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Making Random Access to Nam June Paik

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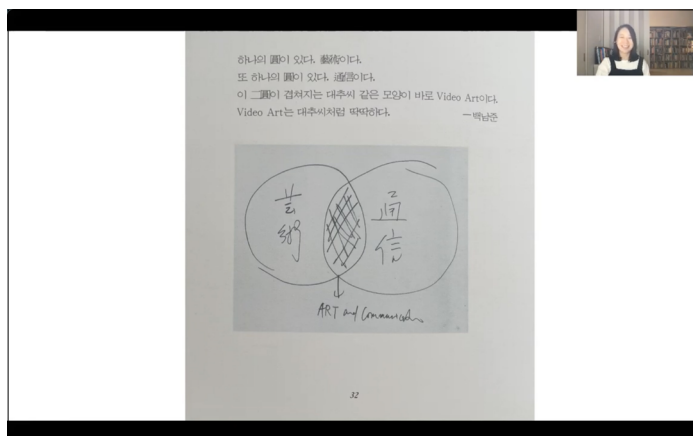
Making Random Access to Nam June Paik

Born in 1980, Seoul. Ma Jung Yeon studied at the Graduate School of Film and New Media, Tokyo University of the Arts, with her doctoral dissertation on the social implications of art and media technologies. The doctoral dissertation was later published as *A Critical History of Media Art in Japan* (Artes Publishing, 2014). Her recent publications include *Seiko Mikami: A Critical Reader* (NTT Publishing, 2019: co-editor), “Exhibition Spaces Emitting Light and Sound: Contemporary Art and Image Media” (in *Doing Screen Studies in Japan*, University of Tokyo Press, 2019), “Power of Language” (in *Zero Gravity World*, exh. cat., Seoul Museum of Art, 2019), “The Operating Method of a Panoramic Imagination” (in *To the Wavering*, exh. cat., Seoul Museum of Art, 2020), *Paik-Abe Correspondence* (Nam June Paik Art Center, 2018: co-translator) and *Koki Tanaka: Reflective Notes [Recent Writings]* (Art Sonje Center + Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2020: co-translator). She is currently working as an associate professor at the Department of Film and Media Studies, Kansai University, Japan.

Ma Jung Yeon

“We have a thing called art and we have a thing called communication, and sometimes their curves overlap. (A lot of art does not have much to do with communication and a lot of communication has no artistic content.) In the middle, there is something like an apple seed, and that is our theme—maybe our dream, too.”¹

It is how Nam June Paik opens “Random Access Information” which was presented as part of the *Video Viewpoints* lecture series on March 25, 1980, curated by Barbara London, curator of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The English manuscript was published in *Artforum* in September of the same year, and a Japanese translation was included in *Bye Bye Kipling*, a collection of works published in 1986. Interestingly, ‘a thing’ in the English manuscript was translated into two different words in Japanese with an added emphasis. Art was translated into ‘mono (物, object)’ while communication became ‘koto (事, event).’² As can be guessed from the Chinese characters, the translation distinguishes a physical thing and an abstract event or situation. What was the theme or dream that existed at the intersection of the two?



The answer can be found in the writing and painting published in the catalog of *Nam June Paik '95: Art and Communication* curated and exhibited by Gallery Hyundai and Galerie BHAK in 1995. "One circle[圓] is Art[藝術]. Another circle[圓] is Communication[通信]. The intersection part of the two circles, which has the shape of a jujube seed, is Video Art. Video Art is solid like jujube seed."³ Robert Morgan's article in the same catalog mentions the 'Fluxus Internet,' which was held in October 1994 for one month as part of the Fluxus Festival in New York.⁴ Conceptualized and organized by Paik with the help of John Brattin, Gil Shaar, Larry Miller, and Barbara Moore, this project allowed access to and retrieval of the works of over 50 artists, mainly Americans and Koreans, at any time of the day with continued updates and changes. Morgan wrote that the 'Internet promotes the temporality of art as instant communication, transcribing the experience of art from the object to event, thus closing the gap between art and its receivership.' Here, the link between object and event in Paik's works is mentioned once again.

Re-reading the writings of Paik who spoke six languages and used unique expressions of each language, the metaphor of common nouns such as apple seed or jujube seed leaves a stronger impression than 'video art,' which was new at the time but has now become an art term of the past. The word 'seed' contains genetic information for the next generation, along with a physical property of hardness, something touchable. The information containing the potential for the future is hidden inside the sweet flesh, tightly compressed for replication and diffusion. Perhaps the archive, which collects Paik's works that combine art and communication and passes them on to the next generation, can be compared to the storage of 'seeds.' The storage should not only collect and store objects but also play an active role in sustaining their life in a series of events of sprouting, flowering, and bearing fruit. In this process,

important concepts to Paik, such as time and chance, are bound to intervene.

