

Reconstructing the Korean Body: Nam June Paik as Specular Border

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Postcolonialist critic Abdul JanMohamed defines the specular border intellectual as the one who is "familiar with two cultures, finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to be 'at home' in these societies". Specular border intellectuals, in his view, subject the cultures to "analytic scrutiny rather than combining them", and utilise the "interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from which to define... utopian possibilities of group formation".¹ Korean

diasporal artist Nam June Paik has been in that specular border position since the late 1950s, actively negotiating himself between the cultures of East and West.

Born and raised in Korea, educated in Korea, Japan and Europe, a citizen of the United States, and an artist who was chosen to represent the Federal Republic of Germany at the 1993 Venice Biennale, Paik does not allow any single country to lay claim to him. Since his debut on the Western art scene in 1959, Paik has reigned over seemingly disparate fields ranging from Zen to cybernetics, and performance to video art. Among his diverse artistic interests, however, a recurrent theme in his art has been a negotiation between East and West.

As an expatriate of Korea who was among the central figures of the international avant-garde movement *Fluxus*, Paik often addressed ostensibly Asian themes in his work such as *Zen for Head* (Fig. 1) and *TV-Buddha* (Fig. 2). Were these references to Zen or Buddhism derived simply from his ethnic background, thus invoked by the nostalgia of a cultural immigrant? Or, was it his strategy to fashion himself as an exotic "Other" to the West? Regarding *Zen for Head*, for example, the precedence of Paik's head dipping is traced back to Chinese calligrapher Zhang Xu (675-759), the legendary master of "mad cursive [calligraphy]", who used to drink wine and then write cursive script by dipping his head in ink and writing with it.² Regardless of Paik's knowledge of this legend at the time of this performance, *Zen for Head* interlocks its performance to the tradition of Asian calligraphy.

The convention of traditional calligraphy often addresses the merging of written characters and the personality of the writer: The characters carry not only the semantic meanings of the words, but the spirit of the calligrapher. Here in Paik's performance, by contrast, the abject replaces the spirit. The relics of his body and its substitutes – such as the imprints of his hands, head, and tie stained in ink and tomato juice – are the indices of the artist's physical body rather than the manifestation of his elevated spirit. Here it is Paik's body, not the written characters, that claims his heirloom of Asian heritage. Those marks are like stigmata of his Asian body, signs of what the artist calls himself, "the yellow peril".³

Korean Body in the West

Nam June Paik was born on July 20th, 1932 in Seoul, Korea as the youngest of five children. Thanks to the affluence of his family, Paik was exposed to modern technology and Western

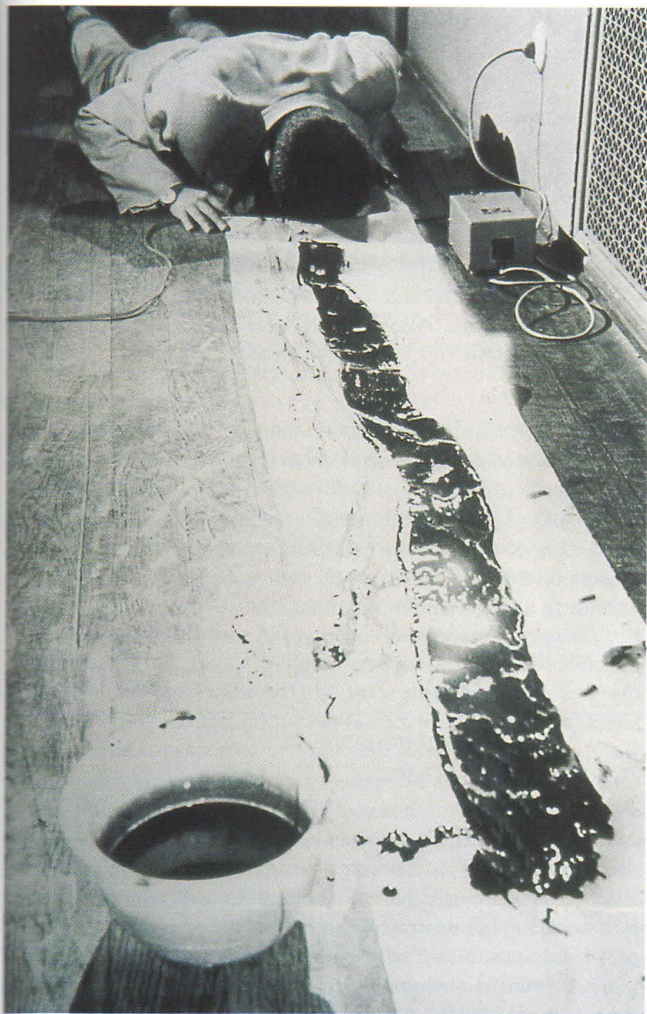


Fig. 1. Nam June Paik, *Zen for Head*, 1962.

