Pierrot Lunaire and *Wal In Chong Gang*

Transcribed from simultaneous translation

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Good morning, my name is Youngchul Lee and I am the director of the Nam June Paik Art Center.

Towards your left you can see stained glass windows depicting many images used in Nam June Paik's work. The concept for this stained glass effect emerged from thoughts about the time when Paik was studying in Munich. From looking at his report card we learned that he studied art history and the history of architecture with Professor Sedlemayr for several semesters. I found it a coincidence that I had written about Sedlemayr in my MA dissertation. Sedlemayr is famous for his book on the architecture of churches where he elaborated on the holiness and grandeur of church structures and referred to the connection between art, space, and religion. This unexpected link to Sedlemayr and spirituality motivated me to begin exploring and researching Paik from ignored territories. Paik was more interested in his work offering a bodily experience rather than merely existing as visual art. Paik started out with music and philosophy and then expanded into TV and video. Highlighting this experience we attempted to create a spatial environment, this stained glass effect, from the still images taken from Paik's video works.

Just a few days ago we marked the commemoration of his death three years ago. Buddhist beliefs state that three years after one's death, the spirit finally moves onto the world of *Amita Buddha*, or the state of Nirvana. On the screen you can see the words for *Mu Riang Gwang Myeong Mu Riang Su Myeong*, a Chinese phrase meaning "Infinite Glory and Infinite Life." These were written by Korea Uni-

versity Professor Choi Jong Hu. In Korea, this saying emerges from this Buddhist concept of *Amita Buddha*. Reflecting on the notion of the end of life, specifically the end of Paik's journey, this moment when he finally moved on from this world, our minds wander into thoughts about his beginnings. When Paik left Korea just before the Korean War, his first place of residence in Japan was Kamakura, an area where a new sect of Buddhism originated and flourished.

In 1986, a Japanese TV program showed Paik visiting a temple in Japan. We came across this image by coincidence. This footage showed rarely seen images of Paik meditating. To me, this film opened new doors for a more expanded frame within which to understand Paik and also how his relation to Buddhism reflected the character of his thinking. Buddhism can be a vehicle through which issues concerning the interrelationship between the causal and the casual are continuously questioned in terms of life, death, and Karma.

Paik was very interested in Buddhism from early on, positioning him within the tradition of a pure humanist, someone endlessly questioning the existential conditions of human beings. He often visited Buddhist temples, something that was mentioned to me during a research visit to Japan. At the time I was conceiving the space design for the exhibition and visited Korean Buddhist temples, including Buseok temple, located in Youngju. The structure of this temple, where there is a statue of Amita Buddha, particularly interested me. In addition, we also visited Seo Soo Library and Byeongsan library in Andong. These were the Joseon dynasty's equivalent to Plato's academy. Contemplating the fundamental philosophies of these structures was crucial in allowing the concepts for the space design to emerge. The aim was not to represent or determine how these ancient structures would impact the spatial experience. Rather, through contemplation of the process and philosophy of interweaving the causal and the casual used to create these structures, I found another path to follow in the conception of the Festival.

Another thread emerged from how art and science have different ap-

proaches to addressing issues. For example, Professor Hannah Higgins mentioned the philosophical development that can be traced from Newton's to Minkowski's notions of spacetime in relation to Nam June Paik works, such as *Moon is the Oldest TV* and *Moon Clock*. These were the crucial issues of the 20th Century and with the development of technology and science I believe that the importance of these issues will be taken to a new level by the interaction between art and science. For example, artists actually experience time and space while scientists come up with theories. By positioning himself on the boundaries of these perspectives, Paik was one of the first to open up limitless directions for these visions and practices.

With these thoughts as a background, I hope to share my experience of the journey taken to prepare this inaugural festival. The title for this presentation is '*Pierrot Lunaire* and *Wal In Chong Gang*.'

Paik once commented: "On a boring afternoon I was listening to NHK radio in Kamakura. A horrible cacophonic sound was playing and a soprano with a sensual voice cried. I mumbled that this must be one of Schoenberg's compositions. Surely enough it was *Pierrot Lunaire*. I can still feel that I am looking at this small brown plastic box."

