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Nomadic Subjects or a Suitcase before a Satellite

Colophon

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Inesa Brašiškė is an art historian and curator based in Vilnius, Lithuania. Her research interests span postwar European and American art and avant-garde film. She recently co-edited *Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running* (Yale University Press, 2022), and co-curated the exhibition *Jonas Mekas and the New York Avant-Garde* (National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, 2021). Currently, she is completing extensive research on André Cadere (Romanian, 1934–1978), coediting a book of essays on Cadere’s work, and preparing the first monograph on the artist. Brašiškė has taught at the Vilnius Academy of Arts; organized symposiums, including *The Post-Socialist Object: Contemporary Art in China and Eastern Europe* (Columbia University, 2017) and “Jonas Mekas Expanded” (National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, February 2022); and initiated the continuous lecture series *Thinking Contemporary Art* (www.thinkingcontemporaryart.lt).

In 2004, two years before his passing, Nam June Paik made a piece called *Nomad Suitcase*. The work consists of a bright yellow travel suitcase scribbled over in Korean, German, and English with other artists’ names, including Yoko Ono, Wolf Vostell, and Joseph Beuys, as well as the names of the cities—Seoul, Cologne, and NYC.¹ Whereas the former indicates Paik’s own artistic affinities and friendships, the names of the cities point to places that at some point were home for Paik: before settling in New York in 1964, he had already lived in several countries after fleeing the Korean War with his family.² The suitcase stands on top of two identical television sets simultaneously playing footage featuring, among other things, the abovementioned artists. The virtual realm of a TV screen here promises to connect multiple places and persons as fast as a blink of an eye. This fervent pace encapsulated in a television set contrasts highly with a substantially slower and more laborious movement through space invoked by the bulky luggage on wheels. The formal arrangement of disparate elements and the contrasting mediums in this video sculpture creates a tension between two regimes of itinerancy, one embedded in digital technology and another one embodied by (analog) corporeal traveling. This late piece of Paik opens up the question of borderless connectivity and transcultural exchange but does so in relation to the (auto)biographical and thus suggests the place for nomadism as a subject condition in Paik’s oeuvre.

Paik’s work is rarely seen as subjective, less so diaristic or (auto)biographical. However, the manifestations of the personal and self-reflective persist in Paik’s work throughout the years. His global vision imple-

1. I want to thank Harvard Art Museum for providing information regarding the work in their collection. Email correspondence with Marvin Smith, 23 February 2023.

2. Paik went to Hong Kong and then Tokyo, followed by a few years in Germany, first Munich, then Freiburg and Cologne.



mented within his televisual works is accompanied by the manifestations of and reflections on his personal experience of moving, connecting, and networking. The question of itinerancy, in this case, encapsulates not only the exilic experience of displacement that marked Paik's biography but also speaks to the contemporary conditions of being in the world (and the art world, for that matter) characterized by the increase in global circulation, cultural transfer, and translation.

1963 was a pivotal year marking Paik's work with television sets. He premiered his video work, including *Zen for TV*, a television set laid on its side with its tube manipulated so that the transmitted pictures are reduced to a single abstract line, in his first solo show *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*, at Parnass Gallery in Wuppertal. However, the exhibition itself was a more complex environment consisting not only of the celebrated TV sets but also of prepared pianos, sound objects, record players, and audio tape installations, all of which invited the active participation of the viewers. In one of the rooms, viewers encountered a cluster of found objects, including a chair on a wooden box and an empty suitcase hanging above it, titled *Head Machine* or *Zen Chair*. Anyone sitting down on the chair which, to make a posture even more uncomfortable and precarious, missed a back would risk hitting his or her head against the cardboard suitcase, thus making a hollow – and somehow expected – sound.³ Around the same time, Paik had started arranging yet another piece, this time filling a suitcase with various items. *Box for Zen (Serenade)* (1963) is essentially a travel suitcase stuffed with various visibly worn-out items, including a vinyl slid in an inside pocket, a thick book, and a maze of electrical chords not unlike those Paik would be secretly working through while rearranging the TV sets for the first solo exhibition.

