

1.

Korean “Paik Nam-june” became “Nam June Paik” of international renown after he left Korea. However, in the background of his rise as the world’s Nam June Paik, quite ironically, are his special interest in ‘Koreanness and ‘Asianness,’ and his will for aesthetic quest that fuses this interest in his works. For Paik, who left his native land to immigrate to the U.S. after passing through Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe, and became a global figure based on multinational artistic activities, post-colonialist issues such as immigration, diaspora, and nomadism, and perception of national and racial identities must have formed a layer in his consciousness that couldn’t be separated from his life and art.

For an expatriate artist, interest in his identity is quite natural and common. However, what is peculiar about Paik is that he created a new artistic genre called video art by unraveling the theme of identity using new artistic methods and aesthetic language. Pursuit of novelty was the foremost motto for, not only his art, but also his life, and it continued to be the driving force that maintained his connection to avant-garde art. He was an avant-garde artist belonging to the pedigree of Duchamp-Cage-Beuys-Fluxus, and in particular, his encounter with John Cage provided him with a significant momentum for looking back into his roots. Cage was the one who presented him the vision of live art, through the concept of indeterminacy that can be compared to the oriental philosophies of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and Yin and Yang.

If we posit that one of the characteristics of avant-garde is to herald decisive readjustment of perspective, we can sympathize with Nam June Paik’s avant-garde spirit that induced radical changes as a challenge to the Western traditional values and aesthetics. Moreover, his art that enhanced the Asian impact in response to the West in the post-colonial, post-structuralist era which renders the invisible visible and gives sound to the voiceless, while paying attention to the social role of art and the voices of “others” and peripheral cultures, can be seen to share the objectives of contemporary political art based on the decentralist idea.

While recognizing identity, Nam June Paik attempted at the integration of the East and the West to manifest a vision for the global world. Assuming “Dialog has never existed between the 1st and the 3rd world,” he tried to create a model for coexistence and cooperation of the East and the West. For example, his ‘TV Buddha’ series, which are real-time closed-circuit pieces, epitomize his efforts to unite the past and the present, and the East and the West, while parodying the present state of the global power structure. Paik’s coexistence model most effectively embodies glocalism, by starting from localism encompassing the cultural tradition of Korea and Asia, and progressing to obtain globalism; and his such will can be sensed from his happenings and video art that modernized Asian cultural tradition and philosophies including Yin and Yang, transmigration, Zen philosophy, wu-wei, and shamanism. It may be

said that his artistic contribution lies in the fact that he combined Asian philosophies or Korean traditional thoughts with avant-garde spirits of the West, and shaped it into an art form using the language of contemporary art, while at the same time, developing his own unique style that is both global and Korean.

2.

From his early action music to Fluxus happening and video art, the artistic world of Nam June Paik was a byproduct of philosophical insight and imaginative aesthetic experiments that encompass the East and the West, and his progressive artistic concepts of communication and participation are also in line with the oriental soul embedded in his consciousness. By referring to the shamanistic belief of mediation and exchange between space and man, nature and man, and heaven and earth, and carefully considering its cultural function and significance, he has theorized an interactive art through the pursuit of mass communication, audience participation, and in the end, worldwide cultural exchange.

From this perspective, an analogy between shamanism and happening, and shamanistic ‘magic’ and video ‘art’, or more specifically, Korean shamanism and Paik’s art, can be proposed; through this analogy, the similarities and differences between techno-culture and classical oriental philosophy can be perceived, and the Asianness and Koreanness in his works can be understood. As forms of media oscillating between the spiritual supernatural world and materialistic natural world, and virtuality and reality, shamanism and video art share the capability to expand human senses and promote communication between the human subject and natural object. In this sense, Paik’s experimentation with media, which presents a new type of visual aesthetics through television and video works, can be compared to the practices of shamanic exorcism of succeeding and representing ancient myths. In addition, shamanism can be seen as a metaphor for the art of Paik who transcended cultural differences and sought new possibility and modes of correspondence.

Paik interpreted the origin and history of mankind based on the shamanistic world view and emphasized the Mongol and Ural-Altaic Asian identity by associating Korea’s forefathers with shamanistic myths. At the historical 1963 exhibition ‘Exposition of Music,’ his first solo show as well as the pioneering exhibition of video art held at Parnass Gallery in Wuppertal, Germany, he shocked the public with his shamanic act of hanging a freshly cutoff, blood dripping bull’s head. This gesture can be interpreted as a kind of racial or ethnical declaration of notifying his roots to the European avant-garde art community. In this context, Paik’s sentiment of consoling the soul of Joseph Beuys can be understood; after the death of Beuys, Paik held ‘gut’ (shamanic ritual) for him in 1990 at Gallery Hyundai, whom he regarded as his other half, and who himself was inspired by shamanism after surviving a plane crash in Central Asia during the World War II, rescued by the local Tartar villagers from the brink of death.

