Nam June Paik in a Global Context :
The whole human being is ontology

Midori Yamamura

By questioning Heidegger's and Husserl's ontology that reduced a unique individual into an abstraction of "being," and by considering that such a philosophical tendency might have helped pave the way for wartime totalitarianism, in his 1951 treatise "Is Ontology Fundamental," the Lithuanian-born Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote that the whole human being should be considered as ontology: "His scientific work, his affective life, the satisfaction of his needs and his work, his social life and his death." Levinas was but one among many that lived under fascist-totalitarian regimes – the former Axis nations (Germany, Italy, Japan) and their territories, and who after the war was critically viewing the new technologies of mass communication that controlled the play of people's imagination and began questioning the rationality of knowledge.

Paralleling Levinas' ontological attempts were artists involved in the Düsseldorf-based Zero movement. Symbolized by their trademark "zero to infinity," two of its founders Heinz Mack and Otto Piene in 1958 proposed to build a new postwar society outside conventional frameworks by using art. In a now famous 1961 gallery photograph Paik is seen for the first time with Joseph Beuys, both attending Zero's opening and a preceding participatory demonstration at Düsseldorf Galerie Schmela. The event was part of the postwar revisionism in Germany.

Known for their art's incorporation of technology in pure aesthetic ways, Zero was the first postwar international movement in Germany, and began their activity with a series of one-night exhibitions at their studio in 1957. Starting in 1958, they published three Zero magazines and circulated them among different

international vanguard groups. As understood in a question raised in the first issue of Zero magazine: “Does contemporary painting influence the shape of the world?” Zero’s ultimate goal was to transform postwar society with art. This dynamic transformative facet of the group’s aim was translated into kinetic aspects of their art and the flow of human energy embodied in their demonstration.

Although Zero’s impact did not take immediate effect, in his recollection from 1986, Paik wrote that: “I started a new life from November 1961. By starting a new life I mean that I stocked my whole library with everything other than those on TV technique into storage and locked it up,” a trajectory of Paik’s work between 1961 and 1963 shows a slow transformation from destructive to constructive phases. On September 16, 1962, at the premier Fluxus concert, Paik was still reciting his previous music numbers that included *Simple* and *Homâge à John Cage*. This was altered in his *Exposition of Music-Electric Television* that took place at Galerie Parnass in March 1963. This is Paik’s first TV installation. The artist filled a space with thirteen televisions that lay on their back and sides with their reception altered. The exhibition centered not only on the presentation of objects, but also encouraged the participants’ creativity. Later in an interview, Paik said that: “My first friends were Fluxus people, who were always anti-something-anti-music, anti-art, anti-Stockhausen, etc. But the new video generation was pro-something - ‘constructing’ a new society with the new tool of video.”

So far, Paik’s formative years have largely been seen in relation to Fluxus and the influence of the avant-garde composer John Cage. It is now well known that after taking Cage’s summer course at Darmstadt in 1958, the “gentle and shy student” of Tokyo University who initially aspired to study Schönberg in 1956 was suddenly reborn into an anarchic vanguard composer who gave a series of mind-awakening, yet destructive performances. This Duchampian debt via John Cage, which has been central to the U.S. interpretation of the postwar avant-garde represented in writings by curators John Hanhardt and Elizabeth Armstrong has overshadowed Paik’s important turning point in 1961. On the other hand, just by looking at Paik’s early work, the music historian Douglas Kahn observed that Paik attempted to “supersede or escape the Cagean aesthetic, to get to the point

somehow of being 'Post-Cage.'" It was thus "no accident that Nam June Paik, in an act of symbolic emasculation, chose to cut off Cage's tie as part of his performance Etude for Piano Forte" held at the artist Mary Bauermeister's studio in 1960, and even applied shaving cream to his hair.

