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Global Groove: Nam June Paik's Electronic Fluxus Object

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- 1 For attribution of video fragments, I consult to Anja Osswald, "Global Groove Shot Analysis," in Wulf Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik: Fluxus/Video*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Bremen (Munich: S. Schreiber, 1983), 168-171, reprinted in Joh G. Hanhardt et al, ed., *Nam June Paik: Global Groove 2004*, exh. cat. Deutsche Guggenheim (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2004), unpagged.

Introduction

Global Groove is a videotape composed of Nam June Paik's video works since mid-1960s and fragments from mass media, especially the network television. Paik produced this videotape in collaboration with John Godfrey at Artists' Television Laboratory of WNET/Thirteen, New York and first presented it to the public at The Kitchen in May, 1973 during The Second Annual Video Festival before it was broadcast in WNET-TV on January 30, 1974. *Global Groove* was significant in the corpus of Nam June Paik's video art for two reasons. First, it became a prototype for the following videotapes and video installation clips because of its way of collecting and arranging the processed images and the prerecorded images from various resources. Second, *Global Groove* suggested what Paik conceived as an alternative distribution network of video for providing equal opportunity of presenting and enjoying world cultures and avant-garde art.

In terms of compositional technique, *Global Groove* is a kind of electronic collage composed of excerpts from various resources: his performance and video works, his artist friends' works, television shows, TV commercials, folk art and low-brow cultural performances. Paik reused prerecorded images, and repeated image-processing and editing techniques that were used in his previous videotapes. As the fragments of images fail to make a coherent narrative, flickering processed-images interrupt and disconnect the linear time flow. Despite its disconnectedness, *Global Groove* implies a whole scene of art and culture in the TV era, revealing a vision of present and future media. In this respect, even though it contains discrete electronic images, whose materiality and semiotic fixity evade, this videotape engages in making an anthology of avant-garde practices and mass culture in the age of the network television. Moreover, as an electronic object, *Global Groove* also previews the experience of overflowing images in discontinuity and with multilayers within the data space in the 21st century digital era.

Regarding the legacy of the 20th century avant-garde art, *Global Groove* shares some affinities with *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-1941) that a Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp produced and Fluxus year boxes (1963-1975) that a Fluxus artist, George Maciunas assembled. Like *Boîte-en-valise* and Fluxus boxes, *Global Groove* can be located between a miniature museum displaying the artist's works and an archive storing cultural objects. It contains video excerpts from Paik's works such as *Ginsberg/Audrich*, *TV-Cello*, *Meta Media*, *A Tribute to John Cage*, *Anonymous Beauty*, *G. I. Cello Crawl Piece*, and *Electronic Opera #1* as well as images from mass media.¹ In this context, this paper will examine how *Global Groove* and Paik's video works that come after repeat the method of the Fluxus boxes, twisting the logic of museum and further that of archive. In addition, this paper will also attempt to point out that Paik's videotapes can be linked to the image collecting and storing process of the Internet age.

As the Fluxus boxes show a desire for distributing Fluxus objects through the consumer market, *Global Groove* also presents Paik's attempt to broadcast avant-garde art and world culture through the television network. In collaboration with the institution of broadcasting television, Paik used the television networks as distribution channels for his video works. Before *Global Groove*, he made a few videotapes for television stations such as *Video Commune (Beatles from Beginning to End)* (1970), *Electronic Opera #2* (1970), and *The Selling of New York* (1972). For the television stations, the collaboration provided an opportunity to have the initiative of the potential new media as a creative medium; for video artists, to search for an alternative space for working and exhibiting. In this vein, *Global Groove* can be thought as an object to be distributed through the network and to be consumed broadly. According

- 2 Natilee Harren, "Fluxus and the Transitional Commodity," *Art Journal*, vol. 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 46.
- 3 Jon Hendricks, "Foreword" to *Fluxus Codex* (New York: Abrams, 1988), 23-25.
- 4 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Fluxus and the Silvermans: An Introduction," to *Fluxus Codex*, 16.
- 5 Anja Osswald, "Global Groove Shot Analysis," *Nam June Paik: Fluxus/Video*, 168-171.

to Paik's essay, "Global Groove and Video Common Market," written in 1970, his ambition was not confined to the national boundaries, but rather aimed beyond them. Despite the desire to expand their network internationally, the Fluxus boxes and Paik's videotapes sought not to follow the main network of the capitalist market economy, but rather to detour the fringe of the system. Nonetheless, they did not go beyond the market. This aspect will be addressed in terms of the avant-gardist idea of objects and Paik's concept of video common market.

