

The Mysteries of Encounters between Nam June Paik, John Cage and Joseph Beuys

Kim Hong-hee,
Director
Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art

1. Introduction

Nam June Paik came from the avant-garde movement of Dadaism. Under the banner of anti-art, the legacy of Dadaism was passed onto Marcel Duchamp to John Cage and furthermore accumulated by the Fluxus movement instigated by Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys. Artist Ben Vautier claimed, 'Without Cage, Marcel Duchamp and Dada, Fluxus would not exist'¹. Likewise, without John Cage, Nam June Paik and Beuys would not have existed.

John Cage (1912-92), the avant-garde musician and philosopher significantly shaped Paik's direction in art; Paik once claimed that 'Cage changed my life'². It was their background in music that the individuals were able to meet but it was essentially their interest in 'time' that brought them together to experiment with performance, music and video. More importantly, Cage inspired Paik to reflect back to his roots through oriental teachings of *I Ching* and *Taoism*. It was paradoxical and unusual that an American with an oriental mentality could enlighten a westernised Korean to retrace his Asian heritage.

Joseph Beuys (1921-86) was also another influential figure to Nam June Paik, who was fond of Beuys's sentimentality towards Eurasian culture and shamanism. Equally, Beuys befriended a Korean born Paik who was actively involved with the avant-garde movement in Germany. Beuys and Paik shared Dadaist gestures in challenging traditions and ethos in merging cultural differences and by carrying out radical and experimental performances.

Nam June Paik's significant encounter with John Cage and his alter ego Joseph Beuys developed into a powerful relationship that fuelled Paik's artistic progress. Creative synergies between persons, thoughts and spirits were inextricable to Paik's success as one of the most powerful global artist of the late 20th century. In other words, Paik's artistic development was ultimately instigated by what Paik described as the 'mysteries of encounters' which could "enrich the synapses between the brain cells of mankind".³ Further exploration of 'mysteries of encounters' will open a path to understanding his art. I wish to explore how Paik met Cage and Beuys, and how their ideas and aesthetics appealed to him. Furthermore, I will consider how Paik was distinguished from the rest and how the result of his encounters affected his career and art.

2. Fate with John Cage

Before Nam June Paik met John Cage, he met Arnold Schoenberg -the composer of

¹ Harry Ruhe, *Fluxus: The Most Radical and Experimental Art Movement of the 60's*, Amsterdam, 1979, n.p.

² Laurie Werner, *Nam June Paik*, Northwest Orient, Laureates, 1986, n.p.

³ Nam June Paik, "Art & Satellite" *Art & Satellite: Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, Berlin, DAAD Galerie, 1984, n.p.

the '12 tone system'- and Karlheinz Stockhausen who is a renowned figure for revolutionizing electronic music. Paik especially admired Schoenberg since his piano teacher Kyun Woo Lee in Korea introduced him to his music. As a young student, Paik rummaged through the Cheonggecheon market in Seoul in search of Stockhausen's records and during his time at Tokyo University (1951-56), Paik wrote a thesis on Arnold Schoenberg. And so, it is apparent that Paik ventured on avant-gardism and experimentation from an early age. But more importantly, his interest managed to persist throughout his teenage years to young adulthood. During his time at Munich University in 1956, he was diverted to focus on traditional forms of music. But despite being put under institutional pressure, Paik claimed that he always remained faithful to his objective in creating new music; 'I wanted to find sounds which did not exist. My teacher told me that the notes I wanted were between the notes that existed. So I got two pianos and tuned the pianos contrary to each other'⁴.

In 1958, Paik was introduced to Karlheinz Stockhausen's electronic music studio by professor Fortner at Munich University. Through continual research at the studio, Paik was able to expand his interest in electronic music to visual electronics, which was later devised into creating video art. However, electronic music did not full-fill Paik's hunger for new music; the young and restless Paik crushed into an epistemological wall. But he quickly recovered as soon as he joined the 'International Holiday Courses for New Music' at Darmstadt in 1958. It was at this very place that Paik first met Stockhausen and John Cage who was giving performances and lectures on 'Change, Indeterminacy, Communication'.

At the time, Cage was a young composer in his mid twenties studying with Schoenberg at UCLA. Paik knew about Cage and his interest in Zen Buddhism, but he doubted how much an American could know about Eastern philosophy. However, this opinion drastically changed when he saw Cage performing live. Paik discovered how boredom and repetition in Cage's music was analogous to Zen Buddhist philosophy and the absolute void. Eventually, Cage's performance had a profound impact on Paik and his ambition to develop the 'new ontology of music'.

