The Sound of Shamans in the Works of Nam June Paik and Early Korean Video Artists

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The Korean shamanistic tradition gave Nam June Paik's works characteristically Asian cultural features, while western music provided him with audio-visual techniques. Undoubtedly, Paik's work at West German Radio's electronic music studio motivated his initiation of a new art form, video art, and invention of a video synthesizer with Shuya Abe in the late 1960s. One can trace the marks of Korean shamanism from Paik's early works, notably his first video art exhibition, <Exposition of Music: Electronic Television>(1963), which featured a bleeding bull's head. Paik analogized Fluxus Happenings to Korean exorcist rituals as performances in which the shamans communicate with spectators. Paik revealed his identity as an Asian in a series of shamanistic performances coupled with destructive avant-garde gestures. Interestingly, some early Korean video artists share the shamanistic features of Paik's art. Among them are Hyun-Ki Park, Keun-Byung Yook, Hae-Min Kim, and Chan-Kyong Park. These early Korean video artists, like Paik, perceived a link between video images on monitors and the invocation of spirits in Korean shamanistic rituals. They regarded that artists are shamans or spiritual mediums connecting spectators and the invisible world. Unsurprisingly, then, the sounds and images of Korean exorcist rituals attracted Hae-Min Kim and Chan-Kyong Park whose works are specially reviewed here among other early Korean video artists. This paper focuses on shamanistic features in early Korean video art since Paik's initiation of video art in the 1960s.

Video art. Sound art. Shamanism. Nam June Paik. Korean video art. "kut". "mudang".

1. INTRODUCTION

Many visual artists are working with the sound these days. "Sound art" different from traditional music had emerged in the visual art scenes since 1950s, even though early usages of the term appeared in the 1980s. (See the webpage of Sound Art Foundation, INC.) It seems natural to regard Nam June Paik as one of the pathfinders of sound art in the visual arts world because he had tried a series of radical experiments with various instruments and TVs that resulted in brand new audio-visual effects. Pulling down the boundaries between different art forms, Paik combined music unfolding in time sequence with the art of shapes and colours ordered side by side in space. I think extremeness and uniqueness of Paik's works were originated from Korean shamanist customs that he had been familiar with, while his radicalism in the experimental arts was rooted in western musical context that provided him electronic sound techniques. My main concern in this paper is to trace the origin of extraordinary sounds found in the works of Paik and some early Korean video artists who were deeply influenced by him. Special focus will be on Paik's interest in the exorcist rituals as well as his devotion to electronic music in

his youth. I'll explore shamanist factors in the works of some Korean video artists after considering Paik's endeavour to searching for a whole new audio-visual art.

2. YOUNG NAM JUNE PAIK AND THE MUSICAL SOUND

Without his musical background, Paik could not have started his video art when digging on a new art form such as happenings. Since 1963, when Paik held his first solo exhibition, <Exposition of Music: Electronic Television>, he had pursued mixed-media with various image-making devices, including televisions, video cameras, and video synthesizers. Traditional performance arts such as music, theatre, and dance are time-based, while plastic arts like painting, sculpture, and architecture spatial. Since late 1950s, Paik had been developing his experimental music under the influence of the famous modern composers Arnold Schönberg, Wolfgang Fortner, Wolfgang Schteineke, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Cage.

Fortner taught Paik in Freiburg and recommended him to West German Radio (WDR)'s electronic

music studio in Köln to give him a chance to develop his musical potential. Undoubtedly, Paik's work at WDR's studio motivated his creation of a new art form, video art. Paik encountered cutting-edge electronic music and high technology of mass communication at the time in Köln. His experience of technologies of mass communication and production of electronic music assuredly led to experiments with TV in 1963 and the electronic image-making tool, the "Paik-Abe Synthesizer" that he made with Shuya Abe from 1964 to 1969.

