



# Pressing “rewind” and “forward” to negotiate a transcultural position: Global challenges of art between the 1960s and 1990s, Fluxus, and the case of Nam June Paik

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**Image** [modified]: frame from the TV Cultura video. Metropolis Program: "Nam June Paik, pioneer in mixing art and technology, has an exhibition at the Tate Modern | Exhibition", Nov. 16. of 2019.

# Pressing “rewind” and “forward” to negotiate a transcultural position: Global challenges of art between the 1960s and 1990s, Fluxus, and the case of Nam June Paik

Pressionando “retroceder” e “avançar” para negociar uma posição transcultural: Desafios globais da arte entre os anos 1960 e 1990, Fluxus e o caso de Nam June Paik

Franziska Koch\*

## ABSTRACT

The transcultural artistic strategies formulated in the Fluxus network during the 1960s, spanning Europe, East Asia, and the USA, are an important reference when searching for ways how to write art history in a global way. These strategies challenged national framings of art informed by the Eurocentric legacy of modernism. In this paper, I focus on Nam June Paik’s (self)positioning in negotiation with the taxonomic mechanisms of the Guggenheim Museum New York in 1994. I will analyze the conditions and limits of his cultural mediation. The first part of my chapter shows how Paik drew a fine-grained picture of Japanese experimental art as a Korean who had studied in Tokyo during the 1950s and then re-visited in the 1960s. In his version, Paik employs transcultural discursive strategies directed towards rewriting art history in ways that take account of multiple agencies and cultural entanglements. The second part of my study analyzes the resulting institutional conflict between Paik and Guggenheim’s Japanese survey show, *Scream against the sky*, to which he contributed an essay but declined to participate with his work. This paper articulates the transcultural (counter-) potential of artists who work(ed) across borders, especially at moments when Western canonization was a double-edged sword.

## KEY WORDS

Transcultural strategies. Nam June Paik. Fluxus. Japan. Institutional critique.

## RESUMO

As estratégias artísticas transculturais formuladas pela rede Fluxus durante a década de 1960, abrangendo Europa, Leste Asiático e Estados Unidos, são uma importante

referência na busca de maneiras de escrever história da arte de forma global. Essas estratégias desafiaram os enquadramentos artísticos nacionais construídos pelo legado eurocêntrico do modernismo. Neste artigo, centro-me no (self) posicionamento de Nam June Paik em sua negociação com os mecanismos taxonômicos do Museu Guggenheim de Nova York em 1994. Analisarei as condições e os limites de sua mediação cultural. A primeira parte do meu artigo mostra como Paik criou um quadro refinado da arte experimental japonesa, como um coreano que havia estudado em Tóquio durante os anos 1950 e que revisitou a cidade nos anos 1960. Em sua versão, Paik emprega estratégias discursivas transculturais voltadas para a reescrita da história da arte de maneiras que levam em conta as múltiplas agências e emaranhados culturais. A segunda parte do meu estudo analisa o conflito institucional resultante entre Paik e a mostra panorâmica sobre o Japão do Guggenheim, *Scream against the sky*, para o qual ele contribuiu com um ensaio, mas se recusou a participar com um trabalho. Este artigo articula o (contra) potencial transcultural de artistas que trabalha(ram) além das fronteiras, especialmente em momentos em que a canonização ocidental era uma faca de dois gumes.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Estratégias transculturais. Nam June Paik. Fluxus. Japão. Crítica institucional.