Embracing the format of a box would not be unusual for someone invested in Fluxus activities. It was in Germany that Paik met Fluxus mastermind George Maciunas, where a Lithuanian emigré had a brief stint in the American Airforce in Wiesbaden. In Germany, Maciunas was organizing a series of concerts that cemented the idea of Fluxus, a name he granted for an international transdisciplinary group of artists working across borders and geopolitical divisions. Apart from concerts and events, another radical innovation and major preoccupation by Maciunas were Fluxus editions. Fluxkits or Fluxboxes were containers, most often boxes and briefcases, filled with multiples, i.e., affordable items conceived by different Fluxus artists and often designed and arranged by Maciunas himself before being set out for distribution on an international

3. Tomas Schmit, "Exposition of Music," first published in *Nam June Paik*, (Kolnischer Kunstverein, 1976). *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music: Electronic Television: Revisited*, Susanne Neuburger (ed.), (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König; New York: D.A.P. Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), pp. 131-134.



scale. Paik himself contributed to Fluxboxes, including *Fluxkit*, which was first announced in Fluxus newspaper, *Fluxus cc five ThReE*, in June 1964. A vinyl-covered attaché case contained a collection of objects and printed items, including a white plastic box holding a piece of 16mm film *Zen for Film* by Paik.⁴ If the Fluxus editions, including Fluxboxes, were a collective effort to expand art's reach beyond galleries and museums on the international scale and, as Natilee Harren suggests, instigated new subject-object relations in their being the transitional commodity, Paik's *Box for Zen (Serenade)* suggests something different.⁵ Despite its name, strictly speaking, it is not even a box. The container is a suitcase, i.e., an object with the function of moving belongings from one place to another when traveling or relocating. Stuffed with Paik's personal things, the piece is nothing short of a relic of someone who is on the go.⁶

In 2005, Jonas Mekas ruminated on his relationship with Paik: "We did many things together with Nam June Paik over the years. (...) But I am most fond of our political Fluxus performances. After all, we both were and probably still are, exiles."⁷ It is likely that one of these political performances invoked by Mekas happened on April 1, 1968, at the Spring's Art Festival at Cincinnati University, where Paik and his long-time collaborator Charlotte Moorman performed what was announced as *Mixed Media Opera*. Since their first appearance together in 1964, the two toured the world with their daring musical performances characterized by the combination of classical music and nudity and thus often turning out scandalous. The program of the event in Cincinnati listed a row of other participants, including Jud Yalkut, a frequent collaborator of Paik at the time, and Mekas, a somehow surprising entry with a designated role: a guest performer.⁸ That political performance, then, would have Mekas and Paik each read aloud the United Nations Charter translating it into their native languages, Lithuanian and Korean, respectively—with the intention to "remind audiences of Human Rights."⁹

The experience and reflection of being in exile, of course, is what characterizes Mekas' own work. Born in the northern part of Lithuania, Mekas, together with his brother Adolfas Mekas escaped the country in 1944, having experienced both Russian and German occupations. While trying to reach Vienna, they ended up in Germany at the Displaced Persons camp, where they lived for a few years before arriving in New York City in 1949. During all those years in exile, Mekas wrote poetry alongside his diary, and soon after he arrived in the US, he bought a 16 mm Bolex camera which became his main tool for telling his life saturated with

4. During his years in Germany, Paik continued his involvement with alternative international distribution endeavors as he ventured into mail art by editing *The Monthly Review of the University for Avant-garde Hinduism*. See: Jon Hendricks, Fluxus Codex, (Detroit, Michigan: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection in association with H.N. Abrams, New York, 1988), pp. 430-433.

5. Natilee Harren, "Fluxus and the Transitional Commodity," *Art Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 44-69.

6. I was able to locate a couple of images of the piece in question. Curiously, the content of the suitcases differs slightly from one image to another. For example, in one reproduction, one can see alongside the items I pointed out, some photos, international magazines, and a pair of worn-out slippers. Published in *Nam June Paik*, Sook-Kyung Lee and Susanne Rennert (ed.), (London: Tate; Düsseldorf: Museum Kunst Palast, 2010), p. 101.