However, it was in Darmstadt and not Köln where Paik experienced significant moments in his artistic life. He met Schteineke, Stockhausen, Fortner, Cage and other composers of experimental music at the international summer course for New Music, Darmstadt in 1957 and 1958. Cage's revolutionary thoughts on music—composition accentuating chance and change, music of indeterminacy, music with noise, and music without sound—changed Paik's life as an artist. Cage influenced the activities of the Fluxus group, famous for their experimental performances called "Happenings". Paik was the most radical member of the group. His first piece of action music or anti-music was *Hommage à John Cage: Music for Tape Recorder and Piano* (1959) in which he destroyed a piano, a symbol of traditional music, threw eggs, broke glasses, and let chickens run wild. Recalling Paik's performance, art historian Wulf Herzogenrath says, "The piano [attacked by Paik] created new sounds when its wires were all hit at the same time." (Herzogenrath & Park, 2012) Paik repeated this performance three times under the same title during the following three years to show his respect for Cage.

Paik paved the way to video art through his early experiments with music-like sounds and actions as well as new communication technologies. Even after becoming immersed in video art, he continued to use musical terms in the titles of his artworks, as in *Etude f or Pianoforte* (1960), *Symphony for 20 rooms* (1961), and *Opera Sextronique* (1967).

Figure 1: Nam June Paik, *Danger Music for Dick Higgins or "Creep into vagina of a female whale."* (NJP Artcenter, Korea © all rights reserved)

3. NAM JUNE PAIK'S VIDEO ART AND SHAMANISM

Besides his contacts with the gurus of modern music and high technology of mass communication, traditional Korean religious customs deeply affected Paik's artistic career, especially Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism. More than anything else, traditional Korean shamanism seems to have permeated his oeuvre.

From the start, Paik introduced the Korean shamanistic tradition to video art. In his first solo show, <Exposition of Music: Electronic Television> (1963), visitors could not enter the gallery without seeing a bloody bull's head hung under the top of the main entrance. In the tradition of Korean exorcisms, the bull's head signifies the boundary between this world and the next, or, more precisely, between secular and holy world. Significantly, Young-Cheol Lee considers Paik as "a master shaman," and describes the exhibition as a kind of *kut*, the traditional Korean shamanistic ritual (Y. C. Lee, 2012). He highlights two aspects of the exhibition. The first is the gallery space itself—Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal—comprising all of its sounds, actions, and objects. The second refers to the thirteen prepared TVs, his first video artworks

shown to the public. The oval shape of the first floor could have reminded Paik of a womb or egg, invoking the origin of life (and death), and of his “danger music” piece for Dick Higgins, which directs the performer to “creep into the vagina of a live female whale.” (Y. C. Lee, 2012) The images of a womb or egg were reinforced by white balloons that covered 70% of the entrance. Eggs and ovals had often appeared in Paik’s performances since his first concert in Freiburg. Moreover, the gallery’s name, Parnass, was named after Mount Parnassus, the home of the muses. Indeed, Y. C. Lee notes that “Paik performed a *kut* summoning gods living in Mount Parnassus.”

Paik compared his practice to that of a shaman: “While working, I remain unconscious. I am profoundly influenced by a shaman, or *mudang*.” This perception stems from his background. He was very familiar with *kuts* and had witnessed shamans’ performances in typically colourful costumes using instruments like knives and ringing bells. He regarded shamans as “media,” the means to communicate with God and a type of vehicles of intercourse according to Y. C. Lee. Since Marshall McLuhan shaped his understanding of “media,” his usage of the term encompassed roads, wheels, horses, rumours, newspapers, telephones, televisions, and even shamans.

Figure 2: Nam June Paik, *Participation TV* in
<Exposition of Music: Electronic Television>
(Peter Brötzmann © all rights reserved)

Y. C. Lee’s second point regarding Paik’s exhibition in 1963 underscores how the signifying function of a TV monitor parallels a mirror. In the East Asian shamanistic tradition that originated in Mongolia, shiny mirrors, as well as lamplights and candlelight, symbolize “a vessel containing the soul.” Paik’s TV sets played the role of mirrors, not as self-reflecting tools that Rosalind Krauss related to narcissism (Krauss, 1976), but as religious accessories for shamans’ costumes. According to Y. C. Lee, “The shaman mirror of the northern nomads is not to see

something but to protect themselves by reflecting strong light.” One could say that CRT (cathode-ray tube) monitors give out light just like lamps, candles, and mirrors. This correlation is why Paik was so proud to declare himself “the khan” (a Hun term for “emperor”) of media art.