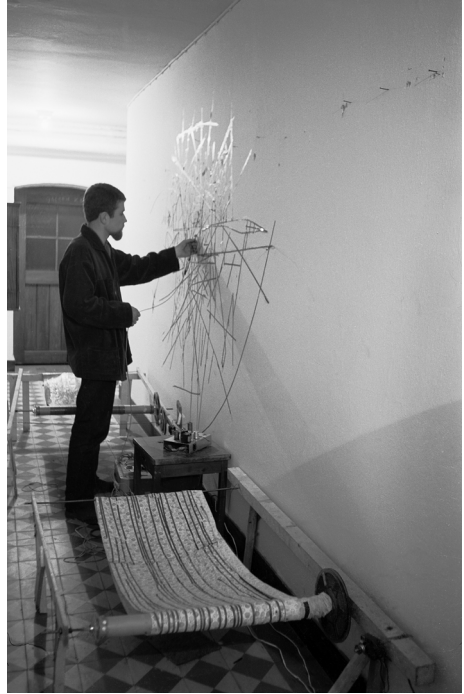
On July 27, 1950, Paik's family took a boat in Busan to escape the war on the Korean Peninsula and arrived in Kobe, Japan and started living in Kamakura the following year. Paik entered the Department of Liberal Arts at the University of Tokyo in 1952 and studied aesthetics and art history, graduating in March 1956 with a thesis titled "Research on Arnold Schönberg." After graduation, he left for West Germany to study, and started contributing to Japanese magazine *Music Art* and academic journal *Musicology* for overseas news from 1957 when he participated in the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt. It was around 1970 that Paik started to be mentioned in Japanese documents in art, film, design, and architecture media other than music.⁵ A distinctive feature of the subsequent materials is that there are many conversations in the form of interviews or talk with people in the various fields of culture. This paper, examining Nam June Paik's digital archives, attempts to make random access to Paik's words and thoughts that cannot be reached in person by making collages of the time in those materials.

"In 1957, New Music was the center of all art movements and Germany was the center of the New Music,"⁶ wrote Paik in the catalog of an exhibition at Kunsthalle Bremen in 1999. However, Paik's writings during the same period contained criticisms of the mainstream academia and music education system that did not understand the New Music, as well as questions about the public value of art. "It is said that a Japanese TV company is building the world's first covered baseball stadium. Which one is more democratic—entertaining 80,000 people with 5-6 billion yen of private capital or spending 3 percent of the taxpayers' money on operas that have nothing to do with general public? What is a democracy, and who killed Socrates?"⁷

His critical view was directed not only at those who rejected the new style of 12 scales but also at those who imitated and mass-produced the new music without understanding its spirit. On the other hand, in writing on the performances and lectures by John Cage and David Tudor in Darmstadt in 1958, Paik did not hide the unusual excitement and admiration, stating ‘Everything is the best and perfect as music and as a piece of music,’ ‘A series of surprises,’ ‘Deep thought,’ ‘The first virtuoso who reformed the way of playing the piano since Debussy.’⁸ The two were criticized by all critics and their audience became smaller each time, but they were supported by a handful of young avant-garde artists mainly in Cologne. “Keep listening to Cage’s music. It is great art for the elite, and at least a fun show for the public. Besides, no song is as easy as that. Because there is no way you can play it wrong.—Everything is connected to the sky. (...) There are too many cultured snobs in this country. Cage doesn’t need Germany, but I think Germany needs Cage.”⁹ Of course, he was speaking to the Japanese readers of the time, but it is a critical message about the acceptance of new art that today’s readers should reflect on.

It is worth noting that Paik’s delight in meeting Cage and his works is connected with the new perspective on art that Nam June Paik himself was pursuing at the time. In fact, what Paik described following the report on Cage¹⁰ was a major change in the art of the 20th century, which was ‘spatialization of time, temporalization of space.’ “This provides a concrete precondition for us to compare all contemporary art without the risk of romanticized hermeneutics and pursue the common stylistic will of the era as a whole.”¹¹ Some might think that these words foreshadow his first solo exhibition, *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* in 1963 and subsequent activities that crossed the border between music and art. In 1965, Paik raised a question by saying, “Painting is a private

property... / while music is a community property..."¹² Are Nam June Paik's 'videos,' which cannot be simply distinguished into spatial art and temporal art, private or community properties?



