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Sohyun Ahn

Nam June Paik had left several pieces of writings, exhibitions and interviews directly related to cybernetics. In his writing entitled Cybernated Art in 1965, he proclaimed the core of cybernetics art, and held his exhibition at New School for Social Research in New York at the same year whose title was <<Nam June Paik: Cybernetics Art and Music>>. In his article of Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan, he emphasized the novelty of relational tendency and interdisciplinary study on the ideas of Wiener and McLuhan, while comparing the former's cybernetics theory with the latter's thought. And by adding the list of the relationship of aesthetics and cybernetics to the end of his article, he disclosed that the theories could become the seed or catalyst of artistic creation beyond media and information theory. In the exhibition <<Cybernetic Serendipity: the Computer and the Arts>>¹⁹⁶⁸ curated by Jasia Reichardt at the Institute of Contemporary Art(ICA) in London, Paik's <Robot K-456> and monitors whose scanning lines were manipulated were on display. He also presented his vision on the art of information society at Jack Burnham's New York exhibition, <<Software: Information Technology - Its New Meaning for Art>> held at Jewish Museum in 1970 in which he'd participated.

By the way, through these exhibitions and writings related to cybernetics, it's not easy to make sure what standpoints artists including Paik took on technology. In their looks on cutting-edge technology used in the works of art at that time, expectations and concern couldn't help but to coexist. Rainer Usselman points out that <<Cybernetic Serendipity>> shows a typical dilemma that media art is facing as follows: "its complicated relationship with the socio-economic environment, the difficulty of engaging with its own historicity and transcending mere and

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Rainer Usselmann, "The Dilemma of Media Art: Cybernetic Serendipity at the ICA London," *Leonardo*, October 2003, Vol.36, No.5, pp.389-396.

the all-too-familiar sense of a naïve, unbridled optimism with its inevitable pitfalls and false dawns."¹ Paik was no exception in such criticism.

Then what standpoint did he have concerning the art whose boundaries with technology became blurred, namely, cybernetic art? And how can we define his viewpoint on the so-called technological art?

The communication Wiener defined was not a static system but a flexible one that requires the possibility to total change through feedback. As Wiener says, when communication is the process of raising the efficiency of the system gradually through feedback and making it most desirable, it seems that cybernetics is an optimistic view on the technology with which enables human(or animal) and machine to communicate. According to Wiener, however, because information like the entropy law of thermodynamics doesn't flow in the state of perfect order, there should be disorder, imbalanced information and noise to some extent. Therefore most desirable state is not given ahead or a priori to a single unwavering point. It is built through the interactions among the communicating parties. That makes Paik finish his declaration in *Cybernated Art* with an accentuated sentence, "We are in open circuits." Of Wiener's sayings, a most repeated sentence Paik frequently quoted in some of his writings is a paragraph that related to the white noise, "The information in which a message was sent plays the same role as the information in which a message is not sent." Paik related this idea with John Cage's unplayable score or music of indeterminacy. While there's a view focusing on the process of filling the blank in the system, Paik regarded the blank itself as important. To him, the blank, a driving force to keep on moving a puzzle, not to put one together, was the core of the puzzle.

Such standpoint leads to Paik's thought on technology. Paik explored art using technology, but it can't take us right away to a reckless optimism that technological development will always give us a positive change. That technology reaches a desirable point can be given by the result of how sufficient amount of interaction happens. Paik once said, "My robot, K-456 is a catastrophe of technology in the 21st century. We are learning to cope with it." This means we are learning through technological art the warning and criticism against catastrophe a

new technology may bring about.

On the other hand Paik said, “The real issue implied in ‘Art and Technology’ is not to make another scientific toy, but how to humanize the technology and the electronic medium.”² It doesn’t seem to be right to take his word, ‘humanize’ loosely as the restriction technological development. As Wiener insists, if human can reach the most favorable state to himself or to each and everyone as he’s going through interactions with machine, that can be seen as a kind of his confidence in machine’s self-control ability. But any technology can’t suggest a most desirable state ahead, either. Art should take responsibilities for how to control and to instruct technology.

