Practical flight, and from there, aesthetical flight : On the 'stationary nomadism' of Nam June Paik

Jinsok Kim

1

To term Nam June Paik's artistic work nomadic is ambiguous. He was not a simple nomad since he referred to himself as a 'sedentary nomad.' When he is described as a nomad, it is often to convey that he wandered through many places and explored several modes of artistic practice. But even this type of definition is still vague. 'Settled' and 'nomad' are terms used in everyday life and yet refer to very complex contexts. In the case of Nam June Paik such complexity should be taken into account. This essay does not intend to evaluate Nam June Paik's work in terms of art history. Rather, it tries to evaluate the character of 'sedentary nomadism' inherent to his work and life in terms of aesthetics and cultural history.

Nomadism expanded along with the development of communication technology. This term has also been culturally overestimated in the postmodern period, and has even been highly praised philosophically. However, I think the cultural and philosophical praise of nomadism is often inflated in postmodern discourse. If we critically review the notion of nomadism, this may challenge our modern reliance on this myth. Paik's life can serve as a good model to begin this deconstruction.

There are facts in Paik's life that are very uncomfortable and irritating to Koreans. They are not well known to the general public but have not been purposefully hidden and only disclosed to some. These facts have not, however,

been culturally acknowledged and evaluated, and were partially hidden or somehow brushed aside when Korea began to praise Paik for being a world renowned artist born in Korea.

The facts are that in the height of the Korean War, in 1951, Paik fled Korea and moved to Japan. To put things bluntly, he escaped. These facts should be given consideration when one is trying to view Paik's life and art in terms of nomadism. There have been, of course, attempts at revealing this and relating it to aesthetic evaluation. In an essay on Paik's life and work, somebody tried to sublimate this fact by relating it to issues regarding Zen. I, on the other hand, wish to address this issue and extend it into a cultural and aesthetic dimension.

It is shameful to flee Korea while it is caught in war. Paik himself did not deny this. When confronted for being "a coward who escaped the war", he replied, "At the time that was the only option I had." This reply does not seem like an apology coming from the bottom of his heart, though. He clearly asserts, "I fled." Like many other intellectuals from wealthy families at the time, Paik was in favor of Marxism. About the fact that he went to Hong Kong as a translator for his father in 1949 he remarks, "As I was cunning, I fled to Hong Kong. It was a splendid exile." The fact that Paik fled his country caught in the middle of a war was surely a detestable scene to most Koreans. Furthermore, as Paik himself admits, his father was a highly prominent Japanese collaborator. "My father was a Japanese collaborator. He opened a steel factory in North Korea with the sum of thirty million won borrowed from Japan. By removing the colonial context from this situation, this practice would appear to be a regular business transaction in the current landscape of global economic exchange." This remark could be controversial and put under accusation. For Paik's discretion about the colonial situation was very ambiguous. However, we shall move on from this point.

I just want to treat his remark that "I fled in the midst of a war" in a public way and evaluate it. In contrast to the ways in which these issues have been addressed in clandestine ways, I would like to deal with them publicly in terms of

cultural nomadism.

Unlike people from other countries, not many Koreans fled the country during the war and if any did they were almost invisible. The mood in Korea was such that to flee was considered very shameful behavior and even a taboo. One of these rare cases was none other than Nam June Paik, the representative Korean artist. So we don't need to avoid dealing with his case from a cultural perspective.

I suppose there were more cases like Nam June Paik's. They should also be closely examined. Japanese collaborators who fled to Japan during the Korean War should be named. Those who were able to flee in those times had to have been the collaborators of the imperialist regime. However, except for the covert collaborators, there might have been individuals and families who fled while considering themselves 'lucky'. Not all these people should be vilified. The possibility of people fleeing the war should the opportunity present itself should not be completely excluded. There may have been those who fled during the war. This is shameful, but probable. Though under different circumstances, many Jews fled Europe during the Great War and went to America. Many Jews engaged in resistance activity in France but many other Jews fled. In order to consider nomadism, numerous real lines of escape that occurred during the war should be acknowledged.

The flight of wealthy families to Japan during the war is a stigma in the history of Korea. Nam June's father could have been condemned as a Japanese Collaborator in this respect. Then what about Nam June himself? His flee was a shameful deed but not as bad as his father's. It might have been enough to accept that he had 'fled the war' and felt sorry about that. Then what is still to be done? I just want to say that nomadism encompasses heterogeneous traits of escape. The lines of escape Deleuze and Guattari emphasized while praising them were about fleeing from the power of the nation. While such an emphasis is important, I suspect it has been overestimated and over praised. To see nomadism as fur-

nished only with 'good will or purpose' is too limited a view and can veer toward narrow-minded idealism. The escape from the power of the state leaves a strong trajectory, but there are other kinds of trajectories as well. The kind of trajectory we see in Nam June Paik's life seems to be the exact opposite. After growing up in a family catering to fascist imperialism, he deserted the country devastated by the war.

