

Constructing Transnational Identities

Paik Nam June and Lee Ufan

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Introduction

Paik Nam June (1932–2006) and Lee Ufan (b. 1936) are Korea's two most famous expatriate artists. In 1949, at the age of seventeen, Paik left Korea, accompanying his father as an interpreter to Hong Kong. He returned in 1950, only to leave again the following year for Japan on account of the Korean War. In 1952, he entered the Department of Aesthetics and Art History at Tokyo University, graduating in 1956. He left for Germany in 1958, then New York in 1964. With the world as his stage, Paik was a prolific artist working variously as a composer, a performance artist, and a video artist until his death in 2006. Paik's junior by four years, Lee spent a year in the Department of Painting at Seoul National University, then left for Japan to become a student of philosophy at Nihon University. After graduation, he began painting but could not draw much attention. In 1969, Lee was awarded an honourable mention for his art-criticism essay, 'From Object to Being', gaining recognition from the Japanese art world. In 1971, Lee published his book, *In Search of Encounter*, and his art and theories brought forth a group of artists, giving rise to the Mono-ha (a School of Things) movement. He currently lives in France.

In the case of Lee who expatriated as an adult, he became well known in the Korean art world as early as the late 1960s. For Paik, however, his fame came belatedly in Korea with the satellite broadcast of *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* in 1984. As is often the case with the media portrayal of well-known expatriates, the media focused on Paik's nationality, emphasising the 'Koreanness' of Paik and his work. Paik was adamantly against such an identity, pointing out that to view his work as a meeting ground between East and West was an imposition. He said he had never thought of himself as expressing Koreanness or Asianness.¹

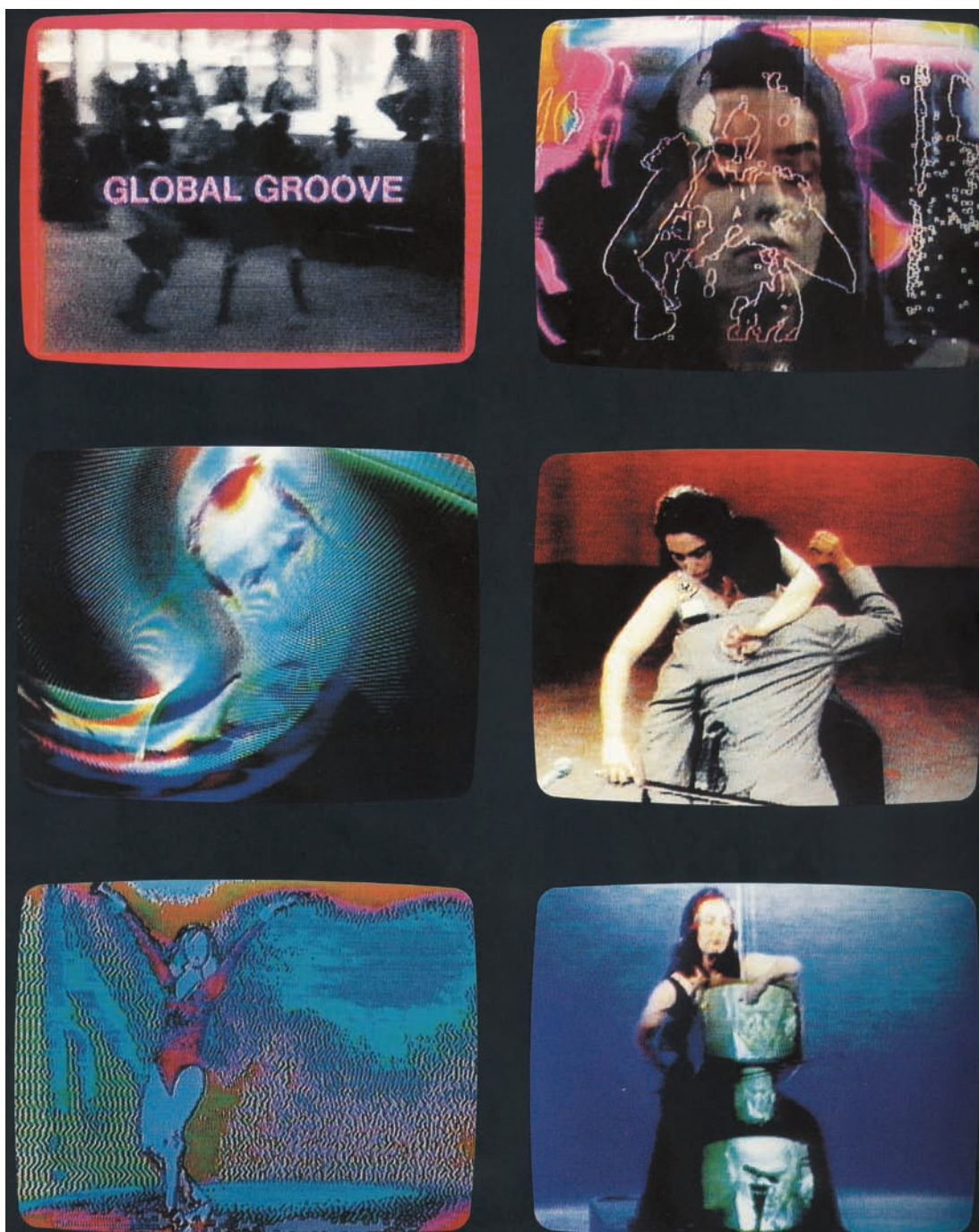
Compared to Paik who had emigrated to a society with a long history of immigration, Lee's

