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Zen for Film: Crossroads of Avant-Garde

Colophon

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“Not all that’s happening at the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque this month is or can be called cinema. Some of it has no name of any kind. The first three programs of the New Cinema Festival—the work of Angus McLise, Nam June Paik, and Jerry Joffen—dissolved the edges of this art called cinema into a frontiersland mystery. Light is there; motion is there; the screen is there; and the filmed image, very often, is there; but it cannot be described or experienced in terms you describe or experience the Griffith cinema, the Godard cinema, or even Brakhage cinema. The medium of cinema is breaking out and taking over and is going blindly and by itself. Where to—nobody knows. I am glad about both: That it’s going somewhere, and that nobody knows where it’s going. I like things out of control.”¹

After seeing Paik’s *Zen for Film* at New Cinema Festival I, Mekas intuited that this work was closely related to contemporary avant-garde films and their legacy. In *Zen for Film*, Paik projected a blank film and wandered between spaces that consisted of cinematic equipments. As the visual spectacle disappeared, the pure movement of the cinematic equipments that produced the illusion appeared. In other words, *Zen for Film* evoked the practice of cinema by showing the fact that “the impression of movement is an illusion.”² *Zen for Film* must have attracted avant-garde filmmakers who had “doubt or mistrust of apparent continuity, or the refusal to disavow what one knows about illusionism in order to believe in its impression.”³

1. Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, (NY: Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 208.

2. A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, Sung Jun-gi (trans.), (Seoul: Communication Books, 2013), p. 10.

3. Ibid. p. 12.



This article historically examines the inevitable encounter between Nam June Paik and Jonas Mekas in the context of the avant-gardes, with *Zen for Film* as the central axis. Peter Bürger explained one axis of the concept of avant-garde art from Saint-Simon's socialist point of view as follows. "An artist's activity is avant-garde, not because the artist produces new work, but because the artist intends to do something different with it (or by giving it up). It is to realize Saint-Simonian utopia or the "to amplify" the progress from the task Rimbaud assigned to the future poet."⁴ Within this functionalist understanding, the avant-gardists are also described as follows. "Avant-gardists understand their texts and images not as works of art but as actions for causing something or protocols for experiencing something. It is a matter of reforming life, not creating forms that would be the object of aesthetics' contemplation. If works of art are at the heart of artistic modernity, at the heart of the avant-garde are the actions of those who no longer understand themselves as artists but as scientists and revolutionaries."⁵ This view of the avant-garde helps us understand the artistic intersection between Paik and Mekas. It is because what made their encounter possible was their will "to produce a different future through art" that each of them had. Paik always wanted to invent new models of connection by using technology. And Mekas explored a new aesthetics and practice called 'underground,' and above all, tried to create a space for new relationships. *Zen for Film* is avant-garde because it reflects and expresses the desire to create a new place, which Paik and Mekas had in common, and experiments with knowledge of the possibilities of such a place. If there was such a thing as friendship between Paik and Mekas, their friendship was neither their personal relationship nor their influence on each other. The essence of their friendship was a network of contemporaries who lived in an era and tried to create a gap with that time. However, this kind of network is usually discovered by people who have the privilege of looking back in time, unaware of those who belonged to it. This privilege can be said to have been mission that constructed history. Paik and Mekas from different backgrounds and fields of activity could encounter at times because they formed a community, that is, invisible solidarity fighting to break old houses and build new ones. And that is why the 1960s, when this community briefly appeared, must be dealt with in relation to the present. Therefore, we need to consider various places intricately intertwined simultaneously to deal with this topic.

4. Peter Bürger, "Avant-garde," *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Seoul: Jimanji Press, 2013), pp. 276-277.