The complexity of all lines of flight should be acknowledged. Paik's specific line of flight from the context of the Korean War can be studied to reveal the paradoxes inherent in the notion of nomadism. This peculiar line of escape inscribes the character of nomadism as inherent to Nam June Paik, his life, and deeds. Is this shameful exile the only thing to be said about Paik? Probably not. Nam June Paik was seemingly able to induce the second phase of his flight from the cultural and aesthetic dimension. This was the escape from nationalism. Therefore two heterogeneous escapes formed his nomadism. Fleeing from the country and the nation at war was the realistic exile. Then there came the moment in which aesthetic freedom was yielded from this shameful incident. That would be the exile from the inflexible nationalism – exile in an aesthetic way, in the name of artistic freedom. This aesthetic moment worked in diverse ways. These two movements of exile constituted the fleeing inherent to nomadism.

It is true that these exiles have occurred in the dramatic form of fleeing from the country at war. However, one can't assume that the circumstances of the Korean War were the only cause of fleeing and exile. It may sound ridiculous but Nam June Paik's mother was already concerned about Paik while he was still a child because "his horoscope suggested that he would wander in many directions and places." What this remark means is that Paik's multiple layered fleeing and exile were not just a result of the over interpretation of actual accidental incidents but a kind of repetitive structure.

Then how did the first exile turn in to the second one? When Paik fled Korea during the war in 1951, the situation was somewhat complex. After returning

from Hong Kong where he had visited in 1949, Paik was onboard an exile train in 1950. He talked about his experience at that time:

> Sometimes I felt I belonged to the wrong side. In 1950 I got onboard an exile train and the violence began. We escaped the scene and I could not decide to which side I had to belong. Then I thought. 'OK, I will have a grand awakening. Now I will see everything as if it were a baseball game. There is nothing to consider too seriously.' I was quite cynical.

The circumstance of indeterminacy – there are individuals keenly left to this ambiguity. This moment comes as very agonizing to most people. For contradictory conflicts coexist here. The complex situation gets more serious. But Nam June Paik realized that he should not take it seriously, it should be just like a game.

Some commentators sublimate this realization as a Zen-style grand awakening, but is this really necessary? Such an evaluation would be to overestimate Zen. I think the moment Paik described as 'a grand awakening' has transformed the first realist exile into the second, an aesthetic one. It is not certain whether he was really willing to see the miserable scene on an exile train the same way one would see a baseball game. This may just be something he projected in America. However, a process certainly occurred in which a realist conflict was replaced with an aesthetic game and with repetition.

Of course one can call the character of game in Paik's performance art or video art "Taoist humor" or "a Zen deviation." Paik's use of the mechanism of game or playfulness reflects the cost inherent to his chosen line of flight. In order to flee, despite the reproach for being a coward or a betrayer, he must then turn this act into an innocent game. This game must be "artistically" very unprecedented and Paik had to somehow endow himself with a greater innocence.

This interpretation is not done to psychoanalyze him. Instead it is done

in order to grasp Paik's nomadism present in his performances and video works. Nomadism in a real scenario is not simple at all but a complex combination of complicated escapes or exiles. Paik's line of escape is similar and peculiar at the same time.

So did he evacuate the realist and political field and flee to the space of fantasy that art may have offered? Was he was just an apolitical person in a cynical way and is his art apolitical? We have to consider the two movements of exile mentioned earlier. Above all Paik fled the political context of reality – fleeing in spite of all the shame and even while the country was at war. But he was not apolitical in the realm of art that he had fled into. Rather, he was keenly aware of the politics of culture and aesthetics. His sensitive attitude toward Zen attests to this. John Cage who Paik confessed to have been a great influence had indeed actively absorbed Japanese style Zen. But Nam June Paik criticized the way Suzuki, who was popular in America and Europe at that time, was problematic and compromised in terms of cultural politics.

Suzuki, Japan's god-like philosopher, wrote texts that differ in meaning in the English and Japanese versions. In the Japanese text the atrocities in Manchuria are all justified. But in the English text, that is not the case. In Germany, he even published a book titled Zen as the Basic Spirit of the Imperial military. In it, dokodai is Zen and hara-kiri is Zen. The basic spirit of the Japanese army was to follow their orders to death. To me, the compromise of Zen and Japanese imperialism is not a simple story; it is a rich area to investigate. You are not even entitled to argue about nationalism.

Although Nam June Paik fled politics and played an aesthetic game, he maintained political interest to some degree. In other words his nomadism was political on the first dimension but political in its own way in the second dimension. Although he was revealed to be extremely apolitical in his first exile, in the second, artistic exile he was a political nomad.