The transcultural artistic strategies that challenged the Eurocentric canons and conceptual framings of modernism, formulated in the Fluxus network during the 1960s, spanned Europe, East Asia, and the USA. They are an important reference for configuring art history in a global way. My contribution focuses on Nam June Paik's exemplarily (self) positioning in negotiation with the taxonomic mechanisms of a Western museum<sup>1</sup>. I address the institutional conditions and limits that influenced his transcultural mediation, a mediation that attempted to present a fine-grained picture of East Asia to Western audiences. But I also examine what kind of narrative strategies he used to introduce Japanese experimental art specifically. In the first part of the article, I establish that Fluxus protagonists of the 1960s and 1970s – such as Paik, born in Korea, student in Japan and Germany – carved out a proto transcultural position that takes account of multiple agencies, cultural entanglements, and

conflicting institutional taxonomies. In the second part, I analyze cultural politics and institutional conflict between Paik and the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1994, when the artist agreed to contribute an essay to the catalog of the pioneering survey exhibition, *Scream against the sky: Japanese art after 1945*, but refused to show his series of Fluxus mail art as a part of it. By focusing on these aspects, I aim to emphasize the transcultural (counter-) potential of artists who worked across borders, in order to confound conventional artistic canonization.

### **The internationalism of Fluxus: Europe, the USA, and Japan**

The manifold approaches to Fluxus have always highlighted internationalism as one of its hallmarks, but seldom are they studied in-depth. How did Fluxus artists claim and maintain border-crossing practices while targeting nationalist tendencies in the Cold War era? Summaries of Fluxus core concepts usually begin with a reference to George Maciunas' *Fluxus* manifesto in 1963, in which he announced the experimental Fluxus actions bidding farewell to bourgeois notions of the autonomous artwork, and aimed at a performative, process- and presence oriented "living art, anti-art (...) non-art reality" (Maciunas as quoted in Daniels, 1991: 101). According to his colleague, Emmett Williams, Fluxus artists subscribed to the motto: "Life is an artwork, and an artwork is life" (Williams as quoted in [www.kunstwissen.de](http://www.kunstwissen.de), 2017).

At the beginning of the 1960s, the early Fluxus practice challenged musical as well as dramatic conventions when composing and staging actions registered in so-called scores. This methodology was to some degree inspired by New Music, and the American vanguard composer John Cage (1912-1992) in particular. The scores consist of simple instructions for (collective) performances that in contrast to previous tradition no longer require the interpreter to be a professional musician or an actor. Typical examples are George Brecht's *Drip Music* (1959-62), in which "a source of

dripping water and an empty vessel are arranged so that the water falls into the vessel,”<sup>2</sup> or Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), in which a performer asks the audience to cut her clothes with a scissor. Typically, the scores were performed on stage in events announced as “concerts”, provoking shocked responses from audiences because they did not conform to the conventions of highly elaborated classical instrumental music or narrative theater.



FIG. 1. Nam June Paik, cover and back sides of an envelope, mail art series *Monthly Review of University for Avangarde Hinduism/N. J. Paik/ Fluxus-A*, various letters, partially filled with coins and other small items, ca. 1964. Archiv Hanns Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Inventory no. AS 2017/2515. Photograph: bpk/Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

Besides these actions, Fluxus members designed playful objects, boxes, and mail art that cause viewers/receivers to become participants, potentially incorporating them in the worldwide Fluxus community. Nam June Paik's mail art project, *Review of University for Avantgarde Hinduism N. J. Paik Fluxus-A* (1963) and his *Piano Intégral* (1963) are exemplary. In the latter, he modified the instrument using *objet trouvés* such as a bra, empty egg shells, barbed wire, and children's toys. Playing the keys resulted in making a light bulb flash, turning on a radio, producing unexpected sounds or no sound at all. In his first solo exhibition in 1963, at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, such prepared pianos and other altered objects – including several TV-sets – invited the visitors to joyfully experiment, perfectly realizing the exhibition title *Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* (Neuburger, 2009). In contrast, the *Monthly Review* [fig. 1] did not even require an exhibition space, as Paik described in a humorous advertisement (Hendricks, 1988: 432). In his signature-style explanation – eloquent, polyglot, and ironic – he combines daily and personal matters with the worst disasters of recent history, turning the boundaries of established art forms upside down, and imagining a transatlantic distribution network by selling this publication for an annual subscription fee of 8 USD.