Paik revealed his Asian identity in two shamanistic performances coupled with destructive avant-garde sounds and gestures. Since his childhood, he had frequently observed exorcist performances and had become familiar with *kuts*. Significantly, he played the role of a *mudang*, which means a shaman in Korean, in the performances commemorating his friends George Maciunas in 1978 and Joseph Beuys in 1990. Paik drew an analogy in these performances between Fluxus Happenings and *kuts* or Korean exorcist rituals because both induced spectators’ participation. When performing exorcisms, *mudangs* usually encourage the client, her family members, and other bystanders to take part in the rituals. It was natural for Paik to play the role of a shaman-performer who crossed over from Eastern to Western culture since he fully understood the spirits of both Happenings and *kuts*.

It is the second point—video images signifying shamans’ mirrors—that intrigue me when approaching Paik’s video art in terms of shamanism. Y. C. Lee’s interpretation of Paik’s first solo show may look controversial. Nevertheless, other researchers have also discovered shamanistic aspects in his Paik’s video art. For instance, WonKon Lee says Paik’s satellite TV shows remind us of shamans’ mediating acts (W. K. Lee, 2003). Paik broadcasted three satellite works internationally between 1984 and 1988: *Good Morning, Mr Orwell* (1984), *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986), and *Wrap around the World* (1988). As well known, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* aired in New York, Paris, and Seoul simultaneously was his response to Orwell’s dystopian anticipation of future in his novel, *1984* (1949). In 1986 Paik also recalled the late poet Rudyard Kipling who had told that “east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet,” and replaced his statement with the vision of “global village” that he was sharing with McLuhan. He invoked the spirits of the dead—Orwell and Kipling— and reconciled them with people who were living at the time in the works he created in 1984 and 1986. He played the role of a shaman in those two works, according to W. K. Lee, just as he acted as a *mudang* in *Wrap around the World* and the two shamanistic performances mentioned earlier. Paik’s self-awareness of his *mudang* role became much more evident in his later days, even though he had already inhabited the role of a techno-shaman in his first solo show, <Exposition of Music: Electronic Television>.

4. SHAMANISM IN THE EARLY KOREAN VIDEO ARTISTS

4.1. Early Korean Video Arts and Shamanism

Nam June Paik is not alone in relating moving images from TVs or CRT monitors with shamanism and traditional East Asian beliefs. There are several early Korean video artists whose works also recall Korean religious ceremonies and customs. They are Hyun-Ki Park (1942-2000), Hae-Min Kim (1957-), Keun-Byung Yook (1957-), Kyung-hwa Oh (1960-), and Chan-Kyong Park (1965-), most of whom began making media works in the 1980s. Like Paik, some of early media artists raised among the strong Korean shamanistic tradition could have thought that virtual images on monitors looked like shamans' rituals (W. K. Lee, 2003). They believed that both moving images and shamans played "media" roles connecting earth and heaven, world of the living and the dead, the present and the past, and the actual and the virtual. The Chinese character '巫' (mu), meaning a shaman, is composed of '工,' which means heaven and earth connected by a cosmic tree, and two '人,' meaning dancing people. One could say that both *mudangs* and media exist "inbetween," or in the interspace (See W. K. Lee, 2003 and Heo, 2018).

Figure 3: Keun-Byung Yook, *The sound of landscape + Eye for field = yin & yang*, video installation, São Paulo Biennale, 1989 (Keun-Byung Yook © all rights reserved)

Forms of graves in Hyun-Ki Park's and Keun-Byung Yook's works, a video installation by Kyung-hwa Oh's that looks like Seonangdang, a kind of shrines to the village deity, and performances of *mudangs* filmed by Hae-Min Kim's and Chan-Kyong Park's videos conjure up the customs of Korean shamanism. Here I will focus the works of two artists among others: Hae-Min Kim and Chan-Kyong Park, both of whom made the audio-visual works with the same title, *Shindoan*, investigating traditional Korean shamanism. *Shindoan* is the name of the town located in Mount Kyeryong famous for shamanistic rituals and fortune-telling.