5. Ibid, p. 284.



Zen for Film is a work that allows us to write history, connecting various places. This work traverses the artistic practice of Paik, who was engrossed in researching new technologies and media to transform time and invent new relationships. And this work cuts across the experiments of the American avant-garde in the postwar period, which tried to radically demolish all conventions and institutions to construct a new ontology and epistemology of art. Therefore, the appropriate question for examining this work is not “what is this?” but “what kind of place is this?” This type of questioning also follows Paik’s great interest in cybernetics and the function of interfaces.⁶ We can understand the core as enabling multiple places simultaneously, making them communicate, mixing them up, and making such a place. Paik was interested in the potential of technology to make new places possible, not the technology itself. Understanding Paik’s work through cybernetics reveals that his art imagines a state in which nothing has a definite place in constant generative change. And it can be seen that *Zen for Film* is a key work that shows that point. This work should be understood through constant random access in open circuits.⁷

Time, Participation, Contingency

Hannah Hölling speculates that Paik may have conceived of this work while preparing for his solo exhibition *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal 1963.⁸ As the title suggests, *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* was, on the surface, an “exposition” of “music.” And more implicitly, it was an experiment to reconstruct and reproduce time with the music.⁹ In other words, although *Zen for Film* seems like a legacy of the avant-garde that fundamentally criticizes cinema as mentioned above, it is more natural to look at it in the context of the artist’s exploration of time that continued throughout the early 1960s. The project of “exposition” of the “music” proceeds in the direction of reconstructing the linear and repetitive temporality established by the institution of music through directionless spatiality, which is the essential condition of the exhibition form. In *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television*, Paik installed four sets of *The Prepared Piano* on the first floor of Gallery Parnas and set up a “television room” with 12 television sets. His television was an experimental tool to dismantle time unilaterally controlled by the media. In addition, Paik contemplates the new temporality brought about by participation—indeterminacy and contingency—by allowing

6. In an article contemplating the connection between Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan, Paik remarks: “Art history and musicology suffered too long from the separation of the unseparable. Technological division of work, Darwinian conception of development (no historian started with Picasso and ended with Greece), Woelfflinesque obsession with style, endless peeling of the onion, to find out who influenced whom... all these toils killed the subject of the study before studying. But if all arts merge into one, as recent movement of Mix Media shows, then the study of various arts should merge too into one by the qualified investigator, who, if I may simulate Wiener, is “a specialist in his own field but possesses a thoroughly sound and trained acquaintance with the fields of his neighbours.” Nam June Paik, “Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan (1967),” *We are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, John G. Hanhardt et al. (ed.) (Boston: MIT Press, 2019), p. 125.

7. Therefore, the word “film” in the title, *Zen for Film*, should be interpreted as “cinema,” not “film roll.” The most crucial thing in this work is not the material supporter, “empty film.” A material film is only one of the conditions that make this work possible. The most significant effect produced by this work is a place that emerges when an empty film is realized in a specific time and space. It is a place with infinitely many holes, open to countless things. There, the term “the cinematic” has validity. And there is a possibility to proceed to the question of “what the cinematic is.”

8. Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film*, (Bard Graduate Center, 2015), p. 12.

9. “In any case, I must specify that my work is neither a painting nor a sculpture. It’s just a time-art. No, I don’t like categories.” Nam June Paik, “Letter to Rolf Jahrling, Wuppertal” (1963), *Nam June Paik: From Horse To Christo*, Edith Decker and Irmeline Lebeer (ed.), Lim Wangjun, et al. (tran.) (Yongin: Nam June Paik Art Center, 2018), p. 128; “Many mystics are interested to spring out from ONE-ROW-TIME, ONE-WAY-TIME, in order to GRASP the Eternity.” Nam June Paik, “Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television – Gellary Parnas, March 1963” (1964), *Nam June Paik: From Horse To Christo*, p. 375.



the audience to use the various objects that make up the exhibition.

In the spring, two years before this exhibition, Paik had already shown an “exposition” of “music” through *Symphony for 20 Rooms* (1961) in Cologne. Paik said that the most interesting thing about John Cage’s performance he saw in Darmstadt in 1958 was the “collage of sound.” And what he attempted in his work was also a collage of sound. *Symphony for 20 Rooms*, later called *Symphony No. 2*, designed a musical structure that invites the audience as active listeners to experience a montage of sound within their own time structure. Paik explained this work as follows.