7. Jonas Mekas, "Four Memories by Jonas Mekas," *BOMB Magazine*, September 21, 2017, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/four-memories/>

8. The aforementioned political performance, as Mekas remembers, was one of the last such events the two did together. Mekas met Paik in New York in the early 1960s through their common friend George Maciunas. Since then, the two had worked on a number of occasions. In 1965, for example, Paik presented his works during the New Cinema Festival 1. The latter sometimes referred to as the "Festival of Expanded Cinema," was a series of multi-screen, performative, and even film-less film events that ran at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque throughout November and December of 1965. Put together by Mekas and John Brockman, the three-week festival featured works by a number of artists, including Paik, who was early in the program. He presented a complex evening filled with works by other artists, including Moorman, Stan Vanderbeek, Robert Breer, and Takehisa Kosugi, as well as his own works in both video and film.

9. Ibid.

longing and memories but also marked by everyday joys and celebrations with his friends and family. Indeed, it was just a couple of weeks prior to the Spring's Art Festival that Mekas premiered his draft of the first diary film, a genre for which he will become most known. Then named *The Diaries: The First Draft* (what will later become *Walden*) presented material Mekas shot with his itinerant Bolex camera for the past three years in his new home.

The suitcase, as Irit Rogoff suggests, is a charged motif, a trope of exile, a metaphor of leaving which is hard to detach from the almost guttural response to it as a node to “a concrete past” or “a nostalgic trace.”¹⁰ And though in his biography submitted to Wolf Vostell in 1965, Paik delivers an experimental take on the genre of autobiography—instead of listing traditional marks of personal or professional development, he provides only a couple of events, one of which is the Korean War, as well as the subsequent entries for the years to come starting with 1965: “I will be 33 years old if there is no war”—Paik’s suitcases transcend this signification of nostalgia and irredeemable loss by focusing on his presence in the (art) world.¹¹ If Mekas was profoundly marked by the memory of the lost home, Paik’s personal experience of uprootedness had translated into mobility and dislocation as a promise of a global borderless movement and connectivity.

Around the same time as *Box for Zen (Serenade)*, Paik began accumulating yet another piece in a traveling bag, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1961 - 1972). Among the items in a leather suitcase, one finds three pocket-size address books filled with names and locales listings, for example, an address of a hotel in Paris, as well as telephone numbers and addresses of numerous artists, including Willem de Ridder in Amsterdam, Tony Conrad in New York, and Anthony Hill in London. The suitcase itself manifests evidence of intense globetrotting: its visibly worn-out surface bears marks of various stickers and carries a Lufthansa Airline tag. Inside the suitcase, there is also a calendar, a plastic container with filler paper, an invoice, a postcard, and a letter addressed to Wolfgang Hahn, a head of the conservation department at the Wallraf Richartz Museum and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, who accumulated a multifaceted collection of the new art from around 1960, including that of Fluxus. Besides Paik’s possessions of personal and professional nature, inside, one also finds more obscure objects such as a New York State license plate and a toy car. Whatever their provenance, all items invoke transportation and communication technologies and thus mirror the container in a nearly tautological manner.

10. Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma Geography's Visual Culture*, (Routledge, 2000), pp. 37-38.

11. *Happenings: Fluxus, Pop art, Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1965, pp. 444-445.

Titling the piece after German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's autobiography *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833), Paik implies that the piece in question is an autobiography of a sort.¹² It is indeed a diary-like work, and only the biographical here is sutured with the professional.¹³ This autobiography singles out not so much of an existential or nostalgic view of placelessness and a perpetual nonbelonging as in Mekas's case, for example, but rather communicates global connectivity and itinerancy as a *modus operandi* in the contemporary art world. After relocating to NYC in 1964, Paik indeed traveled a lot as together with Moorman, they toured Europe visiting Cologne, Berlin, Aachen, Copenhagen, and Stockholm, among other cities. And this particular suitcase indeed belonged to the artist and was used by him for a few years.¹⁴ Through this archival accumulation, Paik conceptualized his constant movement through space as the story of his life, suggesting that the subject is formed by this experience of constant moving from one place to another and that contemporary artist is ultimately a nomad.¹⁵