After reading this quote I thought that Paik, just like Pierrot Lunaire, must have been seduced by the effects of the moonlight. Paik may even be considered as someone who manifested himself as the moon. By coincidence, I learned from a friend that in the Chinese horoscope, the image for Paik's date of birth, July 20th, 1932, is the moon falling into the water. An image similar to this one can be found in the poem *Wal In Chong Gang*. This phrase, mentioned in the second part of my own title, means 'moonlight reflected on a thousand rivers.' This image can also be a manifestation of the state of Buddha's logic. Like the moonlight reflected on a thousand rivers, Buddha's logic and Buddha's being are one. In Buddhism a story describes a teacher pointing at the moon and asking his student: why do you look at my finger pointing at the moon and not the actual moon? To be able to look at

the moon, and not just the finger pointing at it, one has to be in a state of Buddha, becoming moon. These teachings, the very essence of Buddhism, can inspire our readings of Nam June Paik beyond previous discussions that seem to have neglected looking at the actual Paik in the same way the moon was neglected by those that saw only the finger referencing it. If we are willing to suspend our Western scientific reasoning, we can adopt a more embracing logic such as that of the state of Buddha. We may then expand our usual frameworks of thinking into neglected territories, such as the anthropological, philosophical, religious, scientific, and technological.

As the brightest celestial body in the night sky, the moon is clearly visible everywhere as it incessantly rotates around the Earth. Paik returned to Korea thirty four years after leaving. When he left, it was not just his country that he left behind but also his family and parents. He was born as the last son of a very wealthy family, but as an artist he lived a nomadic life around the world. I like to imagine that every evening he probably looked at the moon in the sky and perhaps shared his words and his heart with the moon and may even have thought of sending his messages home through this satellite. This mental image, I have just conjured up, combines two parallel relationships between humans and the moon. In ancient times people would look up at the moon and maybe imagine that it allowed them to communicate with those that were not present. From the late 50s, artificial satellites began to orbit the Earth and communication theorists like Marshall McLuhan, began to imagine how these could be used as communication devices.

In fact, Paik wrote about McLuhan and Norbert Weiner in the 60s and even as early as the 50s he was obsessed with communication technologies and developed this obsession into video art. It seems to me that the complete series of the 1980s *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* broadcasts were the realization of Paik's visions from the 50s. If we can say that Andy Warhol wanted to be a machine, then we can imagine Paik would have wanted to be a satellite. His notions and practice really opened up the way for a new era of art, and he is actually the front-runner

of new media.

So far we have been thinking about the image of 'moon falling into water.' The next image I would like us to imagine is the image of television falling into water embodied by Paik's *TV Fish*. [Image 6. p165] This is the first work one encounters upon entering the art center. In this work, real fish inhabit water tanks placed in front of television monitors. The swimming fish naturally follow a trajectory that draws the figure for infinity. Through the layering of these different elements Paik offers the viewer an experience of the finite in conjunction with the infinite, the natural with the artificial, technology and the human. This notion of conjunction became something we highlighted through making the festival. Conjunction refers to how two different things can be plugged into each other to interfere with thought processes that we have become comfortable with. Our point of departure was to jump into Paik's world of thought and try to pave a way through, regardless of whether it is accurate or not. What was important was to walk into passages that have not been tried before. As a new institution we are unable to create art historically or chronologically legitimate exhibitions such as those produced in Western institutions. What we can do is to create the line of flight. The canvas is not empty. There is no such thing as empty. The painter in front of the 'empty canvas' already has many thoughts concerning the images he wants to create on the canvas, so the line of flight is about creating conjunctions within already complex and intertwined conditions. For instance, we were interested in pursuing the relationship between Paik and Marcel Duchamp since it creates a conjunction between Paik's relationship to Dada and to Fluxus.

In imagining Paik's thoughts on Duchamp, an episode came to mind. Marcel Duchamp and John Cage played chess together from time to time. In 1968, John Cage and Duchamp were to meet for a chess game and Paik wanted to record this on video, so he wrote to Cage saying that he really wanted to videotape the event and would be sure to not let that interfere with their chess game. To me this was a message from a genius to another genius. But that year Marcel

Duchamp passed away. Despite how much Paik wanted to meet Duchamp, to the best of my knowledge he never did.