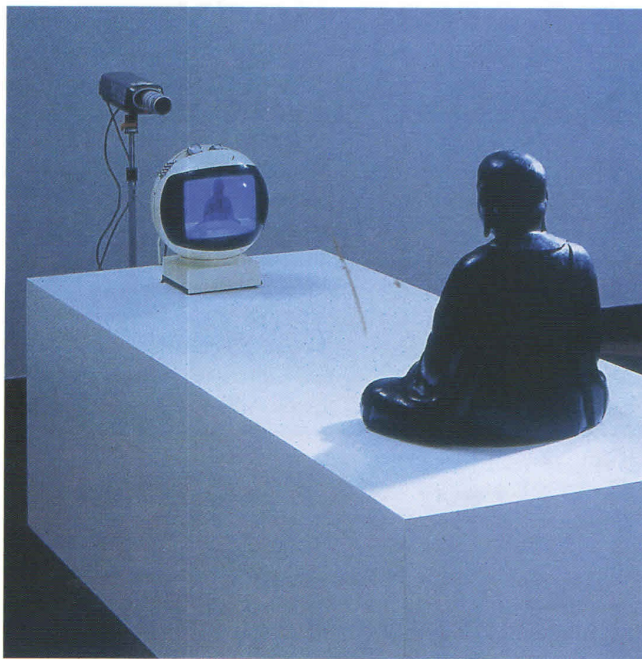


Fig. 2. Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, 1974.

culture quite early in his childhood. His passion for Western music grew under the influence of pianist Shin Jae-duk and composer Lee Keun-woo in his teenage years. During the Korean War, Paik moved to Japan with his family and studied music and aesthetics at University of Tokyo. After graduation in 1955, Paik headed for then West Germany to study the history of music. In 1957 Paik began working at the Studio for Electronic Music in Cologne where the famous Austrian avant-garde composer Stockhausen served as director. Paik's most crucial encounter with avant-garde music, however, took place in the following year when he first met an American avant-garde composer named John Cage.

"I always think that my past 14 years is nothing but an extension of one memorable evening at Darmstadt in 58",⁴ Paik confessed in a letter to Cage. Paik recalled: "I went to see the music with a very cynical mind, to see what Americans will do with Oriental heritage. But in the middle of the concert slowly, slowly I got tuned on. At first I thought this is ridiculous and then I thought: actually, Zen is boring, too...so, maybe there is something, and then I changed my mind and...that was really very profound".⁵

Cage studied Zen for two years from 1945 with the Japanese Zen master Suzuki Daisetz.⁶ In the postwar period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the disillusionment in the perceived logocentrism of Western philosophies led many intellectuals to seek alternatives in Asian religions and philosophies such as Zen Buddhism. Cage's interest in Zen and Asian music was one of these attempts, in his case to deconstruct Western harmonics and the hierarchical relationship of composer, performer, and audience. Whether being influenced by Cage's Zen or the artist's own cultural heritage, Paik embarked on a series of "Zen" works such as *Zen for Walking* (1961), *Zen for TV* (1963), and *Zen for Film* (1964).

Zen for Head (1962), what we discussed earlier, was performed as Paik's interpretation of avant-garde composer La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #10*, which consisted of a rather simple instruction: "Draw a straight line and follow it". Paik dipped his head, hands, and necktie into a bowl of ink and tomato juice mixture, and dragged himself along a roll of paper spread below. Was Paik impersonating himself as a "Zen master" of performance art?

