The intellectual and cultural field during the adolescence of Nam June Paik

Transcribed from simultaneous translation

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Good afternoon, my name is Suki Kim. Before we begin I would like to make a confession: frankly, I am not an expert on Nam June Paik. In the late 90s I worked within the artistic realm, but presently I am more focused on researching the visual culture of colonial times in Korea.

I have an uneasy relationship with Nam June Paik, and I would like to drop the formal way I am referring to him but it is very difficult to do so in the Korean language. In 1984, Nam June Paik came to Korea for the first time after being away for thirty-four years. At this time he was invited on TV and I was in the audience for the recording of that TV program.

The title of my presentation today is The *Early Years of Nam June Paik.* The reason I wish to address this specific time in his life is due to the impression that seeing him in person left on me. To be bluntly honest, it felt to me like Nam June Paik had completely erased his homeland from his heart and this made me ignore his existence in much the same way the art circle within which I worked had done. The main motivation behind this attitude came from a statement made by Paik declaring “art is fraud.” This type of discourse and attitude towards art was something that I, as a graduate student, could not accept at the time. It was impossible for me to understand his perspective because at that time, in 1984, Korean society was going through a major democratization effort and, according to our ideals, the arts were supposed to contribute to politics and society. For us, the role of art was very clear. Immersed within this backdrop, hearing Paik refer to art as fraud, taking art so lightly by having a ‘so what’ attitude, Paik looked very

irresponsible in my eyes, and I stopped paying him any attention. However, my position began to change when I visited the Nam June Paik Art Center's opening exhibition and was confronted by my misunderstanding of Nam June Paik's practice. The narrowness of my thoughts on Paik and the Paik that was introduced to me by the exhibition were dramatically disproportionate. The scope of Paik's practice was immense. How could my disappointment towards Paik be based solely on the impression he had left on me at a first encounter? Possibly this was due to the fact that the floating or apparently meaningless images in his many works were introduced to me without their context; therefore, I found myself without the tools to engage with his practice. I took this invitation to participate in this seminar as a means to explore my desire to learn more about Paik and who he was.

In the process of investigating Paik the questions that have been most present in my mind are: what produced these profound differences, and, still within the domain of the previous question, how does the fact that he was Korean, just as I am, inflect on Paik's artistic achievements?

In the 1950s, the Korean War broke out and Paik escaped from this war. What happened to Paik after this? Could he have become a completely different person from the person he had been in Korea before the war? This question motivated me to experiment with thinking about Paik within the colonial Korean context.

After leaving Korea, Paik left an indelible footprint: what were the environments and experiences enveloping Paik as an adolescent that enabled this footprint? These are some of the questions concerning Paik that resonate with my own interest in modern Korean history and which I hope can be looked at as different pieces of this puzzle. As I developed this topic, I was encouraged by a statement Paik made in an interview conducted when he came to Seoul in the early 90s. Paik stated that a big misunderstanding concerning the origin of his thoughts existed. In this interview he clarifies that although most people believed his thoughts

and artistic achievements emerged from contact with Western culture, this was inaccurate since before going abroad he had already, during his youth in Korea, developed his artistic personality and concerns. Listening to Paik, I always felt he had a very unique dialogue; he speaks with ease and humour. From my perspective, however, this statement was particularly meaningful.

Taking a look at the adolescence of Paik, we can see that he lived through a series of wars. His life in Korea, from the time of his birth to his departure, was filled with wars. A year before he was born there was the Sino-Japanese War. In 1934 there was another war between China and Japan. This was followed by the Pacific War. He grew up in a very wealthy family and until entering elementary school he was probably not directly affected by the war. During junior high, however, it is likely that the various wars began to leave lasting impressions. Most marking must have been the experience of leaving his home because of the Korean War. This experience may actually have served as an opportunity to fundamentally question what life and art mean. Nevertheless, within this adolescence of difficult experiences, Schoenberg and Marx were what caught Paik's imagination. Already in 1946 Paik had become acquainted with Schoenberg's work. He learned to play the piano quite young and in junior high immersed himself in studies of the piano and composition. Considering the colonial Korean context we have to reassess what Western music meant to Paik.

I may be going astray, but in the 1930s very few people were studying Western music in Korea. This was mainly due to the Japanese colonial occupation and the uniqueness of the relationship between Western music and the colonial power. Kim Kwan was the most prominent music critic at that time in Korea and he belonged to a circle that studied Western music in Korea. This critic believed that the most fundamental problem of Western music in Korea was the existence of a huge gap between the public and Western music. To counter this gap, Kim Kwan advocated for the presence of choirs and orchestras within the Korean music circle. In 1939 the Harbin Orchestra from Manchuria, at the time under Japanese

colonial rule, travelled to Gyeongseong, present day Seoul, to perform. Despite this orchestra being under the colonial powers controlling Manchuria at the time, the Korean music circle was still excited about witnessing their performance. This performance however was clearly a product of the subjugation of art to politics. When the orchestra performed in Seoul in 1939, something Korean musicians had been looking forward to for some time, the aims inherent to their presentation were to contribute to the Japanese colonial power by incorporating Koreans into their society and culture. A glance at the list of songs they performed shows these included many famous pieces by famous composers but also, and more tellingly, included pieces praising the wars fought by Japan. With this context in mind, the complex and problematic layers that exist in the exchange of cultures across borders reveal themselves. Considering this situation, what does immersing oneself in Schoenberg mean?