“Here, the audience could freely move from room to room and choose from at least 20 different sounds. Free time inevitably leads to music-space, because free time requires two or more media (direction), and the two media inevitably constitute one space. In this case, the hall (space) does not just mean the richness of sound, but becomes the “better half” that is indispensable to sound. And as a next step for stronger uncertainty, I want the audience to be free to do and enjoy themselves. So I gave up playing piece of music. I exhibit music. I display various musical instruments and objects with which can make sounds in the room and enable the audience play with them freely. I am no longer a cook (composer), but only a merchant who sells delicacies.”¹⁰

In the early 1960s, Paik wrote, “gradually losing interest in action music... thought of nothing but electrons and physics.”¹¹ This is because television and video were areas where the issue of time could be dealt with more acutely and effectively. The blank screen of *Zen for Film* looks like an image of “time without content” that Paik said that video artists discovered after the 1960s. At this point, we need to examine Paik’s concept of random access more carefully. Random access means freely coming in and out of certain collective information without following linear time that has already been established, as in *Symphony for 20 Rooms*. Paik thought this was a database-like idea and something that time art had to accomplish.¹² It can be said that the viewing method of *Zen for Film*, walking between the screen and the projector, was an experiment to transform the film into a place of random access, away from viewing the continuous images created

10. Nam June Paik, “About the Exposition of the music” (1963), *We are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, p. 91.

11. “Before 1950 Artists discovered the abstract space. After 1960 Video artists discovered the abstract time. time without contents.(...) Video can accelerate or slow down, reverse and inverse, warp and distort the straight arrow of time. The French say “le temps se passe”... I wonder what the “se” means.”: Nam June Paik, “Nostalgia is the extended feedback ('30-'60-'90)” (1992), *We are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, p. 192.

12. “Back to random access. Time-based information and random access information are differentiated by the retrieval process. The “book” is the oldest form of random access information. The only reason why videotape is so boring and television so bad is that they are time-based information. Human beings have not really learned how to structure time-based information in recording and retrieval very well, because it is new. There are video junkies who watch whole videotapes, but most people refuse to watch whole videotapes any more. Combining random access with video is a major problem that needs to be solved.: Nam June Paik, “Random Access Information” (1980), *We are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, p. 174.

13. “Perhaps the greatest effect of the Satellite is that it enables one to work out a mutual relation (In-en) artificially and in an accelerated way, and also the sensitive network made between the two new consciousnesses may well be beneficial to economical and cultural growth.: Nam June Paik, “A Satellite—The light of the future Asatte—literally, the day after tomorrow” (1987), *We are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, p. 191.

by institutionalized films. And it also guarantees the function of generative aesthetics called “contingency,” which leads to his artificial satellite work.¹³ It can be said that Paik constantly experimented with a particular vision of the future through artistic practice. The future here is a new world picture constructed with a relationship model based on a new concept of time. It seems clear that *Zen for Film* is in line with Paik’s deconstruction and reconstruction of the time that he thought about through music, and was generated from his early interest in TV and video. And the fact that it was shown in a place for reconsidering the conventional cinematic equipment and revisiting the history of cinema may also be the result of the synthesis through the encounter with George Maciunas, who led Fluxus.

Underground, improvisation, Freedom

Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, where Paik showed *Zen for Film*, is a movie theater founded by Mekas in 1964. Mekas founded *Film Culture* in 1955 and pursued a new form of film, place, and culture within the legacy of American avant-garde films in the 1950s. In 1960, Mekas convened 23 filmmakers, including himself, and held the first gathering of New American Cinema Group. In their manifesto, we can see the aspect of the avant-garde attacking the art system constituted by the norm of “art for art’s sake” and insisting that art return to life and reality. “As in the other arts in America today, our rebellion against the old, official, corrupt and pretentious is primarily an ethical one. We are concerned with Man. We are concerned with what is happening to Man. We are not an esthetic school that constricts the filmmaker within a set of dead principles. We feel we cannot trust any classical principles either in art or life.” Another noteworthy thing in this manifesto is the sixth clause, which imagines the independent distribution system for the films they pursue. The imagination of creating new places for new practices has led to the establishment of distributors such as the Film Makers Cooperative and theaters such as the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque.