Electronic Global Groove and Fluxus Boxes

When Paik presented his first solo show, "Exposition of Music – Electronic Television" at Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany in the March of 1963, the first Fluxus box was being produced piecemeal with the leadership of George Maciunas and in collaboration with the Fluxus artists. During his solo exhibition, Paik invited Maciunas to present the Fluxus exhibition in a basement kitchen, which was already cluttered with furniture and storage boxes. Whereas performance was the main practicing form of Fluxus at that time, Maciunas stacked the kitchen's walls and countertops with scores and small objects.² This Fluxus exhibit, held right after *Fluxus Manifesto* had been open to the public in February, 1963, previewed the form of future Fluxus objects and exhibitions.³ The situation surrounding Paik's first solo exhibition revealed the background of his video works: the Fluxus sentiment in the tune with the 20th century avant-garde music, both of which were based on chance and participation and a crossing of life and art.

In the legacy of Fluxus, *Global Groove* is a mingling of images and music from both high art and low culture in the age of electronic media. It was *Global Groove* that Paik finally made as the proper videotape format after his mastery of *Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer*, which had been invented in 1970. After this videotape, he focused on how to arrange multifarious video contents rather than how to improve the image processing technique itself. Its nonlinear format containing a variety of artistic and cultural activities resembles the Fluxus boxes, which many Fluxus artists made of objects in absurd categories. They collected poems, scores, and trivial things from art practice and everyday life in small containers such as little wooden or plastic boxes, mailing tubes, and scrapped books. For example, Maciunas made *Fluxorgan: 12 Sound and Biography Box*; Alison Knowles, *Bean Rolls*; Larry Miller, *Orifice Flux Plugs*; Ben Patterson, *Poems in Boxes*; Shigeo Kubota, *Flux Medicine*; Ben Vautier, *Flux Holes*; Robert Watts, *Flux Timekit*, etc. Fluxboxes demonstrate "the ordering premise of the Fluxus board game cum encyclopedia,"⁴ exploring a specific category in absurdly serious and humorous ways.

In this vein, *Global Groove* can be an encyclopedic Fluxus box covering the category of "global groove" by art and media, including popular songs and classical music, performances of vaudeville dancers and folk dancers, artists' performances and interviews, image-processed video clips, etc. Scenes and music of *Global Groove* show a wide spectrum including Go-go dance, tap dance, Korean national dances, Fan dancing of the vaudeville stage, Korean shaman dance, African folk dance, Navajo Indian drumming, Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels' "Devil with a Blue Dress On," Billy Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," Judy Garland's "I Can't Give You Anything," Gene Kelly's "Singing in the Rain," Andrew Sisters' "Riff-Raff," Korean and Japanese folk music, Cello improvisations, Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata."⁵ There is neither a coherent narrative, nor sleek continuity between individual videos and sounds. The video starts with dances and popular music, concatenates disconnected

6 Hendricks, "Foreword,"
26-27.

scenes repetitively with cuts, and finally completes a whole scene of the world culture composed of independent activities.

Moreover, Paik compiled image-processing techniques in *Global Groove*. It demonstrates from early image distorting techniques to image-processing techniques supported by Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer: feedback, solarization, blue-box technique, magnetic distortion of television image, picture reversal, synthetic picture distortion, color distortion and intensification produced by synthesizer, abstract color patterns produced by synthesizer, and so on. These techniques were newly used for ornamenting individual video clips or were already included in video fragmented from Paik's previous works. In this videotape, image manipulation techniques function as hinges to connecting discrete scenes together as a whole video. They are materials and tools for packaging each element together into a box titled *Global Groove*. The fragmented contents are framed with formal elements.