Cage gave equal significance to musical and non-musical sounds, notes and noise. His music focused on a subset of sound, rather than harmonies or melodies. He emphasised on physical features of sound such as duration, pitch, volume, beats and noises produced by vehicles, wheels as well as human heartbeats and pulses. David Tudor's performance of '4'33"' (1952) in Woodstock also similarly contemplated sounds produced by the audience breathing and coughing whilst he sat motionless and silent in front of the piano for four minutes thirty-three seconds. His music attempted to convey that as long as we can hear and live, there can never be true silence and all existence of sound is equal. Cage also sought to blur the boundaries between life and art; to create the raw music of Dada through audience participation.

Nam June Paik's early performance in music was undoubtedly influenced by Cage's live music philosophy, but his approach proved to be more provocative and destructive. In 'Hommage à John Cage: Music for Tape Recorder and Piano' (1959) at Jean-Pierre Wilhelm Gallery, Paik produced all sorts of sounds by kicking a tin can; hitting a glass pane; throwing an egg and a toy car; and attacking the piano. Simultaneous to the performance, he also played recorded sounds of the Beethoven symphony, German lieder and Rachmaninoff piano concerto as well as street noises and sirens. In this way, he created a feast of sounds which consisted of both live and recorded sounds, music and noise. Paik also combined music with visual spectacle such as by appearing

⁴ Laurie Werner, ibid, n.p.

on stage with a live chicken and scooter.

During the performance of 'Etude for Piano Forte' in Mary Baumeister Gallery in 1960, Paik suddenly jumped out to the audience and cut off John Cage's tie. This became to be known as one of the most notorious 'Happening' performance. In 'Exposition of Music – Electronic Television' at the Wuppertal Parnass Gallery in 1963, Paik shocked the audience by smashing thirteen televisions and three pianos, which were on display. Such aggressive actions were fundamentally tied to Paik's challenge towards patriarchal power symbolised by the tie and high art represented by the piano.

Paik was labelled the 'destructive artist', 'cultural terrorist' or the 'dangerous musician' and his provocative performances stood apart from the electronic music circuit in Stockhausen and Cage's profound philosophy. However, Paik's destructive acts were not merely sensational but constructive attempts to change and re-create conventional aesthetics. Hence, there was no difference whether if the sound was produced by music or noise, live or recorded: this was altogether an enactment of an anti-musical aesthetic deeply rooted in Cage's live music philosophy.

The aesthetic of indeterminacy is central to Cage's live music philosophy and it held promise to challenge Western rationalism through 'flexibility, changeability and fluency'. Because flexibility and fluidity is intentionally unintentional in producing music for 'purposeful purposelessness',⁵ it emphasized on process than final consequence. The concept of indeterminacy is, in this case, unique for being experimental, unpredictable and un-reproducible. The 'Happening' also emerged from evoking such qualities of indeterminacy through encouraging audience participation in real-time and space here and now.

The notion of indeterminacy helped to establish 'audience participation' as a new genre and opened the possibility of bringing about the 'chance operation'. Cage composed his music based on the outcome of 'chance operation' such as by throwing a coin or a stick with numbers written on it. Through this process he created the effect of chance which could be 'free of individual tastes and memory'⁶. A good example of the 'chance operation' is 'Imaginary Landscape No.4' (1951). This was a distinctive piece, in which 12 radios channels and volumes were tuned according to the score produced from the result of 24 performers throwing coins. Although the performance was based on the structure of the score, the content of each channel constantly changed according to the content, and thus enacting perpetual indeterminacy.

Nam June Paik's video aesthetic developed from this point onwards. In 1963 at Wuppertal in Germany, Paik exhibited 13 television monitor screens for his first solo show entitled 'Exhibition of Music'. Each 13 monitors were constructed by Braun tubes, which allowed the straight scan-lines and televised images to be tuned and altered manually. The work transcended the visual experience to a collective sensorial experience and captured Paik's appeal for communicative art and 'Participation TV' video art.

Amongst the 13 monitor screens at the Wuppertal exhibition, 'Zen for TV' reflected Paik's earlier works which were meditative and ritualistic. The live projected image of

⁵Richard Kostalanetz, *"Conversation with John Cage," John Cage*, New York, Praeger Publishers Inc., 1970, pp.10, 28.