Then, concretely, what is this place for? Whereas Paik was a Saint-Simonist avant-gardist who envisioned a new society, Mekas was a Baudelairean avant-gardist who reformed works of art.¹⁴ On May 2, 1963, Mekas published an article titled “On the Baudelairean Cinema” in the Movie Journal section of *The Village Voice*, where he used to write articles then. In this article, he wrote: “Several movies

14. Of course, the distinction between old and new art is unclear, and they are mixed in different proportions in each artist’s practice. However, in their artistic practices, it can be known implicitly which one is more dominant.



have appeared from the underground which, I think, are marking a very important turn in independent cinema.” Here he held up the films of Ron Rice, Jack Smith, Ken Jacobs, and Bob Fleischner as examples. It was a kind of tribute to the despised and banished, “the world of mashed flesh,” the spirit of liberation and freedom through destruction and defilement, like his constant efforts to realize an intermedia-like place where new, free, and diverse things intersect and communicate on the institutional and cultural levels. Mekas wrote in “Notes on the New American Cinema,” which was written in the 24th issue of *Film Culture* before “On the Baudelairean Cinema.” “The new artist, by directing his ear inward, is beginning to catch bits of man’s true vision. By simply being new (which means, by listening deeper than their other contemporaries), Brakhage and Breer contribute to the liberation of man’s spirit from the dead matter of culture; They open new vistas for life.”¹⁵ On the other hand, Adams Sitney makes an interesting comment about Mekas’ interest in the performance in the context of the Baudelairean.¹⁶ At this point, what he particularly mentions is improvisation. Mekas’ praise for improvisation is in the same vein as pursuing a fundamentally emancipatory life without illusions that do not follow institutions, customs, or instructions. Mekas writes: “Improvisation is, I repeat, the highest form of concentration, of awareness, of intuitive knowledge, when the imagination begins to dismiss the prearranged, the contrived mental structures, and goes directly to the depths of the matter. This is the true meaning of improvisation, and it is not a method at all; it is, rather, a state of being necessary for any inspired creation. It is an ability that every true artist develops by a constant and life-long inner vigilance, by the cultivation—yes!—of his senses.”¹⁷ “An old art is immoral — it keeps man’s spirit in bondage to Culture. very destructiveness of the modern artist, his anarchy, as in Happenings, or, even, action painting, is, therefore, a confirmation of life and freedom.”¹⁸

Zen for Film is placed in a different context from the Baudelairean film. However, it aligns with the critical spirit of Mekas, who explored the movie toward the truth of life, breaking away from institutional and cultural conventions. In an article written right after watching *Zen for Film* at the Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, Mekas wrote about Paik’s work: “His art, like the art of La Monte Young, or that of Stan Brakhage, or Gregory Markopoulos, or Jack Smith, or even (no doubt about it) Andy Warhol, is governed by the same thousand-year-old

15. Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” *Film Culture*, 24 (Spring 1962), p. 15, quoted in Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film – The American Avant-Garde*, Park Dong-hyun et al., (trans.), (Goyang: Common Life Books, 2005), p. 400.

16. “Jonas Mekas’s theoretical interest in performance had a more profound effect upon his criticism and his film-making when it intersected with his poetics,” quoted in Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film – The American Avant-Garde*, p. 402.

17. Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” *Film Culture*, 24 (Spring 1962), quoted in Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film – The American Avant-Garde*, p. 403.