Random Access
(1963), photo: Manfred
Montwe

Paik's Video Study currently being planned by NJP Art Center adds technical variables and 'events,' which are the second digitization and free online release that include value philosophical issues that determine those variables, to the 'objects' of analog videos that were first digitized in 2012. This attempt, globally unprecedented, contains both the positive possibility of discovering new relationships through machine learning based on the digital traces of users and negative possibilities such as concerns and side effects surrounding the ethics on existing archives.

"At the end of the day, the problem is 'access to records.' I've stopped working with videotapes for now and started experimenting with the role of videodiscs, but in this case, the relationship between the access to time, culture and economy and the 'access to records' becomes problematic."¹³ In 1978, in an interview with editor Seigo Matsuoka (born in 1944), Paik gave an example of a Sony recorder that was recording the conversation between the two to explain that the issue of recording had always been a challenge in the past. However, he argued, as the recording became easier, the playback technology could not keep up with the recording technology, which made things boring. He made similar remarks in his interview with poet Shuntaro Tanikawa (born in 1931) in 1981: "The world is, after all, about retrieval. Anyone can record anything, but the problem is playing those records."¹⁴ For this reason, even if it is technically possible to record excessive information, he said, the real question is how to use it. Although we know that there is infinite knowledge on the internet, the amount of information we actually know account for only a small fraction of that knowledge. This current situation that we are in has not been able to solve the same problem. Paik found the reason for this imbalance in the characteristics of the information industry. "I think there are two kinds of metabolism: material metabolism and metabolism based on information.

Traditional leisure for humans, for example, is eating, drinking and sexuality, and these three are natural and quite obvious. But the more information you read, the more you want to read it. The more you watch TV, the more you listen to the record, the more infinite they become. That is why those industries have economic values. The car industry continues to stay saturated, but there is no limit in the information industry. For that reason, it is extremely advantageous for capitalism.”¹⁵ Paik’s remarks at the time were a foreshadowing of the future of the information society, and now his remarks have become our reality. There is an infinite amount of information on the Internet, but only a fraction of it is available to us. Our focus over the past century has been to faithfully collect more material in the archives. But now is the time to think about how to design access and search for those materials.

For Paik, ‘editing’ of a video was a work of organically organizing and increasing the density of such infinite information, and ‘broadcasting’ of the video was a new way of expanding and distributing that information. “Video has the function of gathering all information in one place and increasing the density of that place or that moment. It is in line with the German word for poetry, *Dichtung*, which is derived from the etymology of ‘making something compact.’ But video also has a completely different function. It is to thin the density of a fact and phenomenon and spread it everywhere.” Paik also added that, unlike exhibitions in galleries and art museums where you can only meet people from specific regions and classes with specific hobbies, ‘the fun of broadcasting is meeting people you do not know at all.’¹⁶ Here, I would like to suggest rethinking the construction and release of Paik’s Video Study that complements and expands the existing format of exhibition from the artist’s point of view on editing and broadcasting. The videos collected and rearranged in Paik’s

Video Study become the totality of work material with a higher informational density in a network of complementary relationships. If the Study window opens to the Internet, the videos gain the possibility of an encounter that transcends the distance of time and space, just as seeds blown away by the wind take root in a new place.

Another challenge remains for Paik's Video Study, and that is there are so many similar but different edited versions. Presumably, this is an issue that has been discussed since the artist was still alive. I would like to quote a slightly lengthy interview of Paik with Toshio Matsumoto (1932-2017), a film director and image theorist who was also a member of the University of Tokyo's Aesthetics Research Lab. The conversation, filled with intimacy, mutual understanding, and respect, is an important clue to understand Paik's visual aesthetics that value the open relations.

Matsumoto *Global Groove* gives the impression that the basics of Nam June Paik have been established. For Paik's videos, the signified, which is the meaning of a sign, is insignificant, and everything unfolds as a play of signifiers. It is like visual music composed of shapes, colors, and movements, so to speak, with excessive images continuously fired like from a machine gun. You can enjoy such an orchestration itself, but people who want to read the meaning from the material or development seem to feel that it is as unpredictable as the Kintaro candy that has the same pattern no matter where you cut.