⁶Henry Cowell, *"Current Chronicle"*, Ibid, p. 99.

the Buddha on the monitor, in 'Buddha TV', a single burning candle in an empty cabinet in 'Candle TV', an empty film projection of the blank screen in 'Zen for Film' all signified Zen Buddhism and Cage's illumination on absolute emptiness. Cage's impact had certainly filtered through Paik's video art. Later, in acknowledgment addressed Cage in 1967, Paik wrote; 'My past 14 years is nothing but an extension of one memorable evening at Darmstadt'⁷

3. Joseph Beuys- Encountering the other self.

Nam June Paik first met Joseph Beuys in 1961 at the opening of the 'Zero Group' exhibition at the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf. According to Paik, Beuys was a 'strange-looking middle-aged man with a pair of fierce eyes'.⁸ At the time, Beuys was coming into prominence as a sculptor- making works which evoked literary works by James Joyce- and as a professor of sculpture in Düsseldorf. He was also a member of the 'Zero Group' which included West German Abstract Expressionist artists; Otto Piene, Heinz Mack and Gunter Uecker. The 'Zero Group' introduced kineticism and luminism to establish various ways of working with the moving image and electric lights. Meanwhile, they were furthermore interested in experimenting with the idea of merging kinetic art with video art, which fascinated Beuys and Paik.

Beuys claimed that teaching was a form of sculpture and that his own sculptures were essentially structured by language not bronze. Beuys believed that 'language' could bring equal access to everyone to be an artist and that art could become a social activity. With confidence that art and individuals could transform the society altogether, Beuys founded the 'German Student Party' in 1967 and 'Free International University of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research' in 1971. In 1970, he formed the 'Non-Voting Free Referendum Party' and in 1978, he ran for the Green Party. Beuys also had great concerns about environment and planted 7000 oak trees for the large-scale exhibition Documenta 7 at Kassel in 1982.

Beuys's motives for sublimating Dadaist Anti-Art utopian idealism to cultural activism were instigated by his search for inner aesthetics as an esoteric mythic. His mysticisms were fundamentally driven by the story of his existential experience of life and death. As a pilot during World War II, Beuys was shot down and was rescued by the Tartar tribesmen who wrapped him in animal fat and felt and transferred him on a sleigh so that he could seek medical care in a nearby town. Such anecdote explains the meaning and background behind Beuys's repeated use of materials and objects such as felt, wax, oil, sleigh, and medicine.

However, his narrative matters less than his aesthetical approach towards the materials. In other words, felt, oil, wax and soil were not just simply materials but symbolic evocations and representations of his philosophy and scientific interests in energy and chance; organic and non-organic; activity and non-activity related to metamorphosis and balance. These are connected to Beuys's interest in neurology, communication system and information technology; likewise, Paik was also found latter interests appealing. In this sense, one can see that it is their shared interest scientific knowledge that Beuys and Paik were able to communicate and exchange ideas.

⁷ David Ross, "Nam June Paik's Video Tape," *Nam June Paik*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982, p. 102.

⁸ Nam June Paik, *Beuys Vox 1961-1986*, Won Gallery, Gallery Hyundai, 1988, p.10

The keyword in Beuys's art is 'energy' and its elements were understood in relation to physical characteristics and process of the materials. For example, Beuys melted a block of fat to signify a powerful source of energy. And thus, the process of cold things being heated, solid forms being melted and cold air turning into hot air; his fantasy of reciprocation and recovery formed the content and subject of his work. Beuys furthermore exposed the linguistic and social relations between the parent and the child; the human and the animal; the artist and the audience; art and education and sculpture and society.

'Child's Bathtub' (1960) conveys his hope to be born, to energise and renew life. This motif was repeated again during the performance of the 'Celtic Scottish Symphony' (1967), in which Beuys went inside a bathtub and poured water over himself as a symbolic act to heal trauma. Paik followed a similar sequence in 'Simple' (1961) by throwing beans at the audience, putting on a shaving cream on his face and washing it off in the bathtub. This performance could also be understood to be about self-renovation and a healing process but it was comical, simple and casual in comparison to Beuys's more tragic, expressionistic and dramatic input.