George Maciunas meant to “PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPANISM’” seriously, as emphasized in the *Fluxus* manifesto, and demonstrated by the inclusion of many East Asians, one black American, and some Eastern European artists. (Daniels, 1991: 101f; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007; Merewether et al., 2007). Similarly, the names of eight Japanese composers along with Paik, an artist of Korean origin, on the poster announcing the *Festum Fluxorum 1963* in Düsseldorf, was a novelty for the German post-war context. Remarkably, many women artists participated in Fluxus events, rendering the participants not only ethnically diverse and its activities geographically widespread but also setting an early example for what a more inclusive network would look like in terms of gender<sup>3</sup>.

Concerning its relationship with Asia, the American art historian and curator Alexandra Munroe underlines, as late as 1994, that Fluxus – next to conceptual art – was one of the two earliest international movements in modern art history which were co-founded by many Japanese artists. No other Euro-American avant-garde group had ever seen so many Japanese participants as equal members – 23 people, according to Fluxus annalist Jon Hendricks (Hendricks, 1988) – nor sought such a direct and lasting exchange with the sub-cultural art world of Tokyo (Munroe, 1994: 215-218). Munroe sees the internationally shared interest of Fluxus participants in the “negation of the commodification of art; negation of art as an illusion rather than presentation of reality; and negation of the boundaries between object and action, word and image, art and life”, born out of the desire to overcome the cruelties of the Second World War – summarized as “Auschwitz and Hiroshima” (Munroe, 1994: 215). Apparently, the claims of humanist enlightenment and the bourgeoisie’s ideal of progress in Europe and America were as fundamentally disappointed as was Japan’s modern sense of identity. As a young nation guided by military imperialism, Japan had first usurped the leading role in East Asia, then endured a devastating defeat, the abdication of the emperor, the failure of religious and social institutions (Victoria, 1997), and the loss of other cultural beliefs. According to Munroe, artists in Wiesbaden, New York, and Tokyo consequently would not opt for a radical political change in contrast to their predecessors, the Dadaists: “Influenced by postwar Existentialism, Absurdism and Zenism, they chose instead to make the social and mental nature of being the site of their aesthetic and philosophical investigations” (Munroe, 1994: 215).

Referring to Western critiques of modernism following Marcel Duchamp on the one hand, and concepts related to Zen Buddhism and other Asian philosophical traditions on the other, Fluxus initiated a cultural translation process in Europe and North America that allowed both sides to connect and continue their longstanding, entangled history

of avant-gardism<sup>4</sup>. Similar to the travelling Japanese composer and artist couple, Ichiyanagi Toshi (born 1933) and Yōko Ono (born 1933), Nam June Paik was also ideally positioned to become an influential border-crossing agent who actively propelled exchange between Japan and the West through the Fluxus network and other experimental stances, despite the increasingly sharp ideological demarcations of the Cold War (Munroe, 1994: 218)<sup>5</sup>. Though it was only in the middle of his long career that he directly contributed to the inner-Asian dialogue between Japanese and Korean art scenes when compared to other early migrated Korean fellow artists such as Lee Ufan, Paik did attempt to communicate a differentiated picture of East Asia from afar. He pointed out the distinguishing features of the Japanese art scene of the 1960s in order to undermine the stereotypical and monolithic Western view of East Asia at the time, often reductively equated with Japan. Paik continued to do so during the 1990s, which is the subject of the following discussion.

### **Nam June Paik: the “father of video art” and a “cultural nomad”**

Despite his strong engagement with and contribution to the collaborative practices of Fluxus, and the fact that his later works, performances, and multi-media projects fundamentally relied on collaboration, as the artist often stressed in conversation and his writings, Paik became canonized as an extraordinary singular figure in art history. The narrative follows the powerful modern myth of the genius artist<sup>6</sup>. Significantly, the inclusion of an East Asian artist in the Western pantheon of post-war white male *geniuses* was already a novelty. From the beginning, Paik was situated as a peripheral subject in relation to several partially entangled, dominant centers (Mishra and Hodge, 1991: 399). He began his studies in music, art history, and philosophy as a foreigner in Japan (1952-56), living in the country of his former colonizers



immediately after the violent Japanese rule over Korea ended in 1945. As the youngest son of an affluent merchant who collaborated with the Japanese and had to leave Korea at the outbreak of civil war in 1950, Paik experienced firsthand the longstanding resentment and racism between the two countries as it assumed a new complexity during the Cold War.