Global Groove is also an anthology of new art such as video art, performance, contemporary music, and avant-gardist dance, which were prospering in the New York downtown art scene since 1960s. Even though *Global Groove* is a work of an individual artist, it reveals a collective impulse to have a lineage in the history of modern art. The similar impulse can be found in Fluxus. In collective terms, apart from individual artists' encyclopedic Fluxus products, Fluxus year boxes are a series of anthologies for Fluxus as new art. The idea of anthology was derived far from dada magazines in the early 20th century, such as *Dada Almanach*, the first Dada anthology, which Richard Heulsenbeck edited and published in 1920 after the First International Dada Fair closed, and near from *An Anthology* of La Monte Young, in which Maciunas participated in 1961. Maciunas as the leading figure of the Fluxus movement and publisher of the Fluxus press attempted to make Fluxus Year Boxes as a series of anthologies and compendiums of Fluxus under his own control on production.⁶ According to his original plan, Maciunas intended to make 7 Fluxus Year Boxes, each titled American, Northern European, Japanese, Homage to the Past, Southern European, Eastern European, and Homage to Dada, which were divided by regions, temporal, and art historical terms. But the realized boxes were *Fluxus 1*, *Fluxkit*, *Fluxus Year Box 2*, *Fluxpack 3*, completed between 1963 and 1975. They were not composed according to the original classification, but rather traversed the 7 thematic groupings. In actualization, the Fluxus year boxes ignored the given classification because Maciunas wanted to assemble recent productions and allowed artists to contribute many loose items.

As an anthology of new art, *Global Groove* has a layer of avant-garde art, which loosely combines video clips of artists from visual art, music, and literature. It includes Paik's video performances with Charlotte Moorman, his early video-film works, John Cage's reading performance, Allen Ginsberg's meditation chant, an interview with Moorman, voiceover of Russell Connor. They are displayed as parts of the whole cultural textile of pop culture, folk culture, mass media, and avant garde as if rare items as precious parts of the world were collected for and shown in the cabinet of curiosities hundreds years ago. The cabinets of curiosities, as precursors to museums, had a particular syntax that repeats items from specific but yet-to-be defined categories to create encyclopedic collections. Showing the similar syntax, *Fluxkit*, the second Fluxus year box, contained Fluxus objects contributed by artists or produced by Maciunas based on their ideas. Recurrent motifs of *Global Groove* are also a semblance of the old collecting method and at the same time that of the new method of collecting electronic objects, confronting the emergence of electronic media for communication, storage, execution, and entertainment.

7 "Charting Fluxus: George Maciunas's Ambitious Art History," MoMA.org, accessed July 31, 2016, http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/charting_fluxus/#top.html.

8 "Entretien avec Nam June Paik," interview by Irmeline Leeber, *Chroniques de l'art vivant* 55 (February 1975): 33, quoted in David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 60.

Electronic Fluxus Archive

In the context of the early 1970s, *Global Groove* inherited two important models of classification and collection from the realm of art and the field of mass media. One was Fluxus year boxes, as discussed above; the other was television. Television was mass media that operated as a networked commodity, which in itself contained various channels with sellable shows and constructed a wide distribution system with mass audience. Most of all, Fluxus year boxes and networked television shared a desire to capture the flowing and ephemeral events within a framed chart.

Fluxus was ambitious for an art history diagram that includes Fluxus, especially as a part of avant-garde lineage. It is clear from the fact that Maciunas continuously attempted to draw a diagram of development of Fluxus and to make an art history chart, gathering biographical information of the artists, copious notes, and ephemeral materials of Fluxus.⁷ Fluxus boxes were a trial to document ephemeral practices and to grab "the act of flowing" by demonstrating their actual productions. In the *Fluxus Manifesto* held in 1961, Maciunas defined Fluxus with a word, "flux" with its dictionary subentries, which he modified into three significant concepts: purge, flood and fuse. It means that Fluxus initially suggested the ephemeral and the flowing as the condition of their practice. Thus, creating an anthology of Fluxus was to cut into the flow and to hold a specific moment and aspect.

