these cultures — Nam June Paik is surely a quintessential figure. Born and raised in Korea, trained in Japan and in Europe, living and working in the United States, Paik is perhaps the embodiment of “interculturalism.” Despite this, and despite the fact that Asian imagery regularly crops up in his work, most critics discuss Paik primarily in reference to Western constructs and Western traditions. Regularly evoked are Paik’s primary mentors — Marcel Duchamp, Marshal McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and John Cage. Paik’s Eastern roots are frequently touched upon, but rarely more than that. Aside from brief references to Zen Buddhism, an interest thought to be received via the influence of John Cage, critics and scholars have been very reticent, vague, or cryptic when discussing Asian ideas and imagery in Paik’s work.¹ Very possibly, it is Western critics’ ignorance of Eastern traditions that is responsible for this gap. My contention, however, is that knowledge of such traditions is essential for the interpretation, not only of Paik’s work, but that of all artists whose work constitutes a response to Asian art, philosophy, or culture.

One of Paik’s most evocative, and I would argue “Eastern” works, is TV Buddha, of 1974 (fig. 1). Despite the obvious Asian imagery, this work (along with its many variants) has really never been discussed as Buddhist art. And yet it can be argued, on the basis of comparisons with classical Buddhist art, that a complex theological and metaphysical construct is alluded to, even if subconsciously, in TV Buddha.

The basic set up is extremely simple — a statue of the Buddha placed before a video monitor. Embedded within an earthen mound, the monitor bears the Buddha’s own image, which is being transmitted to the monitor by a camera placed behind the mound. Paik has done a number of variations on this work. One, of 1974, has the image sitting before a freestanding portable TV set. And in Video Buddha (1989), the TV monitor is encased in a layer of bronze.² The basic set up of all three works is similar, but the one illustrated in figure 1 has the greatest poetic resonance —
perhaps because of the quality of the Buddha image, but also because of the mound, which, as I hope to show later, bears specific symbolic references as well.

Before presenting my own interpretation, it will be useful to summarize what other scholars and critics have said about TV Buddha. I do not intend to argue that these scholars interpretations are wrong. I would say, however, that a certain dimension is missing, which can be filled in with a fuller consideration of the Asian content of the work.

An overview of the literature on Paik shows that while many critics consider TV Buddha to be one of his most engaging and significant pieces, the actual commentary on it is surprisingly sparse. In his 1982 Whitney Museum catalog, John Hanhardt states, “. . . the Buddha contemplates itself, a self-portrait, which fulfills a meditative stare inward to the self,” and that the work “explores visual puns and ideas that remind one of Duchamp’s playful seriousness.”3 A 1995 article by Patricia Mellencamp has a somewhat longer discussion of Asian content in Paik’s work, focusing on Zen Buddhism. She begins by stating in another way what I have stated earlier regarding Western critics’ assessments of Paik’s work, that “while a