18. Mekas, “Notes on the New American Cinema,” *Film Culture*, 24 (Spring 1962), p. 15, quoted in Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film – The American Avant-Garde*, p. 400.



aesthetic laws and can be analyzed and experienced like any other classical work of art.”¹⁹ Let us recall the work of Gregory Markopoulos mentioned here. Adams Sitney says the following about Markopoulos’ films: “Markopoulos has always focused his energies on the reconstruction of time in his films and has tended to accept the givenness of cinematic space even when his work on single-frame montage within the camera led him to superimposition. His theoretical exploration of the operation of the single frame begins with the investigation of its representation of psycho- logical complexities and subtleties, but it quickly moves beyond that. In the later essays he assigns it an hieroglyphic significance which puts into question the authority of cinema’s representation of movement itself.”²⁰ On the other hand, Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1964) shows a man sleeping for over 5 hours, and through this, the film becomes excessively open to everything. What appears in the continuum of images with little narrative is the sense of duration and the presence of the audience facing the screen. By not showing anything, this type of film activates the perception and experience of the audience and makes the audience participate in the production of meaning and consciousness. Therefore, the most critical issue for these artists is how the film organizes time. Looking at the impression Mekas left after watching Paik’s *Zen for Film*, we can assume that he sensed that, although what he perceived on the surface was a new form, such works commonly dealt with the problem of reconstruction of time.

19. Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, Macmillan Company; 1st edition (January 1, 1972), p. 209.

20. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 138.

From Outside, Towards the Exterior

This article aims to reveal that at the core of Paik’s artistic practice lies the imagination of the reconstruction of time and generative relationships through *Zen for Film* and examine the driving force behind the emergence of the practice in the field of American avant-garde film in the 1960s. By introducing the concept of ‘animation’ to ‘dematerialization’ that interprets the 1960s, Andrew suggests that we focus more on “the kinetic and temporal dimension of new conditions” rather than the aspect of “loss of solidity.” And he says: “Within such a narrative, postwar art did not simply abandon the solidity of the material object for the fluidity of the performative event[...]. Instead, familiar models of object and material were pressured through novel explorations of liminal states and zones of transition: between the cinematic and the sculptural, between stasis and duration, between object and perfor-



mance, and between the still and moving image. These hybrid objects were neither precisely sculpture nor performance, machine nor instrument, but gave rise to a certain material encounter within which literal and virtual forms of the movement were enfolded in a delimited form.”²¹ And he introduces *Zen for Film* as a representative work related to this. I accept this interpretation and propose an expanded conceptualization of Uroskie’s kinetic imaginary as a kind of place. In other words, it is the kinetics to dismantle the existing place and form a new place. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the avant-garde concept that connects Paik and Mekas is the fact that it produces a movement like this. In this sense, *Zen for Film* was closely linked to the reinvention of artistic institutions. The place where these institutions exist would be, as Bürger says, “a place that is neither inside nor outside the institution of art, in the impossible realm in between.”²²

There are two countries in this world
It is not a country of “color” and of “non-color”
nor a country of “communism” and “liberalism”
but
“developed countries” and “undeveloped countries”
...
I answered Allen Ginsberg
“Maybe I made a very complex cybernetics works because of
the ‘minority complex’ I feel as a Korean or an Asian?”²³

In his article, Paik asked whether it was because he was Asian that he started exploring the aesthetics of cybernetics. Could it be that there was a greater darkness of the times that made the meeting and friendship between Paik and Mekas, a Lithuanian exile, possible? They were crowded out from somewhere, lived in the flow of being pushed out, and were people who constantly tried to push something away. What was the force that moved them? This question will likely have to be raised within the artistic practices to which these artists were so dedicated.

21. Andrew V. Uroskie, “Uncanny Machines and Philosophical Toys: The Animation of Paik’s Early Sculpture,” *NJP Reader #6 Reanimating Nam June Paik*, Yongin: Nam June Paik Art Center, p. 44.

22. Peter Bürger, “Avant-garde,” *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Seoul: Jimanji, 2013), p. 285.

23. Paik, “Thoughts in 1965,” *Nam June Paik: From Horse To Christo*, pp. 320-321.