situation was starkly different. He lived in Japan, a country that had not only occupied Korea for thirty-five years, but also was not very tolerant towards cultural diversity. In both Paik Nam June's and Lee Ufan's work, one detects qualities that cannot be defined by the cultural identity of either their mother country or their adopted one, qualities that go beyond national borders. This paper attempts to pursue this transnationality, and how they construct an aesthetic identity that transcends boundaries.

Paik Nam June, the Transnational Nomad

When Paik was in Germany, he associated with the Fluxus movement, which became the primary influence for him as an artist. Fluxus was an international avant-garde art movement that allowed for Paik to lose some of his self-consciousness as an Asian artist from a poor country. Fluxus attempted to subvert national identity and authorship itself. Among the members were Maciunus who moved to the West from Lithuania after the war, Emmett Williams and Benjamin Patterson from the United States, Ono Yoko from Japan, Ben Vautier from France, and Wolf Vostel and George Brecht from Germany.

In 1962, Paik performed La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 # 10: To Bob Morris* at the Fluxus International Festival of Very New Music at Wiesbaden. According to Young's instruction, which was 'Draw a line and follow it', Paik dipped his head, hands and tie in a pail full of ink and tomato juice, then proceeded to use his body as a brush to draw a line down a long scroll of paper. For the Western audience, Paik's performance recalled a Zen Buddhist priest writing with dashing strokes in a supreme state of meditation, and he became known as a fascinating young avant-garde artist from the East. However, Paik claimed, 'I am not a follower of Zen Buddhism, but as one responds to



Bach, I respond to Zen'.² He not only refused to be pigeonholed into an Asian identity, but also refused the very cultural dichotomy of East and West.

He also made a lasting impression with his 1962 performance of *For a Violin Solo* in which he slowly raised a violin in the dark and smashed it once the light came on. Such extreme acts could be interpreted as an aggressive way of garnering attention, or, according to Kate Millet, the only way an 'outsider' can exist: 'If Tokyo was hard, what was it like in Germany. Maybe he had built a shell, had already perfected that manner of being

Figure 1 Paik Nam June
Global Groove, 1973
 single-channel videotape
 © Produced by the TV Lab at WNET/Thirteen, New York

a foreigner, a refugee artist: thick-skinned, a little strange, a little funny, a bit of a clown, harmless, diffident, ineffably an outsider'.³

From another perspective, Paik's acts of transgression could be read as a response to the conversion of culture into spectacle in the 1950s. The historical avant-garde such as Dada had already



Figure 2 Lee Ufan
Relatum, 1971
cushion, stone, light
Pinar Gallery, Tokyo

attempted strategies of shock and scandal. The cultural tendency towards spectacle from the late 1950s to the 1960s was particularly tied to the experience of public performances. Paik's spectacles consisted of combining the aural with the visual and the theatrical. In Europe, where there was already a history of avant-garde art, Paik's shocking performances, particularly his innovative incorporations of music, were successful strategies for catapulting his career.