Similarly, video art sought its lineage from television and Dada in the 1970s when it began to establish its position within the art world. In an interview in 1975, Paik mentioned the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and video: "Marcel Duchamp did everything except video. He made a large front door and a very small exit. That exit is video. It's by it that you can exit Marcel Duchamp."⁸ In 1976 there was an absurd event titled *The Last Videotapes of Marcel Duchamp*, presenting fake videotapes attributed to Duchamp. John Sanborn planned this event to exploit the hidden desire of the new art to find its genealogy from the legitimate avant-garde art. In this context, it was not explicit, but probable that Paik shared a desire to make an anthology of new art with Maciunas. Thus, it can be said that *Global Groove* provided a kind of anthological view on new art through documenting artists' practices and interviews, like Fluxus year boxes offered a collection of Fluxus' current work as a compendium.

Remarkably, *Global Groove* has some similarity in collecting and arranging materials to Fluxus and television, both of which have segmented vehicles to accommodate independent contents. Even though the format is borrowed from Duchamp's *Boite en Valise*, the appearance of Fluxus year boxes varies. *Fluxus I* is a wooden box enclosing piles of files bounded together; *Fluxkit* is a suitcase divided into cells containing new products; *Fluxus Year Box 2* is a wooden box containing various items; *Fluxpack 3* is a paper tube. Basically, objects and exhibits were collected based on voluntary contributions, and were arranged horizontally without a hierarchical order. Nonetheless, each Fluxus year box presents a picture of Fluxus with discrete fluxus objects. Fluxus year boxes are spatially divided, but reintegrated into an anthology. Likewise, television has temporally disconnected contents in diverse themes, but recombined into a flow of broadcasting programs. *Global Groove* shows these double sides as an electronic Fluxus box and object: One side is its identity as a mixture of heterogeneous parts from different sources and the other is its identity as a temporal artwork as a whole.

Significantly, Fluxus year boxes and *Global Groove* share the three meanings of Flux, or purge, flood, and fuse, in the process of archiving new art. According to the *Fluxus Manifesto*, "purge" implies that Fluxus discharges the professional

- 9 David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 48.
- 10 Joselit, *Feedback*, 50.
- 11 Nam June Paik, "Global Groove and Video Common Market," *WNET-TV Lab News*, no. 2 (1973), reprinted in *Nam June Paik: Video 'n' Videology 1959-1973* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), unpaginated.
- 12 The voice of Russell Connor: "This is a glimpse of a video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on earth and TV Guides will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book."

and commercial culture and the world of dead art; "flood," that Fluxus promotes revolutionary flood and tide in living art, anti-art, and non-art reality; "fuse," that Fluxus integrates the cultural, social, and political revolutionaries into united front and action. Based on these implications, it is possible to rethink the logic of museum and archive, both of which have been the model institutions engaged in collecting and storing. Against the function of museum and archive to formulate knowledge, Fluxus year boxes demonstrate their own way of collecting and archiving new art. This practice leads to construct a new reality of Fluxus.

Similarly, television conveys changing realities by capturing them as particles, and also creates a reality itself with proliferating images. Differing from film as an art medium, television is networked media, which circulate certain images and formulate particular media ecology. In this vein, *Global Groove* is Paik's attempt to permeate and to interrupt the ecological system of television images. David Joselit points out that Paik's video presents excessive images by stacking multiple monitors and making noise on video signals in order to embody a kind of event of self-correctiveness. And he calls diversification and distortion as twin tactics of Paik's video viral aesthetics.⁹ It means that Paik's video "blurs the distinction between commodity and network that defines the television ecology."¹⁰ Based on the new video aesthetics and the Fluxus legacy, it can be said that *Global Groove* is an electronic Fluxus object in that it mirrors Fluxus boxes in circulation and at the same time anticipates the networked electronic object.

