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Art Collection as Open Source, Art Museum as Laboratory: Interview with Yangachi

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Kwon Taehyun writes critiques and curates exhibitions while studying art theory and cultural studies. Although he is working in the art field, he is more interested in things that are not art but are inside art. He continues to study the gap and the possibilities that art and politics create for each other. He is recently planning a project that deals with mobility and the existence of objects.

Yangachi started his work by focusing on net art, surveillance, hacking, and *e-government*, then he focused on tactical media and location-based media. Later, he declared media art that excludes electricity and electronics. He presented *Middle Korea*, *Bright Dove Hyunsook*, and *Night of Burning Bones and Flesh*. He is currently working on a *Galaxy* project related to AI, mobility, energy, robots, and smart cities.

Kwon Taehyun(hereafter KWON): Let us start a conversation with the idea of making and sharing *Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer* by Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe as an open source. Your work is not only an artistic practice, but it seems like a proposal for a new model in the system of art museums.

Yangachi(hereafter YANG): We can start with Nam June Paik. However, it is necessary to look at Nam June Paik not as a part of art history but in the context of cultural history, technological history, or life history. We need to take Paik out of the art history and make him meet many other things. The most important thing that needs to be reviewed again through *Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer* is the concept of "open source." It is directly connected to the problems that art museums are facing today. Above all, there are problems related to preserving, restoring, and collecting media works. How to archive and preserve the works that exist in the form of hardware and software? Recently, the dispute related to the restoration of Paik's 1988 work *The More The Better* at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea dramatically shows the derived problem from it. And this is not only a problem of Paik but a problem of the entire media art. Currently, it seems as if the hardware is holding software hostage. Of course, that's why the process of including media works into the museum system and art history may have been smooth. However, we have to reexamine the perspective of seeing hardware as if it were a sculpture, and at the same time, contemplate how to consider the software contained in it. Right here, the concept of open source needs to be introduced. Wouldn't it be possible to make public the software of works as open source so that many people can use them daily? Furthermore, I think that this practice should not remain at the level of a single work. Beyond making Paik's works open source, Nam June Paik itself should be open sourced.

KWON: Collecting works in software form raises many questions at the level of museology. I understand that the software part of many works is still backed up to a physical device and stored in the museum storage. Your opinion that it is necessary to make the works open source is to see the possibility that art museums will function as a platform. In particular, it is interesting to say that not a specific work of Paik should be made open source, but Nam June Paik itself must be open sourced. That reminds me of GitHub, a platform where developers save and share their code. Programmers use their GitHub account as their portfolio and sometimes use it to refer to code posted by others. Sometimes GitHub itself becomes a community for developers to collaborate. In that platform, as much as they take resources, a culture of sharing what they have created is naturally formed. In such an open source culture, the work's authorship and copyright disappear, but the relationship and connection with the people who shared it remain. This aspect of the open source culture has something in common with your statement that not Paik's specific work, but Paik itself should be open and shared. I wonder if we can apply the GitHub model to art museums.

YANG: That's exactly what I mean. I think that we can implement this kind of structure

in art museums. Like the GitHub example you mentioned, the open source is not a new concept. We can apply a new museum storage model inspired by the developers' sharing culture to the museum. In this sense, we should not trap ourselves in art history but come out of that. However, a format like "laboratory" is more appropriate than a "platform" because the platform concept seems to emphasize the functional aspect. Actually, the platform model is also working commercially. On the other hand, a laboratory is a place that allows failures and mistakes. New attempts become possible only when the art museum can provide an open experimental space to the public beyond the collection, education, and curation.

KWON: Why should it be a lab? How is the laboratory model different from the existing formats such as archives, libraries, or art museums?

YANG: Paik's archives, for example, tend to act as an apparatus that solidifies Paik's artistic status. To open and share Paik, not to accumulate, it requires an entirely different system from archives. Like the GitHub platform you mentioned, we need a space where anybody can upload their data and use them freely. In the case of a library, it is indeed an open space where you can freely use data. Still, it differs from an open source system because a specific person or institution selects the data accumulated in the library.

KWON: In that sense, the openness issue must include the possibility of participating in the storage of information as well as the possibility of accessing information. It is necessary to remember that the archive is a system that leaves memorable things according to specific criteria and excludes the rest, that is, the place where the ideological mechanism of knowledge and power operates. It is a place of memory and, at the same time, a place of oblivion and exclusion.