For such a young person to love and appreciate this music from an avant-garde composer is in itself very unique. Nevertheless, Paik appreciated Schoenberg and was probably one of the few that actually did appreciate this music. Examining the Korean music circle of the time we find that only a few famous Korean musicians would offer Paik the opportunity to become familiar with Schoenberg's work. These would include, for example, Kim Soon Nam, Lee Kun Woo, Ahn Eak Tai, who was called Eaktai Ahn in Germany, and Yun Yisang. Lee Kun Woo was Paik's music teacher and probably introduced Schoenberg to Paik. Paik was also influenced by Kim Soon Nam given that he and Lee Kun Woo were very close friends. Both these musicians graduated from Tokyo University, majored in composition and were leftists and nationalists. Ahn Eak Tai moved to Germany in the late 1930s and was a pro Japanese and pro-colonization musician. For instance, from the 1930s, he regularly held monthly performances designed to strengthen the alliance between Germany and Japan. Initially he presented himself as Japanese in Germany. The music he conducted was always presented as justification of the Japanese wars.

After the liberation of Korea, Kim Soon Nam and Lee Kun Woo moved to North Korea. They were also invited to Russia to study and there they met Shostakovich. Kim Soon Nam studied in the U.S.S.R. from 1953 and is mentioned by several prominent Soviet musicians. According to his memoirs he was highly praised within the Soviet music circle. A few years later, Kim Soon Nam is ordered by the state to return to North Korea and both Kim Soon Nam and Lee Kun Woo are then executed. The reason I mention these musicians is because before the liberalization of Korea in the 30s and 40s, there had already been international musical achievements in Korea. Ahn Eak Tai, Kim Soon Nam, Lee Kun Woo, and Yun Yisang were all well known musicians, and at the Darmstadt International Music festival Yun Yisang meets Paik. They are pictured here at this international music festival, and this is where they meet for the first time. According to the account of Yun Yisang, he asked Paik to think about the future of Korea through his musical practice. By 1958, Yun Yisang is already settled in Germany as a composer. Paik probably knew about him, but the leftist nationalism Yun Yisang promoted was probably something that Paik did not accept at the time. Paik did not agree with Yun Yisang's leftist and nationalistic thoughts.

From the late 1930s and early 1940s, until the 1950s, these were the most representative Korean musicians. They can be categorized into two groups: leftist and pro-Japanese. Paik fits into neither of these categories.

The second topic I would like to address is Paik's fondness for literature. Lee Kyunghee, Paik's kindergarten friend, is here with us today, and in her book we learn that Paik had already read the most important Korean literary works by the time he was in junior high. He had read famous authors such as Lee Kwang Soo, Lee Tae Jun, Jung Jiyong, Taejon Park. The other topic I have up here on this slide is avant-garde literature. If you look closely at the bottom of the slide there is a poem by Paik. This poem was published in 1968 and the reason I focus on the theme of avant-garde literature is due to the fact that the format of his poem indicates it is a concrete poem.

Appollinaire, for example, published a poem about rain, and the words were presented in a manner that depicts falling rain. So the meaning of the poem is not conveyed through the meaning of the words but rather by the poem itself becoming an image of its meaning. Concrete poetry appeared in Korea in the 1920s and experimental versions of this poetry were developed. A leading figure of this type of poetry was Jung Jiyong, a poet Paik greatly admired. Another renowned poet Yi Sang was much more radical and avant-garde in his poetry. He took it to a point where it would betray the minimum expectations people had regarding poetry. In doing so, Yi Sang often enraged readers who would question how the material he published could be considered poetry.

In 1958, Paik writes a poem titled *Song Yi Sang (Tribute to Yi Sang)*. [Image 3. p162] This poem adopts the same form developed by Yi Sang and Jung Jiyong and includes the reference to Yi Sang in the title. From this poem we can assume the influence of these poets on Paik. On the screen, next to Paik's poem *Song Yi Sang*, there are two poems written by Yi Sang: *Poem n. 4* and *Poem n. 5*. On the far right, is a poem by Jung Jiyong. In the West, just before and after WWI poets such as Appollinaire were developing this type of poetry but it was not explored to the radical extent of Yi sang and Jung Jiyong's work. After WWII this type of poetry becomes extremely prevalent in the West.