For this reason his artistic activities should not be treated as a Zen awak-

ening. Paik was not someone to be enchanted by the purity of Zen focusing on serene meditation. Rather, he fled the disaster but reencountered it and played with it aesthetically. Realistic exile at first, but followed by another stronger, aesthetic exile – aesthetic exile but, at the same time distress, unconventional happening. This coexistence of an aesthetic exile and distress is more prominent in Paik's tendency to find a game in the middle of conflict and chaos.

The essence of his neo-dadaist happenings lies firstly in fleeing the boundary of reality and then overcoming it aesthetically. His way of encountering music testifies this. He never studied composition. So his composition was 'very poor' and he played the piano 'in a topsy-turvy way.' His way of art was a 'topsy-turvy' one that fled from the legitimate way. Then it was in his 'topsy-turvy deeds' that his splendid originality was displayed.

Good Morning Mr. Orwell in 1984 reflected such a tendency. When Orwell claimed that the video camera was an oppressive means of surveillance, Paik believed he could play with it while circumventing this gloomy forecast. Paik used the means of communication in a similar way. Not to flee technology but to use it aesthetically; to use the speed of communication but have slowness interfere somewhere in various ways.

So he was quite cynical about the attempt to understand art in terms of the grand sublime and the pure. In an essay in which he confessed he had fled the scene of war, the interviewer remarked, naively, "I realize once again that art comes from the pure." Then Paik responded half humbly, half cynically, "I had no purpose. I just did what I wanted to do, as I grew up in a child's whining way. My family was well-off until 1963. So I could do whatever I wanted to do. Then this becomes that and that becomes this. There is no purely artistic nomadism. I don't even know. I just do what I want to do without any purpose."

Sometimes because he was well-off, sometimes because he was competing with other artists, (e.g. "We are competitors. It is important how we spend a year") he played games. Competitive play was very important in his nomadism

– extreme competitiveness and constant playing. Without this, his life would be nothing. “I am always interested in extreme values.” In the same way Paik turned a confrontation into play while fleeing the country at war, it is easy to imagine that he played on an extreme level. If not, he could not have overcome his exile and fleeing.

This extreme play was extremely apolitical on the one hand, but aesthetically political on the other hand in that he was against the abuse of culture for the sake of politics. In an essay he contributed to the Fluxus magazine in 1963 he mentioned:

> In order not to become a merchant of ‘our’ culture like Suzuki, I abstained from talking about Zen. For cultural chauvinism is more harmful than political chauvinism. It is more harmful because it is disguised. To advertise Zen, which is abandoning the self, is a stupid thing as it is the suicide of Zen.

Here the political and apolitical characters inherent in Nam June Paik are revealed. He attained his own politics in a cultural and aesthetic way by not only taking exile from the country at war but also from all kinds of nationalism and patriotism, and he did it only through this way. This extremely apolitical and aesthetic playing achieved its own political character even if by way of a long detour.

Nam June Paik was an extraordinary nomadic artist. But so far he has been over exaggerated and worshipped in Korea. The title “the inventor of video art” has been overused in overly simplistic, nationalist ways. The installation works, sculptures and other trends of video works that he focused his effort on were easily ignored. There are many trends in video art, such as Bill Viola, Gary Hill and Joan Jonas, who combined performance and video. Nevertheless, the Korean art scene only recorded and consumed video art in the style of Nam June Paik.

A chauvinist tendency underlies this phenomenon of exhorting him as

‘a Korean artist who glorified Korea.’ This tendency is not necessarily shameful, but it is wrong. It binds Paik to the nationalism and chauvinism that he wanted to escape.

> Some people ask, why don’t you work on Korean nationality? Why don’t you use Samulnori? Why don’t you advertise Korea? But all these are utterly senseless to me. It is not easy to live a year in this dreary world. But what else more can you do?

To praise Nam June Paik while focusing on the title “globally renowned nomad born in Korea” is somewhat paranoid. All the attempts to appropriate him as a global Korean end up suppressing his nomadism.

Until the moment of his death Paik was never a Korean. He was a nomad scattered all over America, Germany and Korea, and he wanted be spread out among these countries. He requested that one third of his ashes be taken to Korea. But there are numerous attempts in Korea to culturally appropriate him beyond this one third ratio. All in the name of the Korean nomad!

The last sentence in the quotation above was not left in on a whim. “It is not easy to live a year in this dreary world. But what else more can you do?” One tends to seek exile from the dreary world, realistically and aesthetically, further and further. This movement rendered Paik a nomad. Then what is the sedentary aspect in this nomadism?

In the midst of continuously fleeing, the nomad must find himself still in the middle of the disaster. Although he rode the flow of electronics and crossed the boundaries of media being caught up in numerous struggles again and again, the electronic nomad does not totally entrust himself to advanced communication media. The aesthetic way in which Paik used the media was the insertion of various ways of slowness into the fast flying images. “I love the technology that is the anti- to technology.”

