Nam June Paik :
Politics of performance and machinistic ontology

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1. Machine against Machine

Referring to Pasteur and Robespierre's remark that "poison can be cured by poison," Nam June Paik said we would need the shock and catharsis emanating from electronic devices in order to cure the frustration inherent in life through using them (from *Videa 'n' Videology*). In a more straightforward manner, he said he would "use machine in order to confront the machine." In the "poison can be cured by poison" manner, he would make a full use of the power and capability of the machine in order to keep the machine under control and invented a video synthesizer and robot in order to transform and use the power of machine. Paik used to say, "The cooperation with a mechanic like Shuya Abe expanded or changed his view of life" (from Experiment on electronic TV and color TV).

If Heidegger or Adorno were to see Nam June Paik's work, they would consider him as a person admiring the power and function of machine and technology or data-based mass culture. Indeed, Paik manifested such an attitude about his own style and mass culture. Due to this attitude, he is sometimes regarded as a postmodernist. However, his remark quoted at the outset of this essay accurately reveals that his work that examined the power and function of the machine was a critique of the mechanized world instead of mere praise for it. We can ascertain this point when he said that since pop art lacked the harsh critical attitude found in Dada, he himself tried to express his scorn about the contemporary world using all electronic methods possible. In this sense Nam June Paik was

both different from the modernist who followed the cursed fate of turning away from the general public and the postmodernist who easily flattered them.

The phrase "to use machine to confront the machine" implies three important aspects of Paik's works. First, to him artistic work was entirely political. He set out to confront the world represented in the language of TV – the kind of world in which Heidegger might have found nihilism. If we were to define politics as a confrontation to the world given to us, to the power that maintains it, the 'politics' in Paik's work is more meaningful than his own remark about 'politics in art' or 'art as politics.' Of course the politics in this case does not just reside in the shallow implication of the word 'confrontation.'

Second, instead of listening in a Heideggerian manner to the quite poetic "voice of being" amidst the nostalgia tainted with rage against the loss of home, or accusing the barren field of technology philosophers perceived as putting life and art as well as philosophy in peril, Paik chose to stick to it and tried to create a new possibility of life and art. He had a very positive concept about the machine-world that he set out to confront. In this sense, he was surely a 'nomad'. But not in the conventional sense of the nomad who just wanders around and lives in a mobile status, nor like the immigrants who desert their infertile land. Instead he was a person "who invent[ed] a method to stick to the infertile land and live on it" (Deleuze and Guattari, A *Thousand Plateaus*).

Third, in order to use TV to confront it, the self who tries to use it as well as the TV itself should stand on the same plane as the TV-world, which is his enemy. He should endure the odd identity where enemy and friend are so mixed up together that they become indistinguishable. In order to do this Paik had to renounce the old horizon of thinking that had distinguished TV and human, machine and life, by creating a deep abyss between them. This requires an ontological basis on which machine and human, machine and life meet each other and engage in a relationship on the same plane. The kind of confrontation that Nam June Paik had imagined was impossible without a radical change in the ontological dimen-

sion that went beyond the privileged status given to human and life. When Paik manifested that his works were operating on an ontological plane, he surely knew this was problematic.

2. Ontological Equivalence

The starting point for Nam June Paik's thinking and work was music, and he clearly demonstrated the musical character of his work even when he was working in the realm of 'visual art'. But this had a far more radical significance than merely him just starting his career from music or his work being related to it. It is needless to say that his performance always had a musical character; his video works were done on the basis of music in a very strong sense. This is true not only in the sense that his thinking in total, which can be called ontological, originated from music, but also that the territory he chose drew from musical thinking. Therefore, in Paik, the works were connected to the territory of music through the zone of absolute deterritorialization.

This can be understood in three aspects. First, non-musical deterritorialization pushes the music to the horizon of ontology, which is demonstrated by Lusolo and Schaeffer through John Cage. Second, musical deterritorialization reaches the absolute limit, which is shown in Schonberg and the music lecture at Darmstadt through Stockhausen's electronic music. 'Electronic video' and video synthesizer appeared at this point. Third, John Cage's chance music put the categories such as chance, indeterminacy and non-predictability at the center of the work. These categorical elements that can be termed "outsideness" steer Paik's ontological thinking formed on a subconscious level to a direction totally different from the traditional philosophical thinking.