The literary scholar Andreas Huyssen, from a German perspective, interpreted Cage's music as a kind of dialectic between "uncritical celebration of chance" inspired by Zen Buddhism and the "I-Ching." Huyssen further drew parallels with Walter Benjamin's paradoxical comments in his essay Baudelaire, especially in relation to the structural proximity of assembly-line labor and gambling and interpreted Cage's music as "far less liberating" than its seeming arbitrariness. The artists who lived under fascist totalitarian regimes might have felt this dialectical relation too moderate. Not only was Paik's *One for Violin* about the destruction of an instrument, but also at the 1961 Zero opening the artists destroyed the barricade that covered Galerie Schmela's storefront window and symbolically created ground zero. Only after this destruction, were the onlookers allowed access to the interior of the gallery where their works were displayed.

In order to understand this destructive psychology in post-fascist era, it is important for us to understand the artists' predicaments under the totalitarian regime. Unfortunately, Nam June Paik's personal archive is not accessible today. However, an artist who was three years older and who also grew up under General Tojo's fascist regime was Yayoi Kusama. The earliest work that she keeps today at her Tokyo archive, is a wartime sketchbook that bears the word "NOTEBOOK." The plain-covered notebook reveals something about the young Kusama's situation as an artist during the war. The seventy-six pages are filled with meticulous drawings of peonies, preparatory drawings for Nihonga — a rigorous formal style developed during the Meiji period to deflect the wholesale influence of the West by making traditional Japanese painting internationally competitive. Due to obstinate nationalism, when Kusama began her formal training in art in 1942, a year after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Nihonga was the only art available at her school. During this time of national mobilization, the state attempted after 1941 to marshal every single material and human resource for the war effort. Sketchbooks

were no exception, rationed only to government-recognized professional artists. This was the reason why Kusama, who had a mere three years of training in art by 1945, had to use a regular notebook to make her sketches. After January 1943, English was banned as an enemy language. The type of notebook that Kusama used in 1945, with an English title on its cover, was certainly made before 1943 and very likely came from the black market.

Given the government's slogan, "Luxury Is the Enemy," which permeated popular consciousness during the war, art that did not assist in the national war effort, such as the graphic depiction of battle scenes or a manifestation of state propaganda, was deemed frivolous. Because the fascist government ordered ordinary citizens to police each other for antipatriotic conduct, if Kusama's neighbors had seen her engaged in the bourgeois act of sketching in her family's plant nursery, she could have been reported and arrested. In June 1945, while the vast majority of Japanese people were starving, the sixteen-year old artist put drawing before everything. Willing to take risks for her art, she undoubtedly acquired the notebook from an unofficial source and lost herself in sketching.

During the war, the government further used culture to help forge a new Japanese identity. Children were educated by the Ministry of Education's infamous 1937 manifesto, "Kokutai no hongi (The cardinal principles of national polity)." This program promulgated above all the idea of "serving the Emperor and accepting the Emperor's august will as one's own." As a result, a major task in elementary school history classes was to memorize and recite Japanese imperial genealogy. The world map, marked with Japanese colonial territories, was taught as geography. As wartime propaganda flooded people's lives, Kusama recounted, "Imperialism and militarism melded together, and deprived individuals of their ability to develop free thinking." She remembered trying to confirm the actual existence of things by counting pebbles on the riverbank behind her family house, and asking herself, "Who I am and how do I re-imagine my self?"

Kusama was one among many, due to her experience of the totalitarian society, who came to believe in the importance of possessing idiosyncratic subjectivity separate from the socially encouraged model. Paik, who believed that

“most of our spiritual landscape is well defined before we reach age eighteen,” in his New Year’s program for 1984, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* the TV broadcast that simultaneously connected United States, Canada, France, Germany, and Korea via satellite, paid homage to George Orwell’s novel entitled *1984* written in 1949. The original story was about the last freethinkers under a world enslaved by media, a fictional version of Stalin’s and Hitler’s surveillance regimes, where people got brainwashed. [Image 2. p161]

The Nazis’ organizational skill had indeed profoundly changed the world since the 1930s. Not only Japan’s imperial government adopted the Nazi Law for the Organization of Labor and skillfully manipulated people’s discontent during the world’s depression to pave the way for totalitarianism, but the U.S. government also emulated the Nazis’ information control techniques. As evident from the 1949 U.S. Commission on Information report, after the war the U.S. government systematically propagated information in order to control people’s mindset in the occupied territories.