In addition to that, his prudent attitude about technology is implied in his words; however, McLuhan, another key figure of Paik’s cybernetics would be a good guide, in case that we can’t get some detailed explanations from Paik enjoying short aphorisms. According to Paik, McLuhan was as much optimistic as Cage whereas Wiener pessimistic.³ Compared with a mathematician Wiener, a critic McLuhan gives many examples from works of art, especially in that point his optimistic attitude is stuck out a mile.

In McLuhan’s lecture entitled Art as Survival in the Electric Age held in Columbia University in 1973, he insists that art not only shows the way of life in the new era, but is a way of how to survive. He also says that artists’ offensive action is absolutely necessary for people not to fall into danger of self-satisfaction. “In the last decade one of the roles artists play is to prevent people from getting blindly accustomed to the environment. [...] The danger of becoming an automatic control device through the process of adapting to the environment is blocked and discontinued by the artists who create works of art with radical image that disturb human’s sense system. By agitating human senses, artists keep humans from accommodating themselves recklessly to their entire surroundings and becoming like a robot or slave.”⁴ McLuhan gives many examples of imagination or temporality from modern literature such as James Joyce, Edgar Allen Poe and so on. Regarding visual art, he insists on the gradual decline of the artistic tendency that has excluded, since Renaissance, other senses by focusing on perspective, abnormally privileging sight and

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Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970, p.306

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Nam June Paik, 1967, “Norbert Wiener et Marshall McLuhan,” in Edith Decker and Irmeline Lebeer, eds., *Nam June Paik: Du Cheval à Christo et Autres Écrits*, Bruxelles: Lebeer Hossmann, 1993, pp.163-164.

4

Stephanie McLuhan, David Staines, ed., *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, p.206.

5

Marshall McLuhan, Harley Parker, Jacques Barzun, *Exploration of the Ways, Means and Values of Museum Communication with the Viewing Public* (Proceedings of seminar), New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1969, pp.1-6.

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Nam June Paik, 1965, "Cybernetics Art," in Edith Decker and Iremeline Lebeer, eds., *op. cit.*, p.174.

linear way of perception; since early 20th century multi-sensorial and non-linear art anticipated such declines.⁵ He thinks we foresaw through art the characteristics of today's media environment.

Paik also talks about art as healing. Paik says technology can bring us a poison and art can cure it.

"Cyberneted art is very important, but art for a cybernated life is more important, and the latter doesn't need to be cybernated. (Maybe George Brecht's simplissimo is the most adequate.) But if Pasteur and Robespierre are right that we can resist poison only through certain built-in poison, then some specific frustrations and pain caused by a cybernated life require accordingly cybernated shock and catharsis. My everyday work with videotapes and the cathode-ray tube convinces me of this."⁶

Art as healing can be technological or maybe not. Perhaps cybernetics art could use technology which is poison for itself; however, the poison in that sense could have a power of healing. Strictly speaking, this is not optimism on technology, but optimism on art. Paik's <Robot K-456> walks like human being with the help of technology, but offers a shock through the performance of being killed by a car accident. This is more warning of such possibility through art rather than a direct criticism on technology.

Although Paik was prudent about technology, it can be said that he was optimistic about art. In conclusion, the meaning of 'humanized technology' is not to put on the brake of the development of technology, but to predict the influence of new technology and assume a critical attitude while getting accustomed to the change. In that sense, art should take in charge of such role to do so. In other words, Paik's humanization is artization. Therefore the artistic optimist was always compelled to be critical. Because of his belief that art should always predict and criticize forthcoming way of life, he was forced to be sensitive to the matters of life, and critical about social phenomenon. Paik is not an artist who indulged in techno-fetishism, but one who fell in love with art. #3

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Ahn is a curator at Nam June Paik Art Center. She studied Aesthetics and received her master's degree in French contemporary aesthetics from Seoul National University. She received her Master 2(former D.E.S.S) in Museology and New Media and her Ph. D. thesis titled Sense of Museum Space: Semiotic Analysis of Museographic Elements from Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3. Her museum career includes works at Musée des Arts asiatiques Guimet and at the 2007 Spain ARCO. She has lectured at KAIST, Seoul National University, Dongduk Womans University, Seoul National University of Science and Technology. Her research focuses on the communication of exhibition display, the indexical effect of media art and exhibition's political roles.