TRAVELING AT THE SPEED OF PAIK
An artist-researcher visits the Nam June Paik Art Center

by

Jamie Allen

Nam June Paik visited Japan in 1985, in preparation for Bye Bye Kipling, his second work for satellite, fusing live broadcasts from Seoul, Tokyo and New York. In this same year, German film director Wim Wenders went to Tokyo. Wenders’s trip resulted in his nebulous homage to 1950s film director Yasujiro Ozu, Tokyo-Ga. Of the trip, Wenders commented:

“It was in no way a pilgrimage. I was curious as to whether I still could track down something from this time, whether there was still anything left of this work. Images perhaps, or even people... Or whether so much would have changed in Tokyo in the twenty years since Ozu’s death that nothing would be left to find.”

Tokyo-Ga, the resulting Wim Wenders film, contains only a few scenes that actually focus on Ozu, the director. Instead the work is a filmic scrapbook of a search for “pure images” and recorded encounters Wenders himself had with the culture of Tokyo and the medium of moving images.

And so, mid-way through the 1980s, two projects of corresponding motivation, but different formulation emerge: Nam June Paik, a then 53-year-old Korean-born media artist based between New York City and Dusseldorf, attempts to fuse the cultures of East and West through telepresence, satellite linkage. Wim Wenders, a then 40-year-old European director, visits Japan for the first time and attempts a more personal amalgam of cultures through the images he encounters there. Both projects present the promise not of completion, but instead suggest a voyage, an exploration. Traveling (electronically or otherwise), becomes a means of folding in expanses, dissolving otherness, and rendering the exotic familiar.

Fifteen years later, I got the chance to spend a summer in Seoul, inspired somewhat by these precarious and precocious expeditions. I travelled to Korea to develop new artworks of my own, and to research the work and contemporary relevance of art-and-technology’s patron saint, Nam June Paik. Just as we see through the intimate-yet-distant images of Wenders’s Tokyo-Ga, my encounters and documents of Korea acknowledge the wondrous impossibility of ever capturing or encapsulating absolutely the work of any artist, or any culture. Addressing the life of someone like Paik, and its complex resonances with Korean culture, I hope only to derive impressions, fleeting understandings, and insights as an artist, researcher, technologist and 외국인 – outside(country)-person(인).

My own trip to Korea was in no way a pilgrimage, but my regard for Paik is no less than the great admiration Wenders felt for Ozu’s work. I have an enduring sense that better understanding Paik’s...
experiences and reception as an artist-technologist, and as one of
the world’s first technologically globalized and globalizing creative
figures, could go some distance toward understanding the condi-
tions of contemporary art-and-technology practices and discourse.
Although I count myself among Paik’s legion fandom, it is partially
the contested nature of Paik’s legacy that adds to his sustained in-
trigue. Can we call Paik a ‘Korean artist,’ as he spent a relatively short
periods of his artistic development and career in the country of his
birth? As inspired as he was by both John Cage and Mark Rothko,
should Paik’s creative lineage be traced to his avant-garde compo-
sitory and musical roots, or better seen through the art-historical lens
of the Expressionists? Do Paik’s later, ‘post-video’ works develop the
same kind of rigorous potentialities and critical engagement with
technological culture that his earlier works do? This phrase seems a fitting
distillation of Paik’s particular
the expression of Paik’s oeuvre in these terms, as a kind of Eastern
invasion, linked to archaic Eurasian anthropological precedents, is
the most compelling direct advocacy for the import of Paik’s Korean
background that I was exposed to while in Korea. Otherwise, open-
armed championing of Paik’s Korean-ness seems countered by at least
two arguments in his native land. The first, which we might call the
‘Mainstream Contemporary Art’ demurral, is equivalent to the sensi-
bilities that have come to see Paik written out of other discussions
of serious mainstream contemporary art. That is, certain monocul-
tures of mainstream, traditional and modernist art, through exclusion
raise doubts regarding the legitimacy and earnestness of a playful
and technology-centered artistic practice (perhaps reminiscent of
present-day arguments about the legitimacy of, for example, Net Art
practices). Paik, over the contradictory Fluxus artist and propo-
nent of popular and down-to-earth art, is not easy to include into the
artistic canon in Korea or elsewhere; in fact, very few of the estab-
lished reference books on ‘Korean Art’ found at the National Library
in Seoul include any reference to Paik. Paik was aware and proud of