If Fluxboxes only vaguely resemble Paik's suitcases (which, to my knowledge, were never participatory), I want to suggest that it was yet another artist whose presence informs Paik's endeavors. Marcel Duchamp famously completed his *Boîte-en-valise* in 1941, naming it a "portable museum." Duchamp's leather suitcase contains a number of meticulously crafted miniature reproductions of his major works, summing up his career up until the mid-1930s. T. J. Demos frames this work beyond the critique of the institution of the museum and sees it as the examination of the conditions of exile. Duchamp encapsulates a figure of the peripatetic artist, and "[t]he suitcase, in this context, responds to the transitory existence of the subject in exile, an experience that adjoins the uprooting tendencies of capitalism, artistic institutionalization, and photography."¹⁶ In this respect, Paik's *Autobiography in P* (1953-1981) comes to mind as a telling parallel. It is a collection of 200 prints and various other materials, including magazines, collected in a metal box-like container. From a photograph taken by Shigeo Anzai, one can distinguish posters announcing Paik's performances, a sheet featuring Japanese artist Genpei Akasegawa's work, and a photo of John Cage, among other printed materials. The staging of the photography itself is telling: taken from high above, it captures the stuff arranged on the ground, with the container placed in the middle and surrounded by a group of people, their bodies cropped. As such, it invokes the famous images of André Malraux at home surrounded by loose pages from his then forthcoming book *Le*

12. Jane K. Brown, "Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit (1811-1833) [From My Life: Poetry and Truth]," in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction Volume I: Theory and Concepts*, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 1573-1589.

13. One can invoke here another piece by Paik, *Studienbuch*, which contains Paik's school note-book from his enrolment in the university of Cologne, photos showcasing Paik, a reel of film and other autobiographical memorabilia fixed on a wooden plate. See: *Nam June Paik: Video Time - Video Space*, ed. Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein, (NYC: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1993), pp. 116-117.

14. Email correspondence with Claudia Freiberger, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 7 March 2023.

15. The 1960s and 1970s marked increased traveling among artists associated with minimal, postminimal and conceptual art. See: Christoph Cherix, ed. *In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009. Also: Michael Sanchez, "A Logistical Inversion: From Konrad Lueg to Konrad Fischer," *Grey Room* (2016) (63), pp. 6-41.

16. T. J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, (MA: The MIT Press, 2012), pp. 39-39.

musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale. Indeed, *Autobiography in P* is nothing short of Paik's personal portable museum, the material accumulated throughout decades presented here for the eye of the camera to witness his life as an artist, his output, his development, and his belonging as an ultimately peripatetic artist.

Paik had a dream of transnational connectivity, a limitless space where distinct places, cultures, languages, and traditions meet due to the newest technology, first and foremost, television and live transmission. *Global Groove* (1973), for example, is a montage of performers from around the world who suggest this transcultural impetus and a belief in the progressive potential of mass media in connecting disparate elements. This idea of his was implemented in full force a decade later with Paik's satellite projects. *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984)—the first international satellite transmission, which was held on New Year's Day 1984, connected events happening in New York and Paris in real time, John Godfrey operated an editing machine from New York while Paik did the same from Pompidou Centre in Paris. Finally, Paik's ultimate satellite broadcast enjoyed an even broader geographic scope, *Wrap Around the World* connected Korea, the United States, Brazil, Austria, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Italy, China, the UK, and the USSR. Paik noted in 1984: "Satellite art in the superior sense does not merely transmit existing symphonies and operas to other lands. It must consider how to achieve a two-way connection between opposites of the earth; how to give a conversational structure to the art; how to master differences in time; (...)"¹⁷ Before a satellite, however, there was a suitcase. Itinerancy and a strive for connectivity already manifest in Paik's early work, suturing the (future) global vision with the personal—persistent—experience of moving across borders, cultures, and languages.

17. Nam June Paik, 1984. Cited in: *Nam June Paik*, ed. Sook-Kyung Lee & Rudolf Frieling, London: Tate Publishing, 2019, p. 129.