Here I find certain aspects inherent to his nomadic flee. Nam June Paik did not just flee with ideas. He really fled the country at war but did not stop there. He also fled the cultural nation and nationalism, to the greatest possible extent available to him. To flee in reality is far more actual and brutal than to flee only in ideas. His perfor-

mances within Fluxus that actively engaged his body were a testimony to how he paid attention to his own body, a truly fleeing body.

However a real fleeing person would not just crawl and run. He should flee way faster, riding the media faster than the body. Otherwise the body would not withstand it and redeem him aesthetically. So the nomad runs around the globe again and again over the boundaries of political nations and cultural nations. In this sense, the pinnacle of Paik's video art is not the video installation but the one in which he used the media and satellite.

The trajectory of his performing art, initiated by the unconventional awareness of the body and later developed through video art, and finally global scale media art, can be seen as discontinuous continuity. This artist who emphasized the weight of the body could not have reached the notion of the speed at which light and images circulate by accident. Everything is medium – from the body to musical instruments, to TV. Existing on different planes, they move at the speed of crawling. This imperceptible crawling and running is how the media achieves the speed beyond itself. This oscillation, the speed at which images and information travel, is also encountered in the body despite its weight. This is a strange paradox. But art is a confrontation with this strangeness.

Nam June Paik noticed this paradoxical irony caught between this fastness and slowness, heaviness and lightness. He was surely enchanted by TV and the progress of media. His discovery of global communication in terms of media art in the 1980s is remarkable. He was always being enchanted by fast speed. And he wanted to run and even fly alongside it. But by building a global scale communication work he was not just admiring the construction of the splendid information superhighway. When he gave the title Globe vs. Daydream to the above-mentioned set of media works, he seemed to have noticed the element of a daydream and recklessness in the human effort to communicate image and information on a global scale. Despite traveling the globe as a nomad, along lines of image and information, his body inevitably contained chasms of globalization, nothing and smallness. Crawling over crawling, flying over flying, your body and mind repeating this crawling and flying, very slowly and painfully. I perceive this movement as a complex process of Po Wal [포월(匍越)] or Wal Po [월포(越匍)], which in Chinese means "to go beyond through crawling."

Fleeing and being a nomad, a nomad might feel he is always crawling and crawling. No matter how hard an electronic nomad tries to escape and flee immaterially, he encounters disaster materially. The body that circled round and round in electronic current has not forgotten that it is not free from the heaviness and slowness of material, as if bound to a wheelchair. This should be the incident the little word 'sedentary' represented in the phrase "sedentary nomadism."

Last, about cultural nationalism. Paik overcame it again and again. His last action towards this goal was to divide his legacy so that it could belong to three different nations. Then what is the state doing when it worships Paik as a "nomadic artist that represents Korea"? The state that could not prevent Paik from fleeing now seems to be trying to grab him fast by the tail (which has succeeded in a bigger flight). This is an incorrect way to settle and prevents the nomadic escape in a bad way.

(1) Jung Hun-i, "Nam June Paik's Zen time" no.28, *Art History Journal.*

(2) Interview with <*Monthly Gaekseok*> January 1991.

(3) Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Video Visionary", *The New Yorker*, 5. May. 1875, p.46. Quoted from Kang Tae Hee, "The Nam June Paik's Art, vanguard of the avant garde: from Early Works to Video", <Art World> November 1988, vol.49, p.42

(4) Interview with <*Monthly Gaekseok*> January 1991.

(5) Kang Sukhi, "Nam June Paik and Me" <*Conversation with Nam June Paik*> Committee for the Establishment of Nam June Paik Art Center, 2006.

(6) Quoted from Jung Huni, "Zen Time of Nam June Paik" <Journal for Art History>, Vol.28, p.193.

(7) Investigating various moments in which video art emerged in terms of art history, Park Shineui criticized that excessive admiration of Nam June Paik in Korea had steered the focus of video art to installation works. "Rereading the Video Art of Nam June Paik", <*Conversation with Nam June Paik*> Committee for the Establishment of Nam June Paik Art Center, 2006.

(8) Interview with <*Monthly Gaekseok*> January 1991.

(9) I am quite skeptical about Oh Kwang Soo's remark that the life and art of Nam Jun Paik revealed 'a strong sense of recurrence' in which he left and then 'wanted to come back to Korea.' Oh Kwang Soo, "The Art of Nam Jun Paik and Nomadism", <*Conversation with Nam Jun Paik*> Committee for the Establishment of Nam Jun Paik Art Center, 2006.

(10) It was Asada Akira who pointed out that "perhaps Nam Jun Paik seemed to present this network of media as an indiscreet and dismal daydream." The essay written after the performance <Hello, Nam Jun Paik> performed by a group of artists in 2006.

.