Paik Because it stretches and shrinks flexibly. You can think of it as Bibimbap of Korean cuisine and other cuisines. You do not even have to

finish it all. (...) The criticism I get all the time is for using the same materials. I do not regard my work as a single object, and because I am interested in the relationship between objects and objects, it does not matter what material I use to be extreme. For example, the part of the tape where a child falls presented at the Sony Building was previously made for *Global Groove*. At that time, there was no proper place to insert it, so it was left unused for 6 years. It wasn't until recently that I found it useful, so I put it on that tape. If I keep doing this, I will be criticized again. They will say, Paik doesn't shoot videos without money, so he reuses the same tape over and over again. (laughs)

Matsumoto In a sense, I think that such reuse is the world of Nam June Paik. A consistent way of reusing materials with a certain value to produce distinct values. So, in the process of using and reusing the subject matter of dance, sports, preexisting ads, and someone familiar, the heterogeneous value of a completely heterogeneous system is reconstructed.

Paik Once the film is chemically manipulated with gelatin, it becomes an established fact. Negentropy does not work. It just gets fixed like that. Video is about viewing always through lines, and it is not time or space. Since 650 lines equal one second in its system, it appears as a tangled state as such by chance and you can always reversibly re-weave it or untie it. It

is not in a fixed state like film.

Matsumoto It is like creating a relationship between colors, shapes, and movements, just like the relationship between horizontal and vertical chords on a music sheet. In particular, Paik's videotapes are characterized by a unique texture created through post-production. The fifteen multi-videos presented at Sony Building made me feel as if I was looking at colorful fabrics. The sound was good too.

Paik Sound is important. A work with bad sound tends to have bad videos too. I wonder if it would be better to consider sound first.¹⁷

When asked about the reality of video art in the U.S. of the time, Paik answered as follows. "There are a lot of people making them, but there are few good works. I do not really watch them much to be honest (laughs). I hate watching videos so I'm always running away from them. I do not like watching movies either. It is fun to run away like this, because everyone makes videos, but nobody watches them (laughs)."¹⁸ We are currently living in a flood of visual information as everyone creates it and everyone watches it, but we cannot see it all. There are even social media accounts and videos of people who have already passed away. Paik argued that Shigeeko Kubota (1937-2015) invented death for video,¹⁹ and this could be interpreted as Paik pointing out that we have established a new relationship with death through videos. Kubota's single-channel video *My Father* (1975) features overlapped images of Kubota spending time with her ill father starting at the TV screen to watch the year-end and New Year programs and images of her crying while watching the recorded time with her father and stroking the TV screen after he passed away.

The person in the video never dies as it was then and it is now. For Kubota, the video was like a grave. As shown by her representative work *Duchampiana Marcel Duchamp's Grave* (1972-75) and *Korean Grave* (1993), inspired by her first visit to Korea with Paik, the grave is a bright and beautiful medium that preserves the deceased we respect or the time of the past so that we can meet them again at any time. In that sense, the archive can be said to resemble a grave, and we are looking forward to meeting Paik's videos that are historic objects newly. As with memories, the information in the archive should be randomly accessible.

“Why is TV a dumb box? There is only one reason. Because television does not have random access (function).”²⁰ Around 1980, Paik paid attention to the random-access function of books as a medium. Now, approximately 40 years later, random access to information or moving of thoughts without moving of the body, which he described as a ‘stationary nomade’²¹ has become a daily routine. If we think once again, the ‘random’ in random access leads to coincidence, and ‘access’ leads to encounter. “... Videos create new relationships. (...) At the turn of the century, people were inventing new things. Then, Poincaré said that we are not discovering anything new but only discovering new relationships between things that already exist in the world. Working with videos is working with relationships. I think of it as a (creation of) relationship because I can stop to search...”²²

Archivist Park Sang Ae at NJP Art Center asked an interesting question regarding archival retrieval—‘Will we get lost even in digital archives?’ You can imagine the difference between finding a book on the shelf of a bookstore and searching for a book on the online bookstore. Can we find our own new relationship in the relationship diagram suggested by auto-generated related search words? Perhaps getting lost in a landscape that is not so easy

to get lost would be a way for an unexpected encounter. Maybe this is the realm of ‘connection,’ which Paik called ‘an ambiguous and contradictory concept in which inevitable causes and incidental and subordinate facts and phenomena coincide with each other.’²³ “There is a saying that ‘Even a chance meeting means a fated connection,’ but the connection in this century has been expanded thousands of times because of satellites and interactive TV.”²⁴ In the 21st century, Paik’s Video Study as Video Digital Commons will expand our connection once again.