YANG: I don't think the open source model can work properly in the existing archives system. A laboratory is a hybrid form, which performs curation and education that are the functions of existing art museums and works as a library or archive. And at the same time, the lab is more open. As a lab, the art museum should be a place to perform educational programs, exhibitions, and even producing works.

KWON: So, do you think art museums should turn into labs? Do you think we should push the archive model out and shift to the lab model? Or should it be taken as meaning that archives for recording the past and labs for contemporary practices should coexist?

YANG: Shouldn't an art museum basically maintain the function as an archive but run a separate laboratory system? And at the same time, the archive itself also needs to change. First of all, it is necessary to reconsider the archive taking the viewpoint of "things." This point of view has in common with the discussion that we should review art museums' role in the context of cultural or life history instead of art history. Museums have artworks in their collections as mythical objects. We have to see how those objects and things are different. Now we live in an era of new things. It is also detected that more and more things are connecting to each other. From this point of view, art museums should think about new things in earnest from now on.

KWON: In the first place, we can remind that an art museum is an apparatus that turns objects into mythical works. The tradition called "ready-made" in art has dealt with such issues outrightly. In this context, an interesting issue arises when "media art" begins to be collected, which is a problem resulting from the gap between software and hardware mentioned above. Let's think about a USB memory device that contains a work file. It is only a shell containing software, but it is often stored as if it were a mythical object. There are even cases where the edition number is stamped on it and then traded in the art market.

YANG: That's right. That's why we need to consider the connection that the software in the storage device will generate, not the work of media art as an object. From this point of view, I propose the museums being open and connecting. Museums' content can no longer have both entrance and exit in it. It is not the exhibition that is at the very end of the work. Shouldn't we imagine the new destiny of the art, that is, used in our daily life after coming out of art museums?

KWON: Since we have already started the discussion, let's talk about collecting in more detail. Collecting is one of the fundamental functions of museums. Do you think it should change the way museums own works by introducing the idea of open source?

YANG: Before discussing the issue of the new way of collecting works, I would like to ask if the existing art museums are properly holding works. Think about my work *E-Government*(2003). It is a web page, then how should it be archived? We can consider several models. The first is to save the source as it is. As mentioned earlier, it is a method of storing the software files in a physical memory device and keeping it in the museum storage. The second is to maintain the online webpage as it is. The web page will be managed by the museum and used for exhibitions and educational programs. Finally, collecting the work in the sense of open source is to open the web page to the public and share all the sources and codes of the work. It is an art collection as open source, which allows various people in different eras to create their own e-government. And the structure of the web page created in 2003 reflects the PHP or HTML environment in those days. As the web environment changes over time, the code will take on historical value. Opening up the code has such an advantage.

KWON: I know that there is already an art museum that holds your *E-Government*. How is the work kept there?

YANG: Daejeon Museum of Art has my work. There, the work is collected in the first method. In other words, the source code of the web page is saved as a file and kept in museum storage. It even gets saved on a CD. Not only my works but also Paik's works are collected in the same way. One day, I talked about Paik's works with the person in charge of the collection at another museum. I heard that the museum also keeps hardware and software separately. Hardware is categorized and stored in the same way as a sculpture, and software is kept with manuals and videos explaining how it should be installed, in the form of a document signed by Paik. In these cases, we now have to look at the relationship between hardware and software, that is, between sculptural works and objects. I am paying attention to data working between them.

KWON: There should be a little more explanation about the existence of data between works and objects.

YANG: Let's start again between hardware and software. In the past, movies existed in the form of film. It was both a material existence and an image, in which content and form were merged. However, the storage device where the data is saved is a little different. What does it mean to keep the data of works on a physical storage device such as a USB memory device, CD, or HDD? It does not exist in a way that activates the data in it. Of course, this does not mean that the object itself that the data is saved on is unnecessary. The problem is that the data is left inoperative in the physical device at all. We have to take out the USB memory device as an object stored in museum storage, connect it to the world, and activate the data in it. Even if the data are taken out of the memory device, it is briefly shown at the exhibition and then put back into the memory device. How about connecting the data in the object to the world instead of plugging it into the museum computer? I have been interested in the web from the very beginning of my artist career because the network is directly connected to the world.