Paik's position to Zen is, in fact, quite ambivalent. Paik once

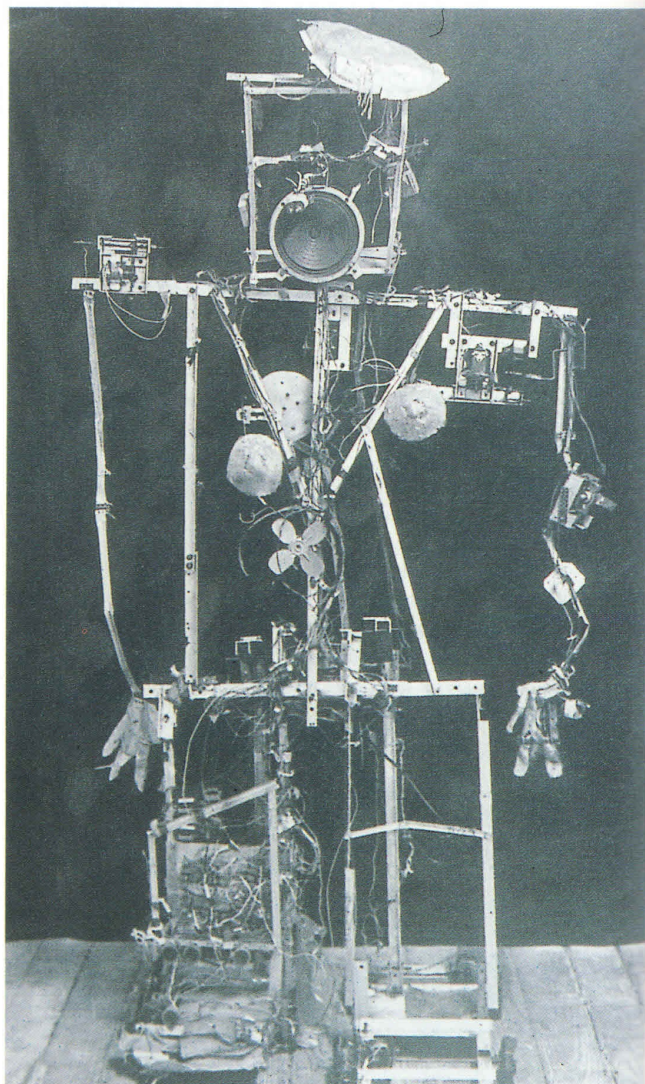


Fig. 3. Nam June Paik, *Robot K-456 in Robot Opera*, performed as part of the 2nd Annual New York Avant-garde Festival, 1964.

criticised Suzuki, by renouncing him as "the salesman of 'our' culture." The artist argued: "cultural patriotism is more harmful than the political patriotism".⁷ Paik's criticism of Suzuki reveals the complexity of Paik's position in this alleged heritage. On the one hand, Paik seems to acknowledge Zen as truly Asian property: "our" culture. Among Paik's many comments on Zen, however, we do not encounter a single quotation either from Korean monks or from Korean texts. Paradoxically, Paik's Zen probably originated from Suzuki's, diluted by American "humour" (Cage), and animated with the Western avant-garde spirit. On the other hand, by disclaiming Suzuki's propaganda of Zen as patriotism (for Suzuki, of course, it was Japanese), Paik freely used the term as his own. Derived from a Cagean heritage, Paik's Zen was, from the beginning, outside of the Zen tradition.

Nevertheless, Zen worked in Paik's favour, paving his way to the core of the Western avant-garde circle. Although Paik was working on cutting-edge electronic music and avant-garde performance, he was portraying himself as a Zen master, and being portrayed as such by the Western critics; his Asian body gained salience from its obvious exoticism. At the same time, however, these features of Otherness within the ethnic and cultural frame of the West became a disadvantage to the artist in presenting his

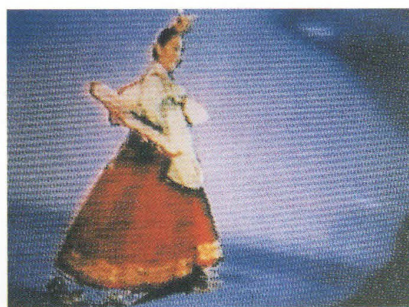
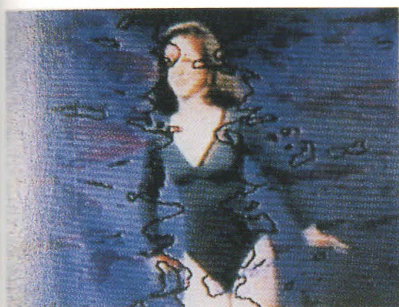


Fig. 4. Nam June Paik, *Global Grove*. Single-channel videotape (28 min 30 sec), 1973.

originality. He was often considered as an Asian version of Cage.

After 1963, we see his Asian body gradually removed from the performance scene. Paik stated: "Perhaps my minority complex as an Asian or a Korean drives me to compose the very complicated cybernetic arts."⁸ By launching his electronic experiments in full scale, Paik defied the Western stereotype of Asian artist. With the help of Japanese engineer Shuya Abe, Paik built an anthropomorphic robot named *K-456* (Fig. 3). *K-456* stood for Paik's new identity after his early German period. The robot had no race, no nationality, no Zen baggage. With this cyborg body, Paik's next stop was New York City.