What were Paik's thoughts about Duchamp? Again there is no answer for this. On the screen you can see a painting by contemporary Chinese artist Wang Xing Wei, *Poor Old Hamilton*. [Image 8. p167] This work served as the departure point for making the exhibition. I first saw this work at Harald Szeemann's Venice Biennale ten years ago. In the painting a young Chinese boy playing in front of Duchamp's large glass appears to have broken the work without being aware of its value. I thought of this boy as being Nam June Paik, someone who broke the existing codes by being unaware of their deep origins.

In this exhibition, I also proposed a triangle between the cave-like landscape in *Étant donnés*, Duchamp's last work, Naoki Ishikawa's series of photographs of pre-historic caves, and Paik's *TV Candle*. [Image 9. p168] I believe this kind of tentative triangle can operate as a means of making Paik's characteristic anthropological perspective visible. This strategy enables him to exist between the analogue and the technological. From a curator's perspective this visual and conceptual assemblage creates a new experience of space and time by inserting questions that have no answers into the physical exhibition space.

The relationship I am establishing between Paik and Duchamp hinges on the Buddhist concept of *Yeon*. This notion of interrelationship extends beyond conventional notions of space and time. Having met or not, different people may be related and influence each other. Throughout Paik's life it is possible to find many instances of *Yeon* with many different people. One of these many people is Shuya Abe, the Japanese electronics engineer who was Paik's long term friend. The painting you see on the screen was donated to the art center by Abe and had been a gift from Paik. [Image 10. p169] This painting consists of two separate paintings collaged together: the Chinese pictogram meaning heart is deconstructed into separate signs placed on separate canvasses. The notion in this pictogram is comparable to the notion of *Yeon*. The way Paik splits the pictogram

emphasizes the inconsistencies and invisible influences of the heart. The interchangeability of the paintings and the notion of inconsistency they refer to, also reflect how Paik embraces changeability in his creative process.

Moving on, in *Autobiography in the Womb*, [Image 5. p164] made by Paik for Dieter and Si Rosenkranz in December 1981, Paik collected and used several issues of the New York Times from approximately 110 days before his birth. In this piece Paik addresses several questions to his mother, including: “What is tax?” “What is the Soviet Union?” or “What is Roosevelt?” At a certain point he implies he does not want to be born into a world that is in a constant state of war. Since Duchamp, the site of contemporary art has been the battleground of knowledge where different egos confront each other. In this situation Paik does not feel the need to follow other people; therefore wishing to not be born is not a sentimental reproach towards the world but rather the desire to achieve non-time, timeless nothingness. This can be taken as a clue to understanding his practice towards life.

In 1961, in *Hand and Face*, [Image 11. p170] Paik is touching his face with his eyes closed. In Buddhist teachings there is an episode about a student asking why the book says he doesn’t have eyes, nose, mouth, and ears on his face, when in reality he does. This question surprises the teacher. In this same manner, we question Paik’s work when there is no need for it to be questioned. In fact, this work is already a question – the fundamental question of being. This questioning of being, similar to the practice of meditation in Buddhism, allows unexpected leaps.

One such leap in Paik’s practice was his first solo exhibition in 1963, *Exposition of Music, Electronic Television*. For this radical exhibition, thirteen TV monitors were presented. Paik produced patterns and unexpected sounds with these TV works he created. This is how manipulated TVs achieved the status of art. In contrast to his technologically advanced experiments with TVs, he placed a dead cow’s head at the entrance to the exhibition held at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal.

[Image 12. p171] Even to eyes accustomed to the shocks and provocations expected of contemporary art, such as Damien Hirst's works, being confronted by the head of a real cow is still shocking. How did someone who was obsessed with cutting edge media technology come up with this image? I think that installing the head of the cow surfaces the expanded spectrum of Paik's thinking which is mythological, anthropological and simultaneously technological.