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colluded to some degree with the invading Japanese to ensure the
national Identity’ issue. Firstly, it relates to Paik’s family’s flight to Japan
shortly before the Korean war. His father, a wealthy industrialist, had
offered some degree of the invading Japanese to ensure the
family could leave the divided country safely. Furthermore, many
artists I spoke with in present-day Korea felt Paik’s later involvement
in the politically charged and historic 1988 Olympics (also call into
question any empathy he may have had with the Korean people. It
often seems that there is quite a bit unfavorable to say about Paik’s
official links to Korea, with his early years marred by his family’s trade
dealings with the Japanese, and his later untimely association with
the heavy-handed, militaristic Chun Doo-hwan government. This sav-
age, perhaps, has no time or need for politics.

The second antipathy to easily ascribing Paik the moniker of ‘Korean
artist’ is much more nuanced. We might call this argument the ‘Na-
tional Identity’ issue. Firstly, it relates to Paik’s family’s flight to Japan
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his day, alongside their deeply anachronistic, or ‘savage,’ naturalness.

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est points towards the East-meets-West politics of Paik’s activities.
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West, in which symbols of Western Art are confronted, and often
destroyed, by an intrusive Asiatic insurrection. Nam-Soo sites incen-
diary declarations of “Yellow Peril! C’est moi,” and his affirmations of
“Genghis Khan the artist,” as evidence of a confrontational aspect to
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Paik's work can be thought of as a kind of portal, linking contemporary technologies and a deeply historicized, hence mythologized, view of human civilization. There is one particular sculptural-installation work in the NJPAC collection that resonates well with such a conception. The work is a later-career laser sculpture titled *Three Elements*. It was created with the help of Norman Ballard and other Paik studio employees for the Guggenheim's 2000 retrospective: *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*. Three Elements, often referred to and thus almost always shown as a single work, is actually three separate pieces built between 1997 and 2000: Square, Circle and Triangle. It is interesting to note that a fourth element was planned never made it out of Paik's Greene Street studio. The final triumvirate of objects we now know as Three Elements comprises standing-height, internally reflective mirrored box forms (the front face made of two-way mirror so that viewers see an infinite-reflection created within). Each enclosure, through a small aperture, allows the entry of a colored laser light, projecting into an oscillating prism driven by a servo motor of carefully chosen speed. The visibility of the laser beam is helped by the incorporation of a fogging apparatus, originally a contraption composed of cigarette burners, a timer and a custom 'smoke powder' to avoid accumulation of oily residues from typical theatrical smoke-machine fluids. During later refurbishment, this assembly was replaced by newer, less unctuous theatrical fog distributors. The work has not been shown widely since it’s first public showing. The Worlds of Nam June Paik toured to three locations (New York 2000, Seoul 2000, Bilbao 2001), and subsequently the piece was purchased by the NJPAC in 2002; refurbished for display, and included in the NJPAC shows *Now Jump!* (2008-2009) and *Seamless Stupa* (2010-2011).

Following my own visits to the NJPAC in 2011, I was fortunate enough to engage NYC-based artist Raphaele Shirley in discussion about Three Elements. Raphaele has been as generous as she is articulate, and openly discussed her role and the role of others co-operating to fabricate this installation with Paik at his studios. Many specifics I have come to know about Paik's laser work, and much of what is written herein about Three Elements, was relayed to me through Raphaele. She has shed light on what is quite an enigmatic set of Paik works, marked for some by what seems a late, hasty turn toward yet another 'new media' as substrate for his investigations and experiments. Comparatively little has been written about these later laser works, and they are not exhibited as often as the traditional works. The most available English-language writings on these pieces, and The Worlds of Nam June Paik catalog's brief notes on the works. We should be thankful that we have people like Raphaele Shirley with whom we can still discuss the Three Elements. She herself joined Nam June Paik's New York studio in 1997, specifically to aid with the development of his laser sculptures, and worked with him, Norman Ballard, Jon Huffman and Blair Thurman until 2002.