4.2. Two Versions of *Shindoan*

Hae-Min Kim's perspective is much closer than anyone else's to Nam June Paik's when it comes to his employment of new media in the 1980s—personal video recorders and CRT monitors—to play a shaman's role. Although he never performed a *kut*, unlike Paik, he too incorporated a shamanistic performance of sounds, lights, and objects in his version of *Shindoan* (1994). *Shindoan*, meaning "new capital city," has symbolized the center for a future utopia ever since the founder of Chosun dynasty (1392-1897), Sung-Kye Lee, deemed the town at the foot of Mount Kyerong as the capital city of a new country.

Figure 4: Hae-Min Kim, *Shindoan*, video installation, 1994 (Hae-Min Kim © all rights reserved)

Candlelight inside the monitors that recall the acts of prayers brings to mind Paik's statue of the Buddha looking at a monitor with candlelight. Audiences in the exhibition encounter a combination of CRT monitors, brushes, and candles. They hear *gayageum sanjo*, titled *Sound of the Night* composed and played by Byung-Ki Hwang.

Gayageum is a traditional Korean string instrument and *sanjo* is a form of string solo in the Eastern music tradition. Visitors can also see candles and brushes in and around the monitors. In his *Shindoan*, H. M. Kim presented video images mediating the actual and the virtual, while representing shocking moments in a spiritual place dramatized by traditional and emotional sound of music. His juxtaposition of actual and virtual objects against the backdrop of intense music emphasizes the resemblance between media's illusionary and immaterial features and a shaman's exorcism accompanied by wild dances and drum sounds (Kang, 2019).

Chan-Kyong Park's *Shindoan* (2008) took its meaning from modern Korea's tragic history, though Park was also interested in *Shindoan*, the famous place for shamanism. Park started his artistic career as an art critic whose main concern was to investigate political and social problems of the 1980s brought about by dictatorship of the military regime born in 1980. Modern Korean political history marked by autocracy and corruption has been one of the major targets of Park's criticism.

Some recent studies conclude that the extreme and violent nature of Paik's Fluxus Happening, which extended his experiments with TV and video techniques, could have stemmed from his direct or indirect experiences of WWII and the Korean war (See Yook, 2017 and Rennert, 2010). Many researchers believe that shamanistic customs that originated in Mongolia and other northern countries have flourished in the Korean Peninsula because Koreans have suffered from wars and violence throughout the long history of foreign invasions, including the Korean war.

By carefully observing modern Korean history, Park has been raising political issues in Korean society, especially those brought about by the division of the Korean Peninsula. His engagement with Korea's shamanistic culture forms a part of his effort to research modern Korean history from a critical perspective. In *Shindoan* and *Manshin* (2013), Park exposes how the periods of Japanese colonization and subsequent modernization, westernization, and globalization have suppressed traditional religious culture.

Figure 5: Chan-Kyong Park, *Shindoan* HD film 45mm, 2008 (Chan-Kyong P ark © al l rights reserved)

With his brother, Chan-Wook Park, Park makes *Night Fishing* (2011) using an iPhone 4, in which he tries not only a new technique of film-making but also a combination of exorcism and avant-garde

music played by an underground band, *Uhuhboo Band*. The movie is about a man who had gone fishing one night and drowned. His mother makes a shaman perform a *kut* to exorcise his ghost, which has been troubling his daughter. At the beginning of the movie, one can see a group of musicians singing and dancing in black hats and clothes symbolizing the death angel. With this movie, Park and his brother won the Golden Bear award in the Berlinale Shorts Category at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2011.

5. CONCLUSION

Recently, many researchers treat shamanism as one of the key concepts to approach Paik's video art and early Korean media arts. Though shamanistic rituals originated in Mongolia, they have thrived in the Korean Peninsula throughout its turbulent history. Ever since Paik's first solo exhibition in Wuppertal, not a few Korean video artists have tried shamanistic performances, recorded the ceremony's sound effects, and adopted their eye-catching visuals. Some Korean artists, like Hae-Min Kim, identify videos with several aspects of shamanism. Others, like Chan-Kyong Park, are invested in the criticism of the societal problems caused by modern Korean history through the researches on shamanistic traditions. Despite the differences in each artist's works, some early Korean video artists regard shamanism as a vital cultural heritage to preserve.

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