In 1965 Paik purchased a Sony Portapak (the first portable video camera) and made a successful debut of his electronic works at Galeria Bonino, New York. The 1973 video *Global Groove* epitomizes Paik's passion for interactive electronic art and global communication. Intertwining ever-changing imagery associated with various nationalities, Paik attempted to bridge the already naturalised dichotomy of East and West within his flexible delimitation of a global village. With *Global Groove*, Paik proposed the idea of "Video Common Market" (based on the emerging European Common Market) to promote the free flow of video information and to abolish cultural nationalism. In *Global Groove*, the juxtaposition of multi-national images attempts to produce cultural hybrids. We see, for example, a sequence of go-go dancers and Korean women in traditional costume performing Korean traditional dances (Fig. 4). By intertwining the images of East and West, did Paik secure an unbiased, equal coverage of East and West?

In *Global Groove*, in fact, the images of Korea petrify Korean culture in the past. The references to Korea do not trouble the Orientalist tropes of the "exotic" Others. Paik's *Global Groove* did not achieve the cultural hybridity, but instead, by using binary more openly than ever, it surfaced his own binary position. The multicultural references in his video art reflected the artist's cosmopolitan persona, and yet this international artist would be continuously reframed in terms of his national identity: "Korean" by his native Korea.

The Homecoming

The year 1984 began with shock and controversies stimulated by Paik's satellite video show *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* broadcast live on the first day of the year simultaneously to Korea, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and the United States. The title was in homage to George Orwell's famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a Novel (1949), in which the author predicted that the future would bring a gloomy society controlled by the omnipresent TV eye of "Big Brother". Paik's broadcast connecting various *weltstads* in real time was intended to contradict the ominous image of TV as a propagand-

ist tool for a dictator as portrayed in Orwell's novel.

Thanks to TV's incredible power to produce celebrity, the name Nam June Paik was instantly known all over Korea. The public as well as those in the Korean art world watched the show with curiosity and pride in seeing a fellow Korean make himself "big" around the world. The reviewer in *Kyegon Misul*, however, also expressed the concerns of some critics and artists that Paik's "experimental art does not appeal to contemporary Koreans in reality".⁹ The article criticised Koreans' pride in Paik as a "complex of the third-world inferiority".¹⁰ This love-hate feeling toward the now famous, yet still controversial Korean artist in New York reveals an intricate framing of abrasion between different cultures and contexts.

On June 22, 1984, Paik went to Korea for the first time in nearly 34 years. Accompanied by intense media coverage, his words and public behaviors literally shook the respectable Korean art world. The following quotes are just a few of his controversial comments in Korea:

"A half of art is charade. It is about deceiving and being deceived. Art is to lure the public... I am a cultural vendor wandering abroad to sell Korean culture – *Chung-Ang Ilbo*", June 30, 1984.

"There are borders in art. [...] I live in the United States not because of its convenience, but because I know that the meanings in history depend on who writes history. History [now] is written by the United States and the New-Yorkers. Thus, I need to live where the history is being written—in an interview with Choi Il-nam, *Shin Dong-Ah*". August 1984.¹¹

Paik's second live satellite broadcast aired on the occasion of the 1986 Asian Games in Seoul. Taking advantage of world television coverage, Paik this time directly addressed the East/West binary in *Bye Bye Kipling*, the title he took from the colonialist author, Rudyard Kipling's dictum, "East is East, West is West, and never the twain shall meet". By connecting New York, Seoul, and Tokyo in live broadcasts, Paik attempted to hybridise East and West, bringing both of his worlds into conjunction. The climax of the program, live coverage of the marathon race in Seoul delivered the cityscape and Korean people in it, passing the vivid here and now imagery of 1986 Seoul (Fig. 5). Paik's renewed contact with his homeland continued with numerous exhibitions in Korea, such as *Video Time/Video Space* opened at the National Contemporary Museum in 1992. Subsequent works of Paik in the 1990s, such as the video installations *Video Dongdaemoon (East Gate)*, and *Turtle* (Fig. 6), have clear indications of Korean subject matter.¹² Mostly drawn from such heroic events in Korean history, however, Paik's Korean references were still directed more toward Korea's past than its present. Could Paik be reconstructed as Korean after his homecoming?

