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**Source** *NJP Reader #1 Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology*, pp.36-39

**Publisher** Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

# *Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Wongil Park*

## Colophon

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**Published on** 2010

# Wongil Park

Wongil Park was a professor of Anthropology at Korea University where he majored in Mongolian studies. Park is the author of several books on Mongolian history and culture, as well as shamanism.

Nam June Paik opened a new world of art through his exhibition with the unique name **Exposition of Music-Electronic Television** at the Parnass Gallery in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1963. In this exhibition, he hung the fresh head of a cow, dripping blood. According to Paik, for his performance, he took the form of “Daegamgut”, which is a Korean traditional exorcism through which people wish fortune to the house guardian deity. However, Paik’s brutal and weird performance in a wealthy area in Germany was stopped by the police because of the neighbor’s complaint, and the cow’s head was buried under the ground. Nam June Paik called himself, **Yellow Peril, C’est Moi!**, which means “I am the yellow peril”, in a letter to Maciunas one year before the performance.

As if his statement was an omen of peril, the gallery, with a 16-year history, closed down two years after Paik’s exhibition. The gallery owner, Rolf Jährling, sometimes joked, “the gallery was closed down through Nam June Paik’s exhibition”. Actually, during Paik’s exhibition, besides the cow’s head dripping blood, other violent and scary scenes also turned the gallery, once a family home, into “a haunted house”. This method of using psychological fear is close to the Mongolian custom in the 12th century to scare enemies at the start of war. Nam June Paik’s calling himself “the yellow peril” is not a metaphor or a symbol, but an expression of his awareness of his very impulsive and destructive performances.

Paik also used the notion “the blue sky” during his performances. This is another important indicative notion to show his awareness of being a “yellow peril”. “The blue sky” refers to an old immutable belief system of Northern nomadic people. Mongolian grasslands, shamans’ battlefield, was a space for a pledge under “the blue sky” and a land of countless betrayals. Nam June Paik’s statement makes us shudder like ancient people did when they heard “with the eternal power of heaven,

people from the sun rising place to the sun setting place surrender to me” as Genghis Khan or his descendants from the ancient Mongol empire once proclaimed. In other words, “by using somebody’s great experiments and the old art in totally different methods, I have created new art. In the future, everyone will use the method that I found and used, and they will make their own creative art with it. Video art is very different from traditional art. Create your own art without hesitation”.

How can we understand Paik’s art world better? Gilles Deleuze’s *A Thousand Plateaus* provides a spiritual guide and a supporting philosophy for the 21st century. One of the chapters - or one of the thousand plateaus - Deleuze creates is “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: - The War Machine”. 1227 is the year when Genghis Khan died during a war. It seems very natural to talk about Nam June Paik as an artist in the 21st century who represents the Eurasia grasslands, and ethnic people’s war machine, since Nam June Paik who wished the world to become “Teletopia” always kept the wild plain of grassland in mind.

It is not possible that any genius can be understood historically while being alive, thus, Nam June Paik explained many times that his ideas and the nature of his artworks are rooted in shamanism and the Northern culture. In other words, his art world and his video art were neither a sudden outburst nor an outcome of a rational decision. Clearly, Northern Eurasia grasslands’ mythology and philosophy in Paik’s subconsciousness provoked an unexpected artistic sensitivity in 1963.

Northern nomadic shamanism as a system to understand natural law is still an area of knowledge not widely understood. It is almost impossible to grasp the facts of shamanism because it has been oppressed, effaced, ignored, and distorted. Today, shamanism needs to be reconstructed and revitalized by a collaboration of philosophy, mythology, archeology, anthropology, astronomy, geography, linguistics, and art. Gilles Deleuze’s study of nomadism is a successful philosophic example. An artistic anthropology might be another useful method to find a path to the essence of shamanism.

Historically, Northern nomadic ethnic groups are based on shamanism and harmoniously merge with it. They have seriously studied economy, the separation

of powers in politics, new weapons in science, and symbols of light (blue sky) in art. In fact, the Eurasia grasslands are a place where wolves wail, god's wind blows, and blood and tears flow. There is no peace after peace; there is only danger after danger in this natural environment and history. In the Eurasia grasslands, survival depends on how fast one can access information and scientific technologies. In that respect, information and communication are like a light in the blue sky. The Northern ethnic groups respect the speed of light, and this philosophy of light is part of shamanism.

How are information and communication presented in Paik's art world? Nam June Paik once created an iconic artwork called ***Moon is the Oldest TV***. In fact, the moon is the oldest mirror for every being on earth even before human beings' existence. After humans came into being, the moon became a mirror for shamans among the Eurasia grasslands and its ethnic groups. Shamans in Manchuria call shaman's mirrors "panaptu, soul's shadow to see the world". Thus, there is no time but only space in the moon; it connects "land without night" and "land without dawn" like light does; it is the soul's mirror. That implies that today's media are like a soul's mirror transformed to daylight. One could say that the old moon, once shaman's mirror, eventually emerged as a medium in modern time. This analogy explains Paik's conception of media. Paik said, "medium is a concept from medieval theology indicating a method and a medium of communication with god." Etymologically, "gut", meaning exorcism, originates from a Mongolian word meaning "spirit". Therefore, media and "gut" have the same meaning. "Gut" is a skill to enjoy shadow and "medium" is a skill to enjoy "brightness". Thus, media, a core concept in Paik's work, is a mirror that helps communication like the old moon did.

Historically, Northern nomadic ethnic people value information and communication above anything else in performing religious services. Harmony and union are the bases for better communication and information. In order to have harmony and union, we need to be aware that all civilizations and cultures are equal. In the great Mongol empire, based on shamanism, that awareness was greatly practiced. The great Mongol empire was the only country without religious problems, since it clung to



Nam June Paik  
***Beuys and Shaman***, 1991 (still image).  
Nam June Paik Art Center Collection



Nam June Paik  
***Bye Bye Kipling***, 1986 (still image).  
Nam June Paik Art Center Collection



Blue Lake, Mongolia.  
Photo by Youngchul Lee

the notion of “Pax-Mongolica” creating a mix of cultures in an open society.

One of Nam June Paik’s works, ***The Moon on a Thousand Rivers*** could be considered an epitaph composed of many languages: various languages spoken all over the world are reflecting moon light on a thousand rivers like old mirrors. In Nam June Paik’s exhibition ***From Seoul to Budapest*** (1991), he showed Eurasia’s great path, a route from his place of birth, and the electronic super highway. He also exhibited a robot called Genghis Khan, an ancient horse riding man, Marco Polo, in ***From Venice to Ulan Bator*** at the 1993 Venice Biennial. In his works, Paik tried to show a historical period of time when shamanistic ethnic groups practiced a philosophy of harmony and union called “Jamchi”, a metaphor of the speed of light awakening the human soul and creating a real global village. In Paik’s early artworks, he already shows that video art has the power to construct a philosophy. ***Good Morning Mr. Orwell*** (1984) seems to be a message to proclaim a new age.

Paik’s work reminds us of the shaman of the Eurasian grasslands. The shaman created a spiritual crisis by tragic greatness and beauty and, thus, gave a new life to people. Perhaps Paik wanted to create a novel life for all human beings and cultures through the role he played as an artist. If we want to travel through Paik’s art world, we need to do so by opening various doors to and conducting various forms of analyses on his work.