For Nam June Paik who grew up watching numerous gut events in a wealthy household, the hustle-bustle of happening similar to shaman ‘gut’ might have been a genre which was destined for him, just as his encounter with John Cage seems to have been destined. Paik reflected: “Although I create my

works unconsciously, the shaman has been my biggest influence. My mother used to call a shaman every October to ward off misfortune for the year. It was a 24-hour happening. Since dead spirits were called, the art was carried out thoroughly at night, and it was her, the shaman's art... With a pig's or cow's head upon her head, she danced in a trance during the ritual performance. The rhythm was completely different from Chinese court music. The Korean rhythm is a syncopated three-beat that connects to odd beats of 3, 5, 7, and so on. The fact that most of my compositions have been three beats and five beats means that my art is Korean art... especially like the temporal art and folk dance of the people and the music of the shaman."

3.

Then, what did Paik, who inherited shamanism as a religious belief and grew up accustomed to the shaman exorcism, pursue through his artistic genres of happening and video art, and how did it relate to shamanism? Happening achieves the participatory ideal by employing such concepts as intermedia and indeterminacy, which negate the traditional concept of art. Happening demonstrates an intermedia of art and theater, and indeterminate surroundings in terms of time and space: in such a happening environment, the role of audience is changed from passive spectator to active participant, assuming itself as a major aesthetic element of 'here and now.' Video art inherits these two concepts from happening, but they are expressed in different ways because of the distinctive characteristics of the media. In other words, video art in itself is the crystallized form of intermedia. It not only occupies the halfway place between the pictorial image and sculptural object, or between temporal art and spatial art, but also is located between art and technology, and art and entertainment; and it intervenes in our existence and living. Additionally, video images generate indeterminate double scene through the stream of images created by electronic movements, and the doubleness of the double scene provokes a specific type of perceptual response from the beholder. This means that the participation of audience on the biological level is achieved through the feedback mechanism. The issue of audience participation becomes more significant when video art is understood based on its relationship with mass culture and mass media. Thus, happening and video art that are interconnected through audience participation share the goal of live art, or integration of art and life, and undermine the position of traditional representation art by practicing anti-art as a life-genre.

Happening and video art as participatory arts belong to the same category of social performance as gut, and share many similarities in terms of aesthetics and ideology. Shamanistic rituality and theatricality were clearly represented in Paik's happenings, video works, and video performances, and sometimes a fusion of gut and performance was attempted as in the case of his memorial gut performance dedicated to Beuys. If we compare his happenings and gut, we can see how closely Nam June Paik's art is related to the shamanistic tradition. First, happening, an art of collective participation, and shaman gut, a social performance for mass catharsis or fortune-seeking, share the key features of communication and participation. For example, just as the audience watching a happening plays an active role, any of those

watching gut can be chosen to become the officiating priest to experience the ecstasy of trance or be possessed like shaman. Moreover, a shaman gut is a comprehensive cultural enterprise involving shamanic costume, music, flowers, drawing, singing, drama, story-telling, and conversation, which reminds us that happening exists as an intermedia between the multi-genres of music, art, drama, etc. In addition, the spontaneity in situ and location specificity of gut are comparable to the indeterminate 'here and now' aesthetics of happening. Accordingly, happening and gut have common features in terms of audience participation, intermedia style, and the aesthetics of indeterminacy, and these traits distinguish them from traditional performance arts including theater and opera that detach the audience, rely on scripts, and synthesize with other genres in a hierarchical order.

Through the above analogy of styles of happening and gut, it is possible to explain the metonymic relationship between video art and shamanism. It is that the indeterminate aesthetics and intermedia style of happening are extended to video art, and that the issue of audience participation is advanced to the participation at the ecological level that involves memory activation or user-friendly interface mechanism. In particular, in today's techno-culture, where development in information technology and virtual reality have spread media into 'spirit media,' video art and shamanism have erased the boundary between the two types of media as if to remind us of their common word origin. In this relation, Paik said that media as a medieval theological concept denoted a means to communicate with god; the origin of gut, the shaman exorcism ritual, is 'earl,' which means spirit in Mongolian. Earl is similar to media and media means gut.

Gut and happening, and shamanism and video art are interconnected based on the concept of the so-called subject-object 'interactivity', and in terms of genres, happening, video art, and shaman gut share aesthetic similarity in that they are all temporal genres centered on time. On the other hand, what is significant is that happening, video art, and gut are not temporal genres as in the general sense that they progress in time, but unique temporal genres which put the flow of time on hold or reverse it. It is discontinuous, illogical, out-of-context, and irrational temporal aspect as in a dream, and drives us away from the axiomatic coordinates, and it takes an epistemological significance in the sense that it presents new perceptual experiences to the audience. While focusing on the temporal aspect of happening and video art that comprises presentness representing 'here and now,' synchronism, and diachronism, Paik emphasized the significance of art presented through 'live' performances or live video broadcasts: "Since live art directly reflects the irresistible forces of human life, and it always accompanies chances and risks, similar to our unpredictable lives, it is full of life and vibrance. Similarly to how important events such as birth and death occur only once in a lifetime, the major significance of live art is that it happens only once and cannot be identically repeated."