When he found television, he was probably drawn to it as a medium that was new and relatively free from the cultural dichotomy of East and West, proffering the potential for a universal language. Ultimately, Paik consistently concentrated on deconstructing the cultural binaries of East and West. For Paik, television was the most efficient tool for transcending national borders, drawing diverse traditions together into dialogue. In the 1960s, Paik insisted on television's progressive potential for individual and collective experience; he focused on the prophecies of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, who appealed to the power of the media to extend man, and connect all corners of the earth into a 'global village'. In a piece called *Global Groove* (see figure 1), echoing McLuhan's own concept of the global village, one could see Paik's attempt to incorporate all cultures. Here, we see a Japanese Pepsi commercial, a monotonous recitation by the poet Allen Ginsberg, Charlotte Moorman's cello recital, a Nigerian dance, a Navajo Indian song, Korean folk dance and other such disparate images alternating freely from one to another. According to Paik, a television festival made out of the music and dance from all nations could mediate every conflict, small and large. This was the ideology that supported a bi-directional communication event such as *Bye Bye Kipling*

(1986), where Paik used satellite transmission to overcome the distance from New York to Tokyo to Seoul.⁴

Paik's perspective was persistently one of globalism. The avant-garde performances of his early Fluxus work participated in the Western cultural tendency towards spectacle through a strategic incorporation of the East. Later, with the discovery of television, an ideal medium for transcending national borders and overcoming the dichotomy of East and West, his work becomes more and more optimistic. Paik described himself as 'a Korean from a minority nation in the minority continent, who picked three Western and three Eastern languages during eighteen years of wandering from Hong Kong via Cairo to Reykjavik'.⁵ Indeed, Paik Nam June chose the path of a transnational nomadic artist, refusing to stay rooted in any one place.

Lee Ufan and the Uncertain Boundary

Lee Ufan's situation differed from that of Paik Nam June. The late 1960s in which Lee started to write about the Mono-ha was another transitional moment, distinct from Paik's formative moment of the 1950s. The 1960s was a volatile period with student protests, the hippie movement and other forms of radical change. This was also the case in Japan. The student protests at Tokyo University against restrictive education policies spawned an explosive mass demonstration. In particular, the demonstrations vehemently attacked the automatic renewal of the US–Japan Security Treaty, critiquing the Japanese Government for passively following the policies of the United States. The resistance spoke to a general sentiment that a new breakthrough was necessary. At this historical juncture, Mono-ha and Lee's theories of the movement offered a solution to the Japanese art world to this plea for an alternative.

The novelty of Lee's theories lay in the refusal to subsume Japanese contemporary art into the trend of Western art. Lee focused on critiquing Western Modernism, particularly the modern concept of the role of the artist and the meaning of creation. Lee criticised how Modernism was founded upon the Cartesian paradigm of 'I think, therefore I am', especially how artists had been conceptualised as the subjects of their creations, the works as a mere projection and objectification of their thoughts. Lee argued that this line of thought resulted in a separation of subject and object. One must overcome the separation by re-conceptualising the artist and the work of art

as part of world structure. Lee thought the artist ought to limit himself in the sense of keeping the choice of materials, the structure and acts of making to a minimum. Thus, the significance of the work of art would not be the form or the structure of the object, but rather the structure of the situation brought forth by the object which is 'mono'. The objects are living bodies, changing in their interaction with the surrounding space. The site where the objects are placed vividly reveals itself as an open world, and the object is understood to be a medium for the viewer to encounter with the world and experience the oblivion of epiphany.