Honeycomb also appeared continually in Beuys' sculptures and drawings as a metaphor for transformation between the geometric form and the fluid liquid; the chaotic state of the liquid and the ordered form of a solid. For Beuys, the bee's production of thick liquid honey reflected the positive force of life and nature's ability to turn ambiguity to a clear and constructive form. Hence, Beuys symbolically uses oil and wax as well as objects such as a piano and humans, in his hope to heal and rejuvenate the past. Just as Beuys was able to recover from his injuries under the Tartars' care, Beuys's art is a narcissistic attempt to heal the past wound by re-activating his senses and memory. In this aspect, his body and its meaning is realised and placed through action. In the Fluxus performance of 'Twenty-four hours' (1965), Beuys challenged the limit of the space and body by attempting to stretch out as much as possible inside a box for twenty-four hours. This work demonstrated the metaphysical subject of balance and change through relationship between action, body and time.

Beuys's body action can be understood as a process and exchange between the cured and the healer, the object and subject, the self and other. In 'How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare' (1965) Beuys muttered to a dead hare held in his arms. In 'The Chief' (1964), Beuys wrapped himself in felt and lied down between two dead hares. Beuys could relate to the energy produced by the dead hares like he did with felt and oil. In 'Siberian Symphony, 1st Movement' (1963) Beuys took out a dead hare's heart after playing the piano; in 'Eurasia' (1966) and 'Celtic City symphony', the dead rabbit reappeared to be identified with his psychology and body. In 'Coyote: I like America and America Likes me' (1967) at New York René Block art gallery- Beuys lived with a pack of Coyotes for a week. This event sought to explore an emotional engagement with the humans and animals.

Beuys assumed his role as a priest, keeper, teacher and a leader of animals such as the rabbit, reindeer, deer and wolves. The attempt to bring pantheistic combination between humans, nature and animals arose from Beuys's affinity to non or pre-Christian mythology of Celtic and Colonial cultures. He also felt a close relation to the Tartars and developed a special interest towards nomadic figures such as the Scottish, Irish and Scythia, Siberians and the Mongolians.

Rabbits and deer appeared regularly in his works to symbolise the green steppe of the Neolithic era. Beuys claimed that the deer is a powerful animal which uses its highly developed sense of smell to find rare precious ginsengs and track down female

partners. Rabbits are also powerful and energetic animals who are peaceful yet fast.⁹ Beuys was also interested in the Moon and created works about the myth that a rabbit lived on the Moon. Paik claimed that such myth have its origins in the 3rd Ice Age in Northeast Asia where there was nothing to see apart from the moon in the dark.¹⁰ Paik also created various installation pieces about the moon and the rabbit in 'Moon is the Oldest TV' (1965) and 'Rabbit on the Moon' (1988).

The interest in Shamanism also tied Beuys and Paik together. Beuys's performances expressed the mysticism and spiritualism to evoke shamanistic rituals having been initially charmed by the Tartar culture of Shamanism. However, he was especially interested in Siberian Shamanism not in relation to magic and myth but in order to 'pursue a visual analysis, and also to bring an element of visual analysis to consciousness'.¹¹

In Paik's case, he grew up watching exorcisms being carried out at home. For this reason, his understanding of Shamanism was more specific and direct. He started his career through the 'Happening' in which his performances were akin to exorcism. In his solo exhibition at Wuppertal, Paik caused a stir by hanging a bleeding head of an ox on the entrance to the gallery. The sight of shamans dancing whilst wearing the head of a dead ox was also considered to be shocking for the viewers. Later without notice, Paik heightened its sensationalism by smashing a piano with an axe. With regards to this performance, Paik was already a Shaman. Interests in scientific knowledge and information technology ultimately brought Beuys and Paik together. However, it is clear that one of them was esoteric and meditative in his approach and the other enacted subversive shamanistic actions.

The relationship between Beuys and Paik is almost to blood relations. Beuys perceived Paik as a Korean who shared the same lineage as the Tartars and thus, Paik was his saviour of life. At the same time, Paik saw Beuys as a European Shaman and a nomad who was also like his brother. Two years after Beuys passed away in 1986, Paik held an event to commemorate his affiliation with Beuys by bringing together Beuys's signature hat, maps, photographs, prints and objects and other 21 other multiple works, as well as the publication of '*Beuys/Vox 1961-1986*'

In 1990, Paik called real exorcists and Shamans to perform simultaneously to his 'Happening' performance at Gallery Hyundai. The fusion between the traditional exorcism and Paik's performance contemplated the properties of recovery, participation and the formality of performance art. Furthermore, for Paik, shamanism became contemporary and the 'Happening' expanded aesthetically. This exorcism happened on Paik's birthday on 20th September. On this day, Paik demonstrated the Karma of death and birth by incarnating Beuys's spirit. In 2006, Paik also passed away. The pair is now deceased but their karma may continue eternally.