Shamanism and media art both extend human senses to take the function of connecting spirit and body, supernatural and natural, and virtuality and reality, and promotes communication between men

and nature. In this regard, it is possible to compare Nam June Paik's video experiments that produce new images and shamanistic activities that re-create myths and collective unconsciousness. Video has the mechanism of manipulation with which it can perpetuate or delay time. In a closed-circuit installation, in which a camera simultaneously shoots and relays the image of an object, time is perpetuated through real-time reflection, while at the same time, it is indefinitely delayed by the reflection of time difference. As expressed in Paik's remark, "You cannot die once you are taken on video," video images exist in the eternal present, and the audience can move freely between past and present tense using 'random access.' The dual tense of past and present is one of the properties of video images generated from the flow of electronic particles. Once the present passes by on the screen, the scene disappears into the memory of the viewer, and the past in the memory is recalled to the present; thus, video is a dual tense medium and at the same time a perceptual medium that relies on the memory of the viewer.

As the subject of perception, audience recognizes synchronism and diachronism, and present and past, at the same time, and comes into contact with a new concept of time that instant and eternity, and beginning and end are the same, as advocated by the oriental mysticism. This is where the temporal liaison between video and shaman gut occurs. The time of gut, as an art of spirit medium dedicated to and coming into contact with the deceased, represents a dual tense that drives through eternity and instant, and death and life; thus, gut becomes a memory genre that recalls myths, the reservoir of human archetype and expression of collective unconsciousness, based on memory skills. Paik, as a 'magician of time,' who plays with time freely wandering through gut, happening, and video art, the typical genres of memory and time, described temporal art as follows: "Among various types of art in Korea, what can be sold overseas are just music, dance, shaman gut, etc. that belong to the category of temporal art. Excavating this heritage would be our contribution to humanity. We were a nomadic people for a long time, and the nomads cannot carry around Leonardo da Vinci paintings even if they are given to them. Only weightless art forms could be handed down and developed."

4.

As shown above, Paik's art and shamanism show similarities in many layers and it is possible for us to attempt at analogical understanding. However, it would be wrong to generalize or label his art as modern-day shamanism or 'neo-shamanism,' based on the similarities of video art and shamanism. It means that rough analogies disregarding the differences between Northeast Asian shamanism and Korean shamanism (musok), or between musok and Paik's shamanistic art should be avoided. Although there is no doubt that Korean musok belongs to many branches of Northeast Asian shamanism, it is presented as a highly formalized genre reinterpreted based on ethnic characteristics in the Korean cultural soil. Compared to Northeast Asian shamanism, which in general has strong communal characteristics, Korean musok has a weak collective consciousness. It also puts more emphasis on the family and individuals, and demonstrates refinement in narrative form, table setting, and singing and dancing, and diversified types of

rituals. In addition, the fact that the shaman's body, rather than animals or insects, is used as the spirit medium sets it apart from the shamanism in other regions. The shamanism conveyed in the works of Paik, who grew up with first-hand experience of shaman gut, is not the shamanism in the general or abstract sense, but the specific and concrete Korean musok tinted with Korean colors and rhythms.

Generalizing Paik's shamanism as Asian or modern shamanism can lead to the fallacy of Orientalism that presupposes stereotype, or multiculturalism that ignores the individual and ethnic differences. Through aesthetic insight distinguishing the similarities and differences of shamanism and video art, Paik succeeded in integrating the dual needs of globalism and localism to establish his unique style. It is in this context that the Asianness or Koreanness of his art, ignited by shamanic inspiration and imagination, should become the subject of discussion.

Nam June Paik, who used archaic words from the 1950s and 1960s and showed the old-style sentiment of 'sticky affection,' had such a down-to-earth native demeanor that it could relieve and let us lower our guard against the progressive avant-garde artist. Although his frequent usage of old folk items such as tobacco pipe, urinal, and soy jar in his works along with shamanistic elements let us feel an emigrant's nostalgia for his home country and the past, Paik liberated himself from the stereotypes of post-colonialist art by updating those items using contemporary visual media including video. This is where we find the rightful reason for positioning him as Korean Paik Nam-june and the world's Nam June Paik at the same time.

(An article that summarizes a lecture at the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, which has been previously published in *Gijeon Culture and Art*, Jan./Feb., 2006, a bi-monthly journal of the Gyeonggi Cultural Foundation)