KWON: The critical difference seems to be revealed between analog films and digital storage devices. To think about collecting methods, we must look at first how the way the works exist has changed. As not only works but also the way objects exist have changed, the system of art museums holding them must be changed. In order to discuss the methodology of the art collection, it is necessary to first think about the change in the way substances exist. This view calls for a fundamental rethinking of existing collecting methods.

YANG: We are well aware that physical collection is important to the survival of art museums. However, it may become more and more difficult to maintain the art museum with such a method alone. It's not a matter of changing your data storage device from a CD to a USB memory device or to a high-tech HDD. Even if the data are backed up to the web, the fundamental problem still remains if it is saved in a closed web hard. In that sense, we need to expand our perspective from the art history of mythical works to the history of objects connecting each other.

KWON: By the way, the new collecting method as open source has a side that betrays the existing collecting methods. What should we do about the monopolistic position of art collections and the problem of artworks becoming scarce goods in the market?

YANG: Lawrence Lessig, who proposed Creative Commons, says like this, "Let's sell books, but share knowledge." We have to keep this in mind. Even if we distribute the text for free in a pdf file, that does not mean that the book is not sold. As knowledge is circulated and discourse is formed in this way, books might be sold more. There is already an answer in this model. We can also reconsider the culture of developers. How can we understand the changes caused by Linux, an open source OS? Does the sharing of knowledge and content damage the original? Not at all. We need to apply this perspective to art as it is. Acknowledge the original, but share it. My attitude toward the open source is nothing new. However, I actively propose this methodology to art and art museums. Some artists might object to the open source release of their work's data, of course. So artists may need to be aware of the new connections and reproductions that will occur when the data are plugged into the world, not art. I want to spread this attitude by opening my work first as an open source.

KWON: Can the collection as an open source be applied only to works that use new media? Or is there a method that can be applied to the classical works that museums have?

YANG: Of course, I think we should the classical art collections open sourced. We need to turn the content into data, then open and share it. Does that mean that the works disappear? Not at all. The works obtain more possibilities. Open source and originality are not contrary concepts. Whether it's Rubens or Van Gogh, I think it's right to share in some way.

KWON: When you mentioned such a classic, the case of The Metropolitan Museum of Art came to my mind. The museum provides images of its collections in super high-quality originals to the public. Since they open dozens of megabytes of original image files, they are often of great help to researchers in situations where they cannot actually see the works in the flesh. We can also think of the *Google Arts & Culture* project, which photographs and shares a number of museums' leading collections in gigapixels. However, since Google does not provide files in a form that can be downloaded and used, the limitations are clear and cannot be named open source.

YANG: It is necessary to surmount such cases well and strongly propose to art museums opening their collections and databases. Many art museums are unable to keep pace with the current changes. In this old way, we cannot treat properly the new works that continue to become dematerialized. I think the museum could lose its function if it goes

like this.

KWON: There is another thing that comes to my mind. If the art collections become open source, a new phase is likely to be opened up for art criticism. In the critiques, rather than describing images with text or referring to pictures, it might be possible to involve part of the works in the text itself. In the movie field, the style of audio-visual critique seems to be established. It may be possible to produce reviews in a completely different medium instead of text.

YANG: HTML, which people mainly use for web development, is short for "Hypertext Markup Language." The word "HTML" itself contains "hypertext." If art museums share works as open source, we might expect critiques as hypertext.

KWON: Some people write poetry with code. As programming languages also tend to become more and more humanized, I don't feel that the days of producing critique text with code are so far away. Computing language has evolved from a fundamental machine language consisting of binary numbers of 0 and 1 to assembly language. Again, C or Python, which is widely used recently, has been developed. Furthermore, nowadays, coding can be done without manual input. Even if I write critique text in a coding language, I don't have to dwell on the incommunicability. Sooner or later, I will challenge myself to write in a coding language.

YANG: The concept of coding itself seems to be changing. So, despite this, how long will we keep Paik's works like sculptures?

KWON: That's right. The way of existence of an object connects to the status of the data. And changes in various aspects at the language level are detected. Therefore, it is natural to reflect these changes in the collecting methods of the museum. Now that we're talking about code. Let's talk about migration issues related to the art collection. In web ecology, flash is a hot topic. By the end of 2020, the platform called "Flash" will entirely end its service. Here, a problem about how to handle all flash format content remaining on the Internet arises. Therefore, developers are preparing for migration in various ways. Some people change to flash to html5 and make it work, and there is a movement to create a third party program that can run flash in a web browser even after the service is terminated. This response is a software version of Paik's *The More The Better*'s problem when cathode-ray tube TVs are no longer produced.