In the article "The Concrete Music of Pierre Schaeffer" contributed to the *Free Paper* published by his brother, Paik demonstrated his deep interest in the idea of concrete music as developed by Lusolo and Schaeffer. As is well known,

Lusolo used non-musical elements such as noise for his music. In *Ionization*, Edgar Varèse composed using sounds from sirens and slapstick and he hid the identity of each sound source so that the listener wouldn't notice what source had been used. On the other hand, Schaeffer, who was a broadcast engineer, recorded the sound of trains, revolving doors, and boiling pots, and used them for his music. He titled each piece so that one would be aware of the source of the sound. *Étude aux Chemins de Fer, Étude aux Tourniquets,* and *Étude Pathétique ou Étude aux Casseroles* are such pieces.

By using things that were not musical instruments, they broke the boundary between musical sound and non-musical sound, proving that every kind of sound could be music. John Cage's musical experiments were a moment in which the search for the method of using 'non-musical sound' was pushed to the level of theory and totally expanded along with the introduction of the category of chance. Another article Paik contributed to the *Free Paper*, "Chance Music--Darmstadt Music Lecture" (January 6, 1959) showed that he was paying attention to such an aspect in Cage. Cage attempted the mixture of musical sound with non-musical sound by intertwining nails, screws and feathers within the piano wire and making the piano a non-musical instrument. The distinction between musical sound and non-musical sound was blurred into a zone of the indistinguishable. The conventional hierarchy between musical sound and non-musical sound collapsed and two sounds were given an equal status. The "equal" here does not mean the same thing, but that two things can be mixed or used on the same plane.

In Cage's famous *4'33''* he plays silence for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Silence and music, silence and sound are equalized here. In this piece full of no sound all sorts of sounds can be heard. Cage expressed in music the Buddhist thinking of *sunya* in which everything can become everything else as there is no immutable self-ness, and everything can reach this state by being emptied.

Nam June Paik extended this idea to realms beyond sound. His performances demonstrated the equivalence between sounds, the equivalence among

instruments, and the equivalence between music and play, music and art. In the famous performance with Charlotte Moorman, he performed experiments that showed the equivalence between human and cello in the *Human Cello* piece and the equivalence between TV and brassier in *TV Bra.*

Given that his thinking extended beyond the realm of music in this process of expansion, Paik was more radical than Cage who remained a musician to the end of his career. When he attained equivalence between human and cello, Paik did not restrict his concept to the realm of music. In an article about *TV Bra* Paik stated that he wanted to think about an occurrence where a machine like the TV was used on the innermost corner of the human and "for the sake of the human." This idea goes beyond music. Indeed, in the TV cello or human cello pieces, Paik did not seem to be interested in music itself. His performance was a performative practice that showed the equivalence between human and cello, and TV and cello, beyond the realm of music. Is it then possible to consider that Paik's abstract capability of thinking, one that progressed so quickly and radically over formal distinctions when he denied the existence of any abyss distinguishing one being from another, went far enough by saying that all beings should be seen as being on a single ontological plane and all beings are ontologically equal?

Paik demonstrated this very clearly by the interview between Russel Connor and Alvin Lucier that he inserted into his video work *To John Cage*. In this interview Lucier, while explaining why he took mumbling for granted, said that he had learned from John Cage that, given all phenomena were equal, then whispered or mumbled language and normal language were also equal. Paik would have known this as much as Lucier did. The same was true in Paik's *Merce by Merce*. In the first part of the video, produced by Merce Cunningham, the choreographer replaces scenes of dancing with various other scenes. By doing this, Cunningham removes the privileged status of the stage in dance and extends the realm of dance to all the spaces of everyday life. He demonstrates that all the places are equal in terms of dance. In the second part of the video, Paik pro-