In addition to this, Paik's family background can offer a glimpse into the motivations inherent to Paik's use of the cow's head. Paik's family was a wealthy business oriented family who diligently worshipped their many ancestors. Paik would constantly see his mother dressed in white outfits, because during the ritual period women are only allowed to wear white. Given their many ancestors, Paik rarely saw his mother in colorful clothing. Paik, as a refugee artist from the East, performs a ritual sacrifice by hanging up this cow's head before entering the artistic battleground of knowledge. This act also represents a departure from his origins. For example, anarchy refers to beheading and represents mental independence. Another possible reading for this act addresses the notion of gift, where sacrifice is given as an offer and not in exchange for something as is common practice in capitalist society. Here the notion of ritual is also related to the notion of gift. This reading of the cow's head within the notion of ritual and gift can be extended to *TV Moon, TV Garden, TV Fish,* and *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. I cannot overemphasize the notion of expanding our understanding of Paik's way of thinking which was full of freedom and which overcame the physical limitations of time and space. Like Genghis Khan riding his horse across Asia, Paik challenged the limitations of time and space. The Mongolians left only a mark in the areas they conquered and continued to move forward, since this impulse is the basic machinery for creation. Philosophers such as Deleuze talk about this machinery: war machine, love machine, and all these different types of machines.

To enter the battleground of knowledge instituted by Marcel Duchamp, Paik engages the machinery of TV and Video. Paik once mentioned that Marcel Duchamp created a very wide entrance to contemporary art but in doing so greatly narrowed

down the exit. For Paik, working with video represented the line of flight that would allow him to exit the legacy of Duchamp in contemporary art. This line of flight remits to our previous discussion on the causal and casual interrelationships that can be found in *Karma, Yeon*, and the infinite.

Paik's performances are related to Buddhism and Haiku poetry. Undeniably Paik was influenced by his Fluxus friends and Cage, but if we consider the time before he came to the West we can also perceive the influence of avant-garde poets and musicians from the Korean colonial period. This perspective hasn't been properly researched and should become one of the topics to be explored further. For instance, in this poem titled *Ogamdo*, a famous poem by Yi Sang, each sentence refers to a child running. "The first boy runs, the second boy runs, the third boy runs"…and so on. The last sentence has a twist and says "the last boy does not have to run." This method can be found in Paik's own scores, such as *Serenade for Allison* and *Young Penis Symphony*. [Image 13-1/13-2. p172] Yi Sang's *Ogamdo* was a very famous poem and most Korean intellectuals were aware of it. There is a great likelihood Paik would also have known about it. In the John Cage Collection at Northwestern University many scores sent to Cage as birthday presents from famous artists are included. Paik sent Cage Yi Sang's poem without any editing. As I said before, the research on the influence of early colonial Korean intellectuals on Paik really needs to be explored.

The image on the screen is a still from a film by the Viennese actionist Otto Muehl. Prior to preparing the exhibition I had been unaware of the relationship between Paik, Muehl, and Hermann Nitsch. They had a personal relationship and mutual respect. For instance, Paik participated in Muehl's film Back to Fucking Cambridge. [Image 14. p173] Paik played the role of 20th century Austrian composer Anton Webern. In this role, Paik asks whether he is better than Schoenberg and the maid says, "Maybe in bed."

The next image on the screen shows *Wrap around the world*. [Image 15. p174/175] The contents of this film are images of dancing that create various kinds of rhythms and patterns. This is very bright and positive, offering a pleasant and futurist

feeling. At his very first artist talk in Korea after having been away for thirty four years, a member of the audience asked Paik why he always dealt with the bright side of the world. Paik replied that the question embarrassed him and admitted that this was one of his shortcomings.

At the beginning of my presentation I talked about *Amita Buddha*. I understand Paik's philosophy of the positive not as a way to ignore the negative aspects of the world but as stance to safeguard against consuming debates. Instead he practiced mercy as a clown with his humor and wit. Here I see a manifestation of Nietzsche's superhuman.

Now on the screen are pictures of the performance *Homage to Jean Pierre Wilhelm*. [Image 16. p176/177] Wilhelm was one of the most influential postwar cultural activists in Düsseldorf. Another manifestation of *Yeon* in his life, Paik once mentioned that the three most important opportunities he was ever given had been arranged by Wilhelm. To honor this dear friend after his death, Paik performed these very simple everyday actions: walking, laughing, and jumping on the street. This seems to me very humble yet very beautiful. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche comments on how all beings are dominated by probability and coincidence, and naivety. He further elaborates that all existence is dominated by accidental occurrences and all beings are dominated by wantonness.

As the last image, I present this photo taken by Kyunghee Lee, Paik's kindergarten friend. [Image 17. p178] This is the last picture that she took of him and it shows the landscape of Miami with the sky and the sea. Paik probably would have been unaware that he wouldn't be present to see this landscape a year from this moment.