YANG: Migration is an essential issue for any work using the technology medium. The same goes for the art collection. Since we talked about flash, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries is a representative group that used flash among recent artists. However, I don't know if it's a response to Flash's end of service, but recently they're just working on the video. Flash animations and video files with only the final surface have different structures. Those look similar but not the same. The way the work exists or the features of the medium can affect reading comprehension as well. We need sensitive awareness about these characteristics.

KWON: Then, since Paik's *The More The Better* also has the delicate characteristics of cathode-ray tube TV, do you think it is essential to keep the original medium alive? I know that there is an issue of whether to keep the CRT or migrate to an LED display using new technology.

YANG: First of all, we cannot directly compare Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries and Nam June Paik cases because creation and collection are completely different dimensions. But if Paik were alive, he would think there was no need to maintain the CRT TV. Here we come back to the problem we were initially discussing. Paik's

thoughts and spirit disappear when obsessed with hardware only at the level of art history. It is the same as we have no attention to Paik's spirit and consider only his body sacred. Isn't it like forgetting the event where he destroyed the piano and holding only the remains of the broken piano?

KWON: But isn't Paik's spirit working to transcend time because such objects contain memories in them? Besides, in contemporary museology, isn't it a new creation that art museums replace their past collections and put them in a different context?

YANG: I admit that. That's why it's essential to maintain the archive's function, but we have to be aware that it's not enough. We need not only a place to preserve the body but also a place that will function to attract souls. That's a laboratory in my point of view.

KWON: The metaphor of body and soul seems to provide a proper explanation for the art museum model in which archive and laboratory work together that you suggested. And can't it also become a matter of past and present, in other words, history and contemporary practices?

YANG: That's similar. I am proposing an art museum where events can occur, not staying in historicizing the remains of events. However, it is true that the present art museum is controlled, so it is difficult for real events to occur. What is an event cannot be curated. What is delicately controlled or intended cannot be an event. Events are essentially something that cannot be planned. Art museums can bring in an event only by providing a space that accepts its possibilities. We need the art museum with wings of both the past and the present, or art history and event.

KWON: Isn't the art museum itself a space that describes history? Art history is not separated from art museums, but art history is also created through art museums' research. Isn't that also an event?

YANG: In that dimension, it is necessary to acknowledge the fundamental role of the art museum. Recently, I think of an art museum as a shelter. Various genres of art are entering the museum. This is probably because these genres can gain much more independence and autonomy in art museums than institutions in different fields. This trend will continue. To accept this atmosphere now, a form of a lab is necessary. It can undoubtedly create various synergies even in the intersection with other genres.

KWON: It is also noteworthy that art history itself is being rewritten through such genre intersections, so-called "interdisciplinary art." I want to talk a little more specifically about the lab. First of all, does the laboratory you propose refer to a physical place?

YANG: Yes. It is a physical place. We need a space that we can actually touch technical media and run programs together. Many non-contact programs are held in current pandemic situations, and various reflections on physical places are being made. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the possibilities that are created when people meet in a physical space. It is not a matter of program content. It is really important because throughout physical meetings such things happen as as jokes, kiddings, and games. Those things turn into great ideas. However, when we run the contact-free program like now, we often focus only on numerical achievement. This is because it proceeds and ends according to the primary purpose. Because the laboratory must be a space to tolerate mistakes and failures, the problem of gathering in a physical place can be more important than anything else.

KWON: Due to COVID-19, the issue of virtual or online exhibitions is emerging. It can be extended to not only the laboratory that you propose but also to contemplation of the physical place of the art museum. Do you think the art museum as the physical place will

still be necessary?

YANG: I think the physical place is still important. Let's consider the GitHub platform again. The platform for programmers to post their code may be a virtual space, but there must be a physical foundation somewhere in which they can both think and make code. It's nice to have one's own space, but we need places to gather and make fun plans like an ant nest. There must be such a space in the art world. There are only personal networks based on artists' studios and small exhibition spaces run by artists or curators. Can art museums also contribute to this network? As a platform, the art museum could also serve as a physical place for the network. I have been working in Korea since the beginning of media art. For me, the experience of Ilju Art Center in the past remains special. Not only exhibitions but also workshops related to equipment and technology were held continuously, so there were opportunities for people interested in gathering together. While meeting people in various fields there, I learned something through unexpected people and expanded relationships with others. Turning these experiences online seems to be near impossible because unspecified encounters and relationships are mixed offline.