With Paik's laser pieces he moves from moving image to the photon. We begin with the inscription of meaning, and wind up with a meaning of inscription. It is true that the aesthetics of laser light have become mired in a slew of highly commercial and perhaps kitsch thought-provoking forms, for some relegating it to the dustbin of technologies available for us in the Fine Arts (along with other ‘futuristic’ techniques like stereograms and holograms which flourished and floundered through the 1980s). Arguably, Paik succeeds with *Three Elements* in transcending this ‘laser light show’ impulse by using the
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phrasing Norbert Weissner to describe the spectral embodiment of meaning in media apparatus, “The signal, where the message is sent, plays an equally important role as the signal, where the message is not sent.” With Paik’s laser pieces he moves from moving image to the photon. We begin with the inscription of meaning, and wind up with a meaning of inscription Laser Video, Sweet and Sublime, Jacob’s Ladder, Olympic Water-Screen, Laser Core, Three Elements.

ELEMENTS OF THREE ELEMENTS

Three Elements confers succinctly the result of a set of interests. Paik seems to have often charted in parallel, the bailed histories of technology and art. Our human project is, in the broadest sense, essentially technological. The grammar of shape Paik uses for Three Elements are a set of fundamental shapes with links to the roots of both occidental and oriental understandings of the natural world. A Japanese interpretation of the symbols is as elemental pure form, “earth fits into the square, fire burns in a triangle and water tends to roundness.” Depictions of these three occur as links to cosmology in Shinto teachings (square, circle and triangle representing the Sun, Moon and Star gods respectively). The oldest scriptures in Korea, the Chu Bi Kyung (4000 BC), describe the ancient order of heaven, earth and human. These depictions have found their way into Tae kwondo symbology as the circle, square and triangle flows of the Dobok uniform of these martial artists. The triangle, circle and square are likewise central to the notation customs of alchemy, a practice historically much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through time, much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through time, much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through time, much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through time, much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. Mercifully, consistency through time, much that the art world demands of people that is less than sympathetic to individual humanity. 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In 1978, Pak gave a talk following discussions with both John Cage and Merce Cunningham for the Time and Space Concepts in Music and Visual Art discussion at the Pleiades Gallery in New York City. Pak, with characteristic impudent reverence, prefaced his own talk by saying, “profound things have been spoken, so I will now speak something vulgar.” Three Elements, with its acknowledgement of the mythological, somewhat unlightened origins of our most refined, sophisticated artistic and technological achievements, is in many ways a sculptural analog of such sentiments. Pak was terribly curious about, and exceptionally aware of, the technological condition of mankind and the creative potentials and limitations suggested by the technological. May we travel at the speed of Pak.

ENDNOTES
2. The film presents a scene where Wenders meets up with fellow visitor Werner Herzog on the viewing platform of Tokyo Tower. Their discussion is around a lack of “pure images” in both cinema and urban settings. Herzog suggests that such images may need to be found in outer space, where Wenders is content to find such purity on the streets of Tokyo.
3. Research work, performances and other artistic activities in Korea were generously supported by the Korea Foundation, and the hospitality of both the Nam June Paik Art Center (LUPAC) and the Seoul Art Space_MulAA.
4. This last point was underscored for me during a guided tour of Pak’s 2010/2011 retrospective at Tate Liverpool, UK. The tour-guide, in his no-nonsense Liverpudlian accent, shared with me his intuition that Pak’s later Buddha, robot and laser works were part of the artist’s “just making money period.”
5. Nam Sos Kim, personal interview and discussion with the author, the Art Space_MulAA, Seoul, Korea (July 2011).