duced with Kubota, a taxi runs through the Manhattan streets swinging side by side. The question “Is this dancing?” is asked and the reply given is: “This is taxi dance.” In this work Paik extends the notion of dance to the rhythmic movement of every moving thing including a taxi. He thus deterritorializes the dancer well as human dance. Perhaps he learned this from Cunningham who extended the concept of dance to the sphere of everyday life. To put it more precisely, Paik generalized the process of abstract equalization that Cunningham had started from dance and extended it from human to taxi and later to moving things in general. How would this be possible without an understanding of the equality between human and taxi, between human and all moving things? I believe that for Paik who already knew the equality of sound and silence, it was all too apparent that no abyss exists between moving things and non-moving things.

Through diverse experiments that established the equality of all beings, Nam June Paik reached the plane of mechanistic consistency. This was a common philosophical ground that connected his early performance works with the later works done with TV and video. This also implies that Paik’s video works stand on an entirely different ontological ground from that of conventional ideas, or rather, progressed while creating such a ground. It is for such a reason that one can say Paik’s works were not merely music or fine art but ontology itself. Thus his works could be described as “ontology written in machine” instead of text.

3. Politics of Performance and Ontological ‘Communication’

Michel Foucault very concretely demonstrated the mode of power operating in our everyday lives by carefully analyzing discourse and discipline. The essence of his argument is that we are produced into a specific form of subject by the elements that make us behave repetitively in a specific manner (in *Discipline and Punish*). In school we execute a certain set of behaviors assigned according to a time table. Not only in school but also in the office, factory, home, or even in

private situations, we are produced into subjects that live according to the discipline of schedule. We are educated into becoming a body that can repeat the same action for a long duration of time, into being a subject who believes that living life according to a time table is right it is, a normal life and expects this from other people.

This not only happens in school but in all the spheres of life. Through this we either become male or female and not something ambiguously stuck between the two. We become laborers, students, sons, daughters, juniors, seniors, sociologists and citizens.

The mode of life is a mode of being in our everyday life but is also an operational mode of power that tames us to live, think and act in a certain way. While practicing ideas and behaviors in such a mode, we form our normal body and intelligence by performing discursive practices necessary for it. In this sense, life can be said to be a repetitive set of performative practices. The institution is a set of diverse devices that maintains and reproduces these performative practices so that they can be continuously repeated.

This is true not only of everyday lives but also of philosophy and art. In these areas in which 'creation' is at the very core, we adapt ourselves to and perform an already existing mode of life by repeating the existing mode of practice. The mode of production in art as well as the institution that maintains and reproduces it trains the persons who are willing to perform such an activity and the mores of the past are practiced.

In the performance of Nam June Paik, Fluxus and John Cage confronted head to head these performative practices formulated within everyday lives. Although this confrontation takes place on a local territory that is a specific form of art, it always agitates the dominating way of life and thinking and breaks this ever sturdy border. "The Fluxus Manifesto," written by Maciunas, vocally expresses this. In it he proclaims, "Purge the sick world of the bourgeoisie, intellectual and professionalized but commercialized culture. Purge the dead art, mimicry, facti-

tious art, abstract art. Develop live art and anti-art." This is not just a matter of art but of the real lives of people. In this sense, they urge the need to "promote the non-artistic reality that not just art enthusiasts, critics and professionals, but everybody can understand." In Fluxus, i.e. the pursuit of the fluid, artistic performance flows across the borders and walls that reproduce the dominating art and culture. "Promote the revolutionary flow and stream in art." Thus another way of living and thinking will open.

A new artistic practice named performance attempts to subvert the way of reproducing the artistic activities and power that produces and reproduces ordinary lives. In this sense, performance fits the definition of the Foucauldian resistance which aims at the subversion of micro power operating at the level of everyday lives and that of the Marxist revolution which is defined as the subversion of the dominating mode of life. Therefore, Nam June Paik's performance attempting to radically subvert the conventional notions of music and fine art, even before he belonged to Fluxus and traversed and collapsed the border lying across music, play and fine art was directly political.