KWON: It has much in common with what I felt while watching online residency and online exhibitions recently. Whether it is online or offline, in other words, contact or contact-free is secondary. The most important thing is what kind of connection can be made through the program.

YANG: Like people, things are now connecting. We can also point out the meaning of online is expanding more and more through the Internet of Things. The concept of connection and its status is important. On the other hand, we must think about the problem of online also in a sensual dimension. For example, let's think about replacing the standing concert experience of a rock festival with an online concert. It's impossible. However, the recent generation, who grew up playing many games, seems to sense something different in the virtual body.

KWON: Indeed, the concert of American rapper Travis Scott at the game *Fortnite* was impressive. I think this is one of the few successful examples of online performances. He didn't merely transfer the concert to the image. He utilized the game situation, immersive state, and virtuality, then held the show in a completely different way from the offline. Looking at it, I realized that if I have to do something online, it is essential to plan a new online program instead of broadcasting the existing offline program.

YANG: This is probably because, in the game, the virtual gravity and virtual bodies are working. There is another possibility in such virtuality. Just as games do now, hacking played such a role by the time I started playing. It was a time when I was playing hacking, such as hacking other people's websites and changing their index pages.

KWON: I remember the recent presentation in which you discussed the encounter between art and technology. At that time, you expressed doubts about the meeting between art and technology. Let's talk more specifically about that.

YANG: First of all, there is a problem of not knowing technology accurately in the art field. We cannot solve this problem because we try to give meaning to technology without knowing what it is. Without an understanding of the technological dimension, Paik's work cannot be handled properly either in curation or archives. In my case, my understanding of Paik's work completely changed while working with his technician Lee Jeong-sung. The attitude of trying to understand separately, technical issues on the one hand, and aesthetics or art history on the other, is a problem. An integrated approach to both can lead to a more robust discussion. The reason why I emphasize the laboratory model is that the introduction of a lab can create a gap for an engineer's thought to enter the museum.

KWON: Interest in discourse about technology seems to be increasing. There are also many exhibitions and projects related to this.

YANG: Will such an art exhibition work as an event? I'm skeptical. It is a brief event for the audience and is not working as a social event. The position of technology in culture is ambiguous. Above all, we cannot ignore the tendency of such works to become spectacles. We need to reflect on technology and science.

KWON: Somewhere, the term media art itself seems to be used as a term for a genre that uses technology as a spectacle.

YANG: Media art in that way has now become a commercial event. Artists or groups working on technology are now found to operate in the same system as a commercial enterprise.

KWON: Then, in what direction should we reflect on technology?

YANG: In relation to this, the most important issue in recent years is the appearance of artificial intelligence. Art has basically been interpreting and translating the world. However, it is now becoming more and more apparent that human choices are not the best. It is necessary to reflect on the interpreting role itself. So what are we to do now? If we don't contemplate the different functions of art, a real crisis will come. Lee Se-dol, who played go with AlphaGo, no longer plays go. However, he is still living a life involved in go. What can artists learn from his decision and attitude?

KWON: With the development of technology, the way people do something has changed continuously. If we had to work hard on the broom to perform cleaning in the past, now we can operate a robot cleaner. If so, we can think about how art will change. However, since art itself is based on critical thinking, it can act as a warning to something or help us move away from the current situation.

YANG: As you said, it's time to think critically. A more rigorous surveillance system will be established as technology gradually develops. Rather than a simple surveillance camera, Lidar-based sensor technology that perceives space in three dimensions is growing tremendously fast. And major companies are already gathering our data. However, there is not only technology working by capital and power. There has always been the technology of the people against capitalism. Workers, for example, have been doing simple hacks to bypass payphone systems. There have always been struggles between technology and life.

KWON: It is the time to contemplate how to create another agonism in the world while doing various artistic practices and looking back on the traditions within the technological culture. How about finishing the conversation here? Today, I feel that my imagination is being widened as we discuss various issues such as open source art collections, Yangachi's museology, which proposed an art museum as a laboratory, and the relationship between technology and art.

YANG: It was a good time.