4. Going forth

Paik, Cage and Beuys were essentially Postmodernists who embodied the Dadaist avant-garde ideology with Oriental philosophy. Furthermore, their karma was also post-modern which cannot be explained in relation to the cause and effect of modernism. If cause and effect are physical, fate faces an alternative consequence from cataclysmic

⁹ Nam June Paik, *Beuys Vox*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Nam June Paik, *Beuys Vox*, p. 92.

¹¹ Gotz Adriani, *Joseph Beuys: Life and Works*, Barron's, 1979. p. 71.

reactions between the past and present; oriental and occidental; self and the other. Through this process, Paik distinguished the differences between cause and effect and karma. For Paik, the notion of cause and effect are found in Newton's classical physics to Marx's theory of economic determinism which emphasized temporal chronology and necessity¹². By contrast, Karma sharply differs from the notion of time-symmetry in Contemporary Physics, Quantum Mechanics and Cybernetics. Karma in fact simultaneously occurs through inevitable incidents. This is what Paik meant by the 'mysteries of encounters' lead by fate and the essence of mandala.

If Paik's action music, 'Happening' and video art are seen from the perspective of Karma, his relationship with Cage and Beuys was fate. 'Happening' and video art was about the nomads, developed by the nomads and for the nomads. For those likewise who have shifted within agricultural and industrial societies, the Korean Peninsula to Siberia, Israel, Ireland, Greenland and North America-memory, experience matter more than materialism. Thus, the nomads are suited to art forms like dance, music, film, performance and video. 'Music, dance and exorcism are the only kind of art forms that we can sell from Korea to an international audience. Excavating such things is a contribution to the humankind. For a long time, our people (Koreans) were nomads and there is no point for the nomads to possess a painting by Leonardo da Vinci as it would be possible for them to carry it around. Only a weightless form of art has the potential to be transmitted and progressed.'¹³ As Paik notes, the pre-historical age nomadic culture can go beyond the agricultural, industrial age and come into contact with the post-industrial and electronic culture.

It is necessary to focus on Paik's Korean characteristics in intimate sentimentality towards affinity. Avant-garde dancers Merce Cunningham, poet Allen Ginsberg, erotica performer and partner Charlotte Moorman also had close affinity with Paik. These artists were important figures in forming a crucial content for Paik's video. The three satellite pieces; 'Good Morning, Mr Orwell' (1984), 'Bye, Bye Kipling'(1986), 'Wrap Around the World'(1988) all featured colleagues whom Paik had met in the past and as well as those he had newly befriended. 'Good Morning Mr. Orwell' was first part of the Space Opera trilogy; this was an energetic performance which took place from New York and Paris and broadcasted from Cologne, Seoul, other regions in Tokyo, LA, San Francisco, Berlin and Hamburg. The performance involved avant-garde artists such as Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Allen Ginsberg, Laurie Anderson, as well as rock bands, fashion designers and A-list celebrities. In the other two remaining works, Paik once again invited new, commercially emerging artists to parade his cosmopolitan and global network.

In 1996 Paik suffered a severe stroke, and after ten years he passed away in 2006 at the age of 74. For nearly sixty years he lived as an avant-garde artist, forming countless relationships and supporting many of his contemporaries. In 1978 when the leader of Fluxus, George Maciunas, passed away, Paik and Beuys performed a piano duet in his memory. When Beuys passed away Paik organized a shaman exorcism in his memory and he also announced Cage's death and opened his memorial exhibition in 1992. And in 1996 when Charlotte Moorman died, he staged and performed an exorcism to wish her happiness in the after life. Nam June Paik treasured his relationships until the day he died, from that he gained the most beautiful Video Karma.

¹² Nam June Paik, *Beuys Vox*, p. 70.

¹³ 1984 KBS-TV Panel discussion, Kim Hong-Hee, *Good Morning, Mr Paik*, Design House, 2007, p.231.