One can say this performance was oriented towards 'communication.' It is well known that Paik gave the problem of communication in the media serious consideration when he criticized that a medium like TV had become a means to control and render the masses as passive as Pavlov's dog or as women who had become sex machines for their husbands (Catalogue from *Machine Show* SPACE MOMA, 1970). But in works like *The Moon is the Oldest TV* or numerous multi-video installations, did the TV really behave as a medium that enabled the participation of the audience? Or was it the case that the broadcast station, as a one-sided sender of messages, was simply replaced by Nam June Paik? Was he negating what he had said before, when he said, "Only a handful of people understand my TV work. That is why I feel lonely in my work" (to John Cage, in *Videa 'n' Videology*)? From this it would seem that communication had never truly occurred.

What Paik chose to communicate through performance seemed to be a method against communication in the sense that it broke the established codes that

enabled the de-codification of the message and Paik thought that the meaning of his deed did not have to be understood. Rather than transmitting something, his performances crossed through the codified system of notions that were known and interpreted by everybody. This mode of performance broke the normal and dominant channels of transmission – borders and walls erected for normal transmission, and made what has been made invisible by the division these boundaries established, through inclusion or exclusion, visible and the inaudible audible. Thus for Paik and Fluxus, communication was not a process of transmitting a message in a two-way system where both parties understand each other. Instead it was breaking down the wall and blurring the boundaries established for "normal communication." It was communication against communication.

It takes the form of radical deconstruction in performance, but that is not all. In *Global Grove* and *Video Common Market* Paik quoted the remark of the former president of the Vietnam Veteran's Association, "The failure of the US in Vietnam resides in the absence of communication and understanding," and went on to say, "Jazz united the black and the white, Mozart harmonized the Asians and the Europeans. Beethoven combined the Germans and the Americans during WW2. Now rock music is the only channel between the old and the young." Communication here refers to transposing the wall that separates white and black, Asians and Europeans. It also means 'harmonization', 'fusion' and 'cohesion.' Instead of transmitting what black people said to white people, jazz made them meet and unite with each other. Encounter and union, or coexistence was the method of communication discovered here. Such an encounter and union crosses the border between the races and contributes to demolishing it.

Can we understand Paik's music performance and installation works that enabled the encounter between TV and human, TV and cello, TV and plant, TV and fish and TV and candlelight as being on a similar plane to this? When he made a 'work' by combining TV and fish, TV and plants or TV and human, did he not want to communicate 'what was incommunicable'? By making the encounter across the border possible between human and machine, machine and plant, human and animal, and

having them construct something new, the abyss lying across them disappears and the hierarchy is dismantled, and new relationships emerge on an equal status. When Paik quotes Wiener saying, “The control of communication between animal and human,” we get a glimpse of his idea of cybernetics as the discourse of relationships.

If this is how Paik imagined communication, it is very close to the notion of ontological equality previously noted. Ordinarily communication refers to an incident in which there is a sender, a receiver, and a message, or a medium carrying it. This occupies a more obvious form in Shannon’s theory of information or Jakobson’s general theory of communication. Habermas’s concept of communication and discussion is not very far from this either. Seen from this perspective, Paik’s works are not in favor of communication. Even Cage was perplexed at Paik’s performance for being ‘radical’. Even his video works seem to disturb the transmission of the message because of the speed of the images. They are not a form of Hermes style communication as formulated by Michel Serres where the message varies every time it is transmitted (M. Serres, *La Communication*).

If Paik had any concept of communication, it would be an ontological one. He demolished the wall among beings that were presupposed to be ‘incommunicable’ and made them co-exist on a single ontological plane. This communication is not an epistemological but an ontological thing, and not a mode of transmission and dialogue, but of transgression and deconstruction, or a chance encounter and connection. The heterogeneous produce commonness among them by meeting and co-existing with each other on the same plane. Ontological commonness would be the result one can arrive at through questioning being; in other words, through the question of being itself lying beyond being. This suggests a new zone of becoming in which TV and human, TV and plant, machine and life meet and co-exist with each other. We know well that such a suggestion can be connected to the political ‘communality’ and the construction of the communal relation.