Video Common Market and Electronic Fluxus Objects

In February 1970 before preparing *Global Groove*, Paik wrote "Global Groove and Video Common Market," an essay on a worldwide artists' network and a video common market for distribution of cultural products and artistic practices. Published in *The WNET-TV Lab News*, no.2 (1973), this essay proposed an alternative to the nationalistic video culture, referring to the European free trade zone after 1957. Paik critiqued the biased television representation of other cultural regions, pointing out that that bias caused "failures in communication and understanding." According to him, there were two needs for global communication. One was to assemble cultural contents from every nation; the other was to disseminate them freely to the world. He thought that the American public television system had the potential of producing and distributing diverse cultural contents. To freely circulate them to the world, he conceived the concept of the "video common market."¹¹ Indeed, Paik proposed changes of both video's contents and its circulation structure. As the voiceover in the beginning of *Global Groove*, Paik attempted to present "a glimpse of a new world" flooded with global TV channels.¹² *Global Groove* as a vision of the globalized television era shows a package of various cultural contents that television audience will be able to have at home, covering avant-garde art and music to folk music and dance, to television commercials around the world. Most of all, Paik may have expected avant-garde arts to distributed throughout the world via the video common market.

Broad distribution of artistic products was the significant agenda of Fluxus as well as Paik's video. Actually, Maciunas adopted production and distribution tactics from the market system: the multiple as a form of commodity and the various sales routes; in other words, mass produced commodities and chain stores. As Maciunas collected castoffs in the Canal Street, where the leftovers of mass-production accumulated for some latent use-value, he found the potential items for Fluxus boxes. As the collected castoffs were multiples in themselves, so were Fluxus objects. In this vein, Fluxus

13 For more discussion of the Fluxus box and the pop multiple in consideration of 1960s consumer economy, Pop art, and the business in the Canal Street, see Harren, "Fluxus and the Transitional Commodity," 52-54.

14 Paik, "Global Groove and Video Common Market," unpaginated.

boxes emulated the downstream of the market of mass-production by dealing with the format of multiple, which revealed a low-culture, low-value sphere of the consumer society.¹³ On the other, the Fluxus year boxes resembled general merchandise stores in that they contained a broad selection of different artistic works. In the same way, Maciunas discovered the distribution methods of Fluxus from the periphery of the capitalist system. They were low-efficient tactics for mass circulation. For international distribution, the distribution system was diversified from artist-run Fluxshops and mail order houses, to the Fluxus newspapers and handbills, and to impromptu exhibits during concerts and Fluxfests. All of them were more fit to on-demand production than aggressive marketing to push commodities to consumers. Moreover, the travelling sales method was also adopted. A miniature Fluxshop, which was a ground version of *Fluxkit*, was made to carry around the country in a car and display for selling. While Fluxus products attempted to capture the flow of life as art as well as that of new art as anthological items, their distribution engaged with the flow of commodities, creating a flexible moment in the market system.

For Paik, the public television network looked suitable for video circulation because it had the potential for a main distribution channel of world culture videos. But the formation of the European Common Market in 1957 was the first inspiration for his concept of video common market. In "Global Groove and Video Common Market," he emphasizes the divided and discummunicative video culture due to the isolated national boundaries.

Videoland on this spaceship Earth resembles the divided state of European countries before 1957. Many TV stations around the world are hoarding videotapes totaling thousands of hours and asking impossibly high prices or compliance with complicated procedures to obtain some commodity for which they have almost no prospect of selling. Or Videoland, a so-called communications media, is so discommunicative with each other that practically no one knows what to buy, to import or export. Should video culture stay as divided, nationalistic and protectionistic as the block economy of the Thirties, which amplified the depression, instigated Fascism and helped promote World War III?¹⁴

Although each country in the "videoland" is full of video commodities, there are no free trading routes among them. This situation causes the flow of videotapes to be contained within a country and leads the video as a communication media to fail in communication. According to Paik, the main problem of videoland (television industry) is how to make flooded video cultures of divided nations globally flow and how to fuse them into the global ecology pursuing world peace. *Global Groove* is a vision of the future when people can freely access to the hoarded videotapes in TV stations around the world, and simultaneously a videotape as a multiple and general merchandise shop of new art and TV culture to be circulated through the video common market. In this respect *Global Groove* resembles Fluxus objects. Indeed, this videotape has been used as a significant image resource of many Paik's video installations and traversed them.