It is a well-known fact that Lee's theories are greatly indebted to the writings of German philosopher Martin Heidegger as well as Nishida Kitarô, the Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto School. In Lee's own writing, one can find constant references to Nishida's synthesis of Western and Eastern thought and his concepts of 'pure experience' and 'absolute nothingness'. In particular, Nishida argued for a place of absolute nothingness where the dichotomy of subject and object would be deconstructed, where an object would exist in and of itself. Thus, for Nishida, salvation lay in non-attachment or selflessness and one's existence in nothingness.⁶

Lee's art focuses on such an encounter in the world. In the *Relatum* series (see figure 2), he organises encounters between material and material, material and the viewer, and material and site by setting a boulder on top of splintered glass, juxtaposing rough rock with soft cotton, industrial steel with natural stone and so on. Stones, glasses and steels are contrasted in the shape, size, mass, weight, texture of objects, or through a dynamic of concealing and revealing.

Most critics interpret Lee's work as positioning the humanist and technophile traditions of Western Modernism as the other, and thereby offering as an alternative the traditions of Japan and East Asia.⁷ Lee's emphasis on the cultural dichotomy of East and West contrasts significantly with the position of Paik Nam June. The construction of the binary opposition of East and West is characteristic of how Japanese modern history and culture asserts its own national identity. Furthermore, even though Lee offers the 'East' as an alternative, the fact that the concepts of non-attachment, selflessness in his writing and Nishida's philosophy reflect a strong influence of Japanese Zen Buddhism, and points to the possibility that this East is yet another name for Japan.⁸

There have been views, however, within Japan in recent years that point out that Lee's work actually reflects certain similarities to contemporary

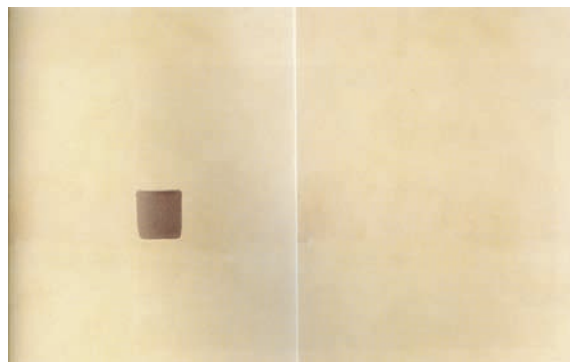


Figure 3 Lee Ufan
Correspondence, 2000
228 × 364 cm
oil on canvas
Published in Lee Ufan, *The Search for Encounter*, Samsung Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, 2003, p. 131

Western art, in particular, to installation art, Minimalism or Earthworks of the 1960s, points that Lee also affirms.⁹ On the other hand, the enthusiasm for everyday objects, the radical refusal of sculptural figures can be aligned with *Arte Povera*, which was very popular with young Japanese artists at that time.

Thus, one could argue that Lee's work positions itself within an ambiguous sphere where the divide between Japan, East and West are not distinct. What is not asserted in Lee's work, which is very interesting, is its 'Korean-ness'. Lee's position was diametrically opposed to that of Paik Nam June, who introduced himself explicitly as an avant-garde artist from the East. For Lee, it might have been difficult, even dangerous, to assert his Korean identity. Perhaps this is why Lee had to affirm himself within the context of Japanese modern culture.

While Lee had a disadvantage as a Korean living in Japan, the reason why he is widely known as one of the most important artists of Japanese contemporary art is that he was a theoretical leader. His writing demonstrates philosophical depth and, consequently, Lee was able to establish himself as an artist-philosopher.

Lee's sculptural career was short, and the Mono-ha movement itself persisted for only three years. From 1972, Lee turned to painting. Lee explains that his return to painting from sculpture is due to his experience as a child in Korea, learning how to write and draw with a brush. With the production of his strictly structured *Correspondence* series (see figure 3), the aesthetic of empty space has become very important for Lee. However, here we see a return to a more rigidly Japanese style, rather than an East Asian

one. Especially, the surfaces that are struck with a single brushstroke correspond to the simple, serene Japanese taste for *wabi-sabi* (a restrained and austere loneliness).