In 2001, Paik vehemently denied interviewer Alice Kim's assumption that his post-1984 works were symbolically Korean. He said: "I don't think that mattered much; I just had to sell my work to



Fig. 5. Nam June Paik, *Bye Bye Kipling*, Single-channel videotape (30 min 32 sec), 1986.

a new audience, a Korean audience, hence the change".¹³ Despite some criticism of Paik's ambiguous Koreanness, positive reviews of Paik prevailed throughout the 1990s in Korea. *Munwha Ilbo* evaluated Paik's international and national aspects: "Art is the vanguard of culture. The success of Paik's art demands a critical review on cultural insularity and conservatism. Paik has both of so-called 'ours' and 'others,' old and new, traditional art and non-art".¹⁴

Paik's rejection of nationalism and his idiosyncratic position as both insider and outsider were once again confirmed in the 1993 Venice Biennale. The nomination of Paik to represent the newly united Republic of Germany and the resulting discourses of artistic globalism in the Biennale present an intriguing portrait of a diasporal artist achieving a new status as the avant-garde of cultural hybridization in the 1990s. His ambivalent position, with works such as *Global Groove* that seemed to reinscribe the East-West binary, was suddenly overlooked in favour of a new respect for his placelessness.

By tracing Paik's performances and videos in the West as well



Fig. 6. Nam June Paik, *Turtle*, 1993.

as in Korea, this paper demonstrated how an Asian diasporal body comes to inhabit a liminal space – the "specular border" – between traditional binaries. Paik sometimes performed essentialised Asian identity, but more importantly, overall Paik's work is seen to produce a hinge function showing how ideas and meanings are transformed when they cross "imaginary" borders of East and West. Equally familiar with or equally estranged from West and his country of origin, the artist is always already the Other, finding himself unable or unwilling to be "at home" in any single culture. By examining his diasporal position at the specular border of these two cultures, the "imaginative geography" of modern Asian art, which has been articulated through and by virtue of the taxonomy of the West, can be further explored. Negotiating for both worlds, Nam June Paik, I argue, opens up the interface between East and West.

Jieun Rhee completed her Ph.D in 2002 in Art History at Boston University where she taught seminar in Modern Asian Art. She gave a talk at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in April 2002. She is currently teaching at the College of Fine Arts, Seoul National University.

NOTES

1. Abdul R. JanMohamed, "Wordliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual" in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michael Sprinker (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), p. 97.
2. Li Zhao, *Thang goushi bu*. (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957), p. 17. Translated in Amy McNair, *The Upright Brush: Yan Zhunqing's Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics..* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), p. 22. I thank Professor Qianshen Bai for bringing this precedence to my attention.
3. Nam June Paik, "Yellow Peril! C'est moi" ca. 1962/63. Manuscript printed in Wulf Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video*. Exh. cat., Kunstalle Bremen, 2000, p. 52. Jean-Paul Fargier also acknowledged that Paik had declared as such in his pamphlets of his earlier exhibition in Europe. See his essay "The Yellow Peril and the White Wolf" in *Nam June Paik: Video Time-Video Space*, eds. Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993, p. 103.
4. Nam June Paik, "Letter to John Cage", *Video 'n' Videology: Nam June Paik (1959-1973)*, exh.cat. Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1974, unpagd.
5. Nam June Paik, in *Nam June Paik: Edited for Television* (New York: TV Lab at WNET/Thirteen, 1975), videotape. Quoted in John Alan Farmer, *Art into Television, 1960-1965*. Ph.D. dissertation. Columbia University, 1998, pp. 155-6.
6. See Ellsworth J. Snyder, "Chronological Table of John Cage's Life" in *John Cage*. Richard Kostelanetz ed. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, pp. 37-8.
7. Nam June Paik, *Video 'n' Videology*, unpagd. Emphasis is Paik's.
8. Nam June Paik in a catalogue essay written in 1965. Reprinted in Wulf Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik: Fluxus Video*, Op. cit., p. 95.
9. "Most-Talked-about Paik Nam June Frenzy and Video Art", *Kyegon Misul*. No. 29 (Spring 1984), p. 195.
10. *Ibid.*
11. These interview/newspaper clips are reprinted in Lee Tae-ho, "His First Comment: 'Art is Charade'", *Kyegon Misul* no. 31 (Fall 1984), p. 63. Translations are mine.
12. *Dongdaemoon* (East Gate) refers to one of the four gates of the capital city Seoul, which dates back to the early Chosun dynasty; it is also the emblem of the Korean capillary economy, nearby the traditional bazaar, Dongdaemoon Shi-Jang, has been located for centuries. *Turtle* also has ancient references, alluding to *Turtleship* built by the famous Korean General Yi Sun-sin in the late 16th century, who used it to win the biggest victory ever recorded of the Korean navy against Japanese invaders.
13. Nam June Paik in the interview with Alice Kim, "Coyotes and Wolves: An Interview with Nam June Paik", *New Art Examiner* vol. 28, no. 7 (April 2001), p. 41.
14. "The World of Open Culture through Nam June Paik" *Munwha Ilbo*. September 3, 1992. Quoted in Kim Hong-hee, *Paik Nam June: Happening/Video Art* (Seoul: Design House, 1999), p. 221. Translations are mine.