Paik's insight on video common market anticipates that the future world will operate by exchange of electronic objects and connect with the global information network. *Global Groove* as an electronic Fluxus object combines individual objects and network together. In other words, it documents artistic and cultural practices of the time in order to distribute them as a single content named as video art, through

15 Jeselit, *Feedback*, 63.

16 Jeselit, *Feedback*, 63. Referring to Paul Virilio, Jeselit describes the "trajective" as "the kind of motion that television attempts to tame in both its animation of things and its channeling of networks," and adds: "If a commodity's meaning results from its circulation, it is possible to develop a politics whose goal is not to abolish or 'critique' commodification (objectives that are utopian and inefficacious by turn) but rather to reroute the trajectories of things...As that site where the mobility of commodities is narrowly channeled in the service of sales...television is both the largest arena for and the greatest impediment to proliferating the pathways of things" (italics original). For detailed discussion on this, see Jeselit, *Feedback*, 5-7.

17 Paik, "Global Groove and Video Common Market," unpaginated.

television broadcasting. While Fluxus boxes are actual objects, video images are basically electronic waves, which are visualized on monitors with scan lines. In effect, as Jeselit points out, Paik's work is "a truly mutational form of the readymade in which it is the code itself, in the guise of a commercial television network."¹⁵ And Jeselit interprets that the viral aspect of Paik's video has a radical power: "Paik's manipulation of scan lines performs a truly viral paradox: it proliferates images while obliterating commodities. It releases the trajective force of information networks that, in the commercial television industry, are closely channeled."¹⁶ Accordingly, *Global Groove*, as one of Paik's viral art, invades into the commercial television network and creates a liberated moment, like Fluxus products making a hole in the flow of commodities.

Conclusion: After *Global Groove*

After *Global Groove*, Paik continued to make video works for television broadcasting. As he mentioned about Buckminster Fuller's idea of ecology, for Paik, video and television were significant media for "comprehensive research and design" of life and "evolving knowledge" for survival.¹⁷ For this, he repeated the same method of *Global Groove*. For instance, *Suite 212* (1975/1977), which is a 30-minute-long video sketching life, commerce, and media in New York, reuses some scenes from *The Selling of New York* (1972) and includes video pieces of other artists.

In the late 1970s Paik attempted to realize his dream of bridging separate countries via international satellite telecast in collaboration between video art and broadcasting television. In 1977 he participated in the first live international satellite telecast by artists at *Documenta 6*, in which he and Moorman performed live performances such as *TV Bra*, *TV Cello*, and *TV Bed* and broadcasted to 27 countries. The next year he collaborated with Dimitri Devyatkin to make *Media Shuttle: Moscow/ New York*, which sketched life in Moscow and New York while dreaming of people in two countries communicating each other via satellite. However, it is through *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* broadcast live in January 1 1984 that Paik finally realized a full-scale satellite live performance to link the global audience in different countries. Like *Global Groove*, this live satellite show featured diverse performances of the avant-garde and new pop performers from around the world and Paik's video virtuosity in mixing them together.

Today the Internet and the mobile communication system has realized Paik's dream of global television by linking the whole world as an electronic information network and providing the limitless access to infinite resources. While the users can display and collect fragments of everyday life via the Social Network Service, corporate institutes and governmental organizations can extract and process significant information from large and complex data sets that exceed the capability of ordinary data analysis tools. Basically, habitual use of the Internet and mobile devices create massive and rapidly changing data. As the users who enter the digital network have to struggle with the excessive data flow, it might be possible that they would rather conform to analysis and decision given by a specific organization. In this situation, the legacy of Fluxus boxes and *Global Groove* provides the method about being alert to proliferating digital images and algorithmic objects. That is the logic of flux, "purge", "flood", and "fuse" through the network of commodities.