- 1 Nam June Paik, "Random Access Information," *Nam June Paik: From Horse to Christo*, Edited by Edith Decker and Irmelin Revere (Yongin: Nam June Paik Art Center, 2018), p. 200.
- 2 ナム・ジュン・パイク著, 高島平吾訳, 「ランダム・アクセス・インフォメーション」, 和多利志津子監修, 『「バイ・バイ・キップリング」ナム・ジュン・パイク』(東京: リクルート, 1995), p. 82.
- 3 Gallery Hyundai, *Nam June Paik '95: Art and Communication* (Seoul: Gallery Hyundai, 1995), p. 32.
- 4 Robert Morgan, Translated by Jong Soong Lee, "Short Videos of Nam June Paik," Gallery Hyundai, *ibid.*, p. 14. In this article, the internet is written as 'internettu' in Korean. Considering the fact that commercial internet service started to be provided from June 1994 in Korea, the word or concept of the internet was probably not yet universally used globally.
- 5 「Art-Technology-Art-Work(芸術-技術-術-業)-E.A.T」, a report on the exhibition *Some more beginnings* contributed by Nam June Paik to the February issue of *Art Notebook*(美術手帖) in 1969, Jud Yalkut's "Sex and Music and Computer Art - Nam June Paik's Art" translated by Shigeko Kubota in the May issue of the same magazine, etc.
- 6 Kunsthalle Bremen, *Nam June Paik Fluxus/ Video* (exh. cat), 1999. Hand-written document printed on the inside cover.
- 7 白南準, 「シュールムジークとムジカント」, 『音楽學』 4 (1958. 10), p. 56.
- 8 白南準, 「セリー・偶然・空間などー Darmstadt 1958ー」, 『音楽藝術』 17(13) (1959. 12), p. 87.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp. 100-101. Colloquial sentences written in the form of 'P.S. 2.'
- 10 Although it was not written in the article at the time, it was described as follows in "Random Access Information." "John Cage developed an amazing idea in the 1950s. The earliest form of electronic art was electronic music, which was restricted by time until 1958. (...) He said, "It was motionless and dead." He tried to compose electronic music that could be played for three seconds or thirty hours without sheet music (as in encyclopedia). Such a problem related to fixed durations of audio and videotapes would not have been imagined if it was not for a genius like him." *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 11 白南準, *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
- 12 Nam June Paik, "Thoughts in 1965," *ibid.*, p. 323.
- 13 ナム・ジュン・パイク, 「時間のノマドロジー」, 松岡正剛, 『間と世界劇場ー主と客の構造?』(東京:春秋社, 1988), p. 244.
- 14 谷川俊太郎, ナム・ジュン・パイク, 「詩的瞬間をとらえたい」, 『月刊イメージフォーラム』(1981. 1), p. 24.
- 15 ナム・ジュン・パイク, 山藤久生, 「ビデオアートは理屈じゃない」, 『アサヒカメラ』 66 (15) (1981. 12), p. 60.
- 16 「ナム・ジュン・パイク, 「タイム・コラージュ」, 『ナム・ジュン・パイク タイム・コラージュ』 (Tokyo: ISSHI PRESS, 1984), pp. 14-15. It is misspelled as 'Dichtang' in the original document.
- 17 ナム・ジュン・パイク, 松本俊夫, 「対談: ビデオ・アートのことはじめ 世界初のシンセサイザーは、ジャンク屋の店先からはじまった」, 『アサヒカメラ』 67(16), (1982. 12), pp. 172-173
- 18 ナム・ジュン・パイク, 松本俊夫, *ibid.*, 173頁。
- 19 Nam June Paik, *ibid.*, p. 203.
- 20 Nam June Paik, "Why is Television Dumb?," John G. Handhardt, Gregory Zinman, Edith Decker-Phillips (eds.), *We Are in Open Circuits: writings by Nam June Paik* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), p. 172.

- 21 | Nam June Paik, *ibid.*, p. 207.
- 22 | Nam June Paik, *ibid.*, p. 173. The same remark by Poincaré's is also cited in "Art and Satellite" (p. 149) in *Nam June Paik: From Horses to Christo*, but there is no mention of information retrieval. "At the turning point of the century, the French mathematician Henri Poincaré expressed this opinion... (Yes, it was the so-called age of material progress and discovery of new objects...) He said that discovery consisted not in finding new objects, but in finding new relationships between already existing objects."
- 23 | Nam June Paik, "Asatelite—In the light of the day after tomorrow," *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 24 | ナム・ジュン・パイク, *ibid.*, p. 17.