In 1958, along with his previously mentioned poem, Paik also published an article in the Liberty newspaper (Ja Yoo Shin Moon) that was run by his brother. In this article he referred to music in relation to concrete poetry. I believe this happens about the same time he met John Cage. Cage's music was different from existing music, because while existing music used instruments, as well as sounds and voices performed by trained musicians, these new musical experiments used sounds from nature or everyday sounds from the surrounding environment, such as the sound of a train passing by. The sounds heard in everyday life were brought into music and used to expand the music field. In 1958 Paik writes about these experiments and, through this newspaper, introduces this new

type of music to Korea. The intensity or radicalism of concrete poetry and music reminds me of Dadaism in the West because these attitudes deny the existence of minimal criteria for artistic practice to be considered art. This blunt denial and intensity can be found throughout Paik's practice.

The next topic closely related to Paik that I would like to mention is Marxism. In Korea, Marxism developed a firm following during colonial times because in the 1920s the KAPF (Korean Artists Proletarian Federation) emerged as a group of proletarian artists in Korea whose guiding principles were firmly rooted in Marxism, and they would become the main literary and artistic movement in Korea at that time. Towards the end of the 1920s, with the great depression and the Manchuria situation in the 1930s, this type of literature and art was suppressed by the Japanese colonial powers, and so on the surface the appeal of Marxism dwindled as it went underground until after the liberation of Korea. In the Korean post-colonial sphere Marxism regains its predominance. In post-colonial Korea, the ideological clash between leftist intellectuals who had fought for the liberation of Korea and who were nationalists and the pro-Japanese traitors who were rightists was very clear. Given this context, Marxism was something that must have come naturally to Paik.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, Paik's adolescence was a time of many wars. In an interview with Calvin Tompkins in the *New Yorker*, Paik said:

> Sometimes I felt like I was on the wrong side. In the 1950s I was on a train going away from the war and there were explosions. I wanted to escape. I did not know whose side I was on. I thought at the time, 'I'm going to watch everything as if I'm watching a baseball game. I'm going to be aloof.' I was cynical.

Until the Manchurian war and the Sino-Japan War, Paik wouldn't have experienced the war directly, but in 1945 when the Pacific War broke out it would

become part of his daily reality. Towards the end of this war, junior high students were given military education, especially at Gyeonggi High School and Junior High. From the history books in use at the Gyeonggi schools, the influence of military education on the general education model is quite evident. This impact went as far as requiring the students to march at night as part of their military training. And so, although I have not been able to find any statement by Paik directly referring to the Pacific War, it is probably still relevant to analyze Paik's interest in technology in relation to his experience of war.

In this image we see the first Korean museum the Museum of Science. Paik frequented this museum which is why I present it here as a reference. Next, there are illustrations (not pictures) that were included in the text books for elementary school students. In these illustrations there are many images of weapons. These were used in textbooks for children and when Paik was in Elementary School he probably looked at these illustrations and even used them in art classes as well. The images in the center of the slide are of gliders, and from these images it is also apparent that many of the craft classes must have dealt with creating models of things that are used for war. Paik's schoolmates, people close to him, remember creating these models with him. From this evidence we can presume that Paik must have seen a vast amount of these illustrations related to military technology during his schooling.

As I have already mentioned by referring to the prominent musicians in Korea under the colonial period, artists were against the Japanese colonization and worked for reunification after the division of the Korean peninsula. In the case of Paik there seems to be no clear ideological preference. It is important to take this into account when understanding his practice. Ironically, Paik's father was a collaborator of the Japanese colonial regime. He had already inherited a large business from his ancestors, but Paik's father continued to create great wealth for himself and his family through this collaboration. Quite possibly Paik was aware of his father's political position. He must have understood the different nuances

implicit in comments people made suggesting that his family should go bankrupt. This probably caused a considerable amount of confusion for Paik, especially since after liberation Paik's father had even greater economic success. I am not certain how accurate these accounts are, but Paik worked as an interpreter for his father in Hong Kong and it has been suggested that this was related to weapons trafficking. In the capitalist society following liberation, Paik witnessed not only fascism and totalitarianism but also corruption. This had a strong impact on his perspective and attitude toward the state and the people and possibly left him feeling he had no choice other than to escape by looking for new forms of flight.

Siegfried Kracauer, a film theorist, writes at the end of his book, *History, the Last Things Before the Last* that he was a refugee during the Nazi regime. A refugee is always a foreigner, so to escape is to lose one's homeland, erasing oneself thoroughly. Kracauer says that you need to become a true 'refugee' in order to accurately write history. I don't know how this status impacted Paik's work allowing it to surpass boundaries and go across the US, Japan, Korea, and Germany. I don't know if this statement will give us a glimpse into his thoughts, but I believe that we will be able to further this dialogue through the next presentation.