This is the chart from the Commission of Information report. “IBD” stands for “International Broadcasting Division,” “INP” stands for “International Press and Publication,” and “IMP” stands for “International Motion Pictures Division.” With the concerted effort of controlling mass-media, U.S. information penetrated into eighty-four countries. These American programs stimulated a tremendous intellectual appetite in war-torn countries where people longed for news, commentaries, books, magazines, movies, photographs, and other cultural products.

Examining this inherent modern condition of mind-control and surveillance, Levinas, in his 1961 book *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* defined two distinctive ideas. According to Levinas, “totality,” like wartime totalitarianism and postwar information control, arises when people confuse their particular needs and happiness with what they believe to be their needs and happiness as encouraged by society. In contrast, in Levinas’s idea of infinity, each individual is conceived of as an essentially free being who would produce infinite thoughts from infinite contents beyond socially imposed ideas. Different from the high-modernist notion of individualism and taking into account morality sus-

pended during the war, ethical concerns and building a society founded on true inter-human relationships were becoming central to the post-fascist generation.

Examining Paik's "Installation view of *Exposition of Music-Electronic Television*," there exists a kind of obsessive quality in his work. Such repetitive-compulsive and obsessive tendencies are also seen, for example, in the artists shown at the Zero exhibition, such as Günther Uecker's nail pieces, or Heinz Mack's reliefs "Obsessional Art," which as a label could thus be applied to a particular aesthetic tendency in the post-fascist art of the 1960s. According to Levinas, obsession, by resurrecting a long forgotten anxiety, could help bring a person to his or her true consciousness beyond conventional values. In Uecker's case, he began compulsively hammering nails into supports provoked by his memory as a young boy of boarding up the windows of his house to protect against bomb blasts during the war.

Further, there existed a disturbing quality in Paik's Parnass Gallery exhibition, especially the severed cow head and the mannequin forcefully fit in a bathtub by cutting-off and shaping her head. These two displays especially provoked the feeling of suffering. In his 1982 treatise, "Useless Suffering," Levinas contended that people traditionally sought meaning when experiencing pain and suffering. Only through such personal experience could they comprehend pain in others and thus foster a benevolent wisdom "leading to the Good." However, in modern society, doctors formulate medicine that artificially reduces pain, which leads to an incomprehension of it. Consequently, all balance in human thought is destroyed and reason becomes "political and detached from all ethics." For instance, in 1932, the year when Paik was born, the Japanese government revised its policies toward the colonies of Korea and Taiwan by exploiting colonial farmers as slave labor to supply raw materials for the Japanese industry. At home, the government resolved the grave unemployment situation by relocating 50,000 Japanese to Manchuria. After the outbreak of full-scale war with China in 1937, the soldiers from the lower social strata, whom the government perceived as liabilities to a capitalist society, served as cannon fodder. Two-thirds of those who served were either killed or wounded by the end of the war. These are the back-

drops of Paik's adolescence.

Paik remarked that "the real problem in art and technology does not lie in inventing new and scientific toys, but in how to humanize the technology" and in 1966, established a *Utopian Laser TV Station* for his friends. Paik's media program for a day began with a chess game at Duchamp's residence at 7 AM, followed by Cage's press conference. After the conference was Merce Cunningham and Caroline Brown's morning exercise. A Fluxus multiple commercial spot was planned at 1 PM. At 6 PM, a program entitled "How to Lose Money Quickly" announced George Maciunas's stock prices. At 3 AM, after La Monte Young finished playing his "Dream Music," all the participants' lively drinking party began.

This is Paik's *TV Buddha*. Buddha is gazing at his own image-projection and thinking how to re-envision himself. Obsession and suffering were not only the qualities Paik introduced, but his art incorporated Eros, humor, fear, beauty, and other essential human qualities. Through interaction with his art, Paik's aim was to encourage in his audience a plurality of being who, as a unique individual, could think independently and make his or her own judgments separately from conformist society. This in turn would lead to a new human reality, established through an assembly of free beings in genuine ethical relationships, which could possibly end state capitalism and post-Leninist imperialism, an immanent political question that the artist held since he ran away from Korean War in 1949.