Conclusion

Nam June Paik never 'settled' either in Korea, Japan, Germany or the United States. Early experiences with the difficulty of transitioning from one culture to another, from one language to another and so on, became an endless resource for inspiration rather than a cause of cultural confusion. The artist Paik Nam June established himself within the avant-garde tradition of Western art. Paik not only satisfied the desire for 'difference' that Western art projected onto the East, he also achieved 'similarity' with Western avant-garde with his spectacularly shocking performances and his use of new media such as video. Thus, Paik succeeded in constructing the image of an Asian and a transnational artist at the same time.

Paik's cultural transition was relatively free. This was not the case for Lee Ufan, whose boundaries are rather complicated and uncertain. It seems that Lee himself felt this confusion. Lee confesses, 'In Korea, my work was criticized as being saturated with Japanese colours; in Japan, it is still too Korean. And in Europe, they consider me as an Asian. Like ping-pong, I am tossed from one side to another, a foreigner to each and every side.'¹⁰ Despite of his feelings and Korean background, his philosophical theorisation of Mono-ha and the aura of an artist-philosopher changed people's perception of Lee: from the stigma of a minority artist to the foreign artist with a background in Japanese aesthetics. However, the very dichotomy that Lee established between East and West is caught in an Orientalist gaze. Thus, Lee's work is positioned on a complicated and confusing border where Modernism, anti-Modernism, Orientalism and anti-Orientalism, or Japan, Korea, East and West compare and contrast.

NOTES

- 1 Jong-soong Rhee, 'PortaPaik', *Art Asia Pacific*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, p. 54.
- 2 Interview with Otto Hahn, cited in *Nam June Paik: Eine Data Base*, La Biennale di Venezia, XLV Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte, Edition Gantz, 1993, p. 185.
- 3 Kate Millett, 'Bonyari', in Toni Stoos & Thomas Kellein (eds), *Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space*, Harry N Abrams, New York, pp. 110–13.
- 4 After his fame in Korea in 1984, Paik drew more and more of his subject matter from Korean sources. However, it is difficult to reduce the interpretation of such works to a return to his origin. In a 2001 interview, Paik said that he made those pieces specifically for Korean collectors who were now starting to buy his works. Alice Kim, 'Coyotes and Wolves: An Interview with Nam June Paik', *New Art Examiner*, vol. 28, no. 7, April 2001, p. 41.
- 5 Paik Nam June, 'Expanded Education for the Paperless Society', in *Nam June Paik: Videa 'n' Videology 1958–73*, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1974.
- 6 Steven Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2001, pp. 129–34.
- 7 Teruo Fujieda, 'Jokyo toshide no sakuhi, monoha', *Nihon kingendai bijutsushi jiten*, Tokyo Shoten, 2007, p. 236; Shigeo Chiba, *Gendai Bijutsu Ittsudatsushi 1945–1985*, Shobunsha, 1986, p. 122; Alexandra Munroe, *Scream against the Sky, Japanese Art after 1945*, Guggenheim Museum of Art, Harry N Abrams, 1994, pp. 61–265; Toshiaki Minemura, 'A Blast of Nationalism in the Seventies', *Art in Japan Today II, 1970–1983*, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1984, p. 17.
- 8 As the relationship between Japan and East Asia is ambiguous in Lee's work, so is Nishida's thought. Although Nishida and the Kyoto School of philosophy in the 1930s proposed the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere as an alternative, ultimately they also argued that only Japan could represent this East Asia, supporting the ideology of a Japanese imperialism, and its ideal of a Great East Asia.
- 9 Interview with John Clark, *Asian Artist Interview Transcriptions*, vol. 3, unpublished, Japan, 1992.
- 10 Lee Ufan, *Yeobaek ui misul (Art of the Empty Space)*, trans. Kim Chun-mi, Hyeondae Munhak, Seoul, 2002, p. 95.