At the same time, Paik benefitted from the advanced educational opportunities that went hand in hand with Japan's economic and political hegemony in East Asia. After Japan was forced to open up internationally in 1854, a modernist art movement informed by American and European trends developed there (Volk, 2010) while remaining deeply connected within Asia<sup>7</sup>. When Paik returned to Japan for several months in 1964, Tokyo proved to be a particularly creative environment, as will be discussed below.

To pursue his music studies, Paik moved to West-Germany in 1956. Again, a country that had just recently been defeated was in the process of being re-built as a fortification against the so-called Eastern Block. While finishing composition studies in Electronic Music with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne, he met John Cage and La Monte Young at the "International Summer Courses for New Music" in Darmstadt (organized from 1958-63) and became a participant in the first Fluxus concerts that George Maciunas co-organized in Rhineland<sup>8</sup>.

At the time, Paik's "action music" (Decker, 1988: 27) favored chance operations and experimented with indeterminism, which eventually led to his pioneering turn to media art (Neuburger, 2009). The triggering point was Paik's artistic engagement with TV technology in Germany (1963) and his debut with video works shortly after his move to New York (1964) (The Paik Estate, 2017; Paik, 1991: 17-19; Rennert et al., 2010).

It is thus not surprising that two dominant motifs govern Paik's international reception. On the one hand, his achievements in new media earned him the title "father of video art." (Eimert, 2010: 127f)<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, Paik has often been characterized as the central representative of an

artistic attitude that fosters the global dialogue of cultures. It is mirrored in the etiquette “Kulturnomade” (cultural nomad) (Decker, 1992), which denotes his migrant and travelling persona as well as his conviction that art is a means to foster cross-cultural communication.

When legitimizing the label “father of video art” scholars refer to Paik’s visionary key concept that communication should flow unrestrictedly, connect globally, and allow everyone to participate. Following his early music-inspired Fluxus scores, he explored television and then video as artistic media beginning in the early 1960s to realize his idea of an interdisciplinary approach. Telling examples are the TV-based works in his first solo exhibition in Wuppertal, 1963. Paik allowed visitors to manipulate live television images by externally applying a strong magnet or using a foot switch that distorted the black and white images on screen. He was challenging the one-to-many communication principle of television, pushing it towards the reciprocal and multiple connections that define the many-to-many principle of the internet era. It was a crucial media change that the artist lucidly described using the innovative term “electronic superhighway” in a proposal written as early as 1974 (Daniels, 2005).

Two decades later, in 1993, Paik together with Hans Haacke was selected to represent Germany’s contribution to the *Venice Biennale*. Resonating with his image as “cultural nomad”, Paik dedicated his contribution to “Marco Polo” (Kiffel, 2015; Medien Kunst Netz, 2005). He engaged with cultural entanglements relating Asia, Europe, and the US that had already begun to interest him when he was studying in Japan (Decker, 1992: 11; Oliva, 1993: 6-7; Zeller and Reich, 2007: 46-47, 147-149). In the multi-monitor wall called *Electronic Superhighway* that he installed in one of the wings of the pavilion [fig. 2], he mixed earlier footage of his own seminal works such as the video tape *Global Grove* (1973) with scenes of John Cage and other clips of renowned collaborators such as Charlotte Moorman and Joseph Beuys<sup>10</sup>. The continuous fusion of both his interest in new media and the dialogue between cultures earned him (together with Haacke) the “golden lion” award in Venice that

year. Altogether, Nam June Paik can be portrayed as a transcultural artistic figure since the 1960s, at a time when the term was not yet used and when reified borders of the Cold War effectively hindered border-crossing artistic collaboration. These restrictions also inspired imaginaries of a truly global artistic exchange (Connery, 2007). They became at least partially realized during the 1990s and early 2000s, although embedded in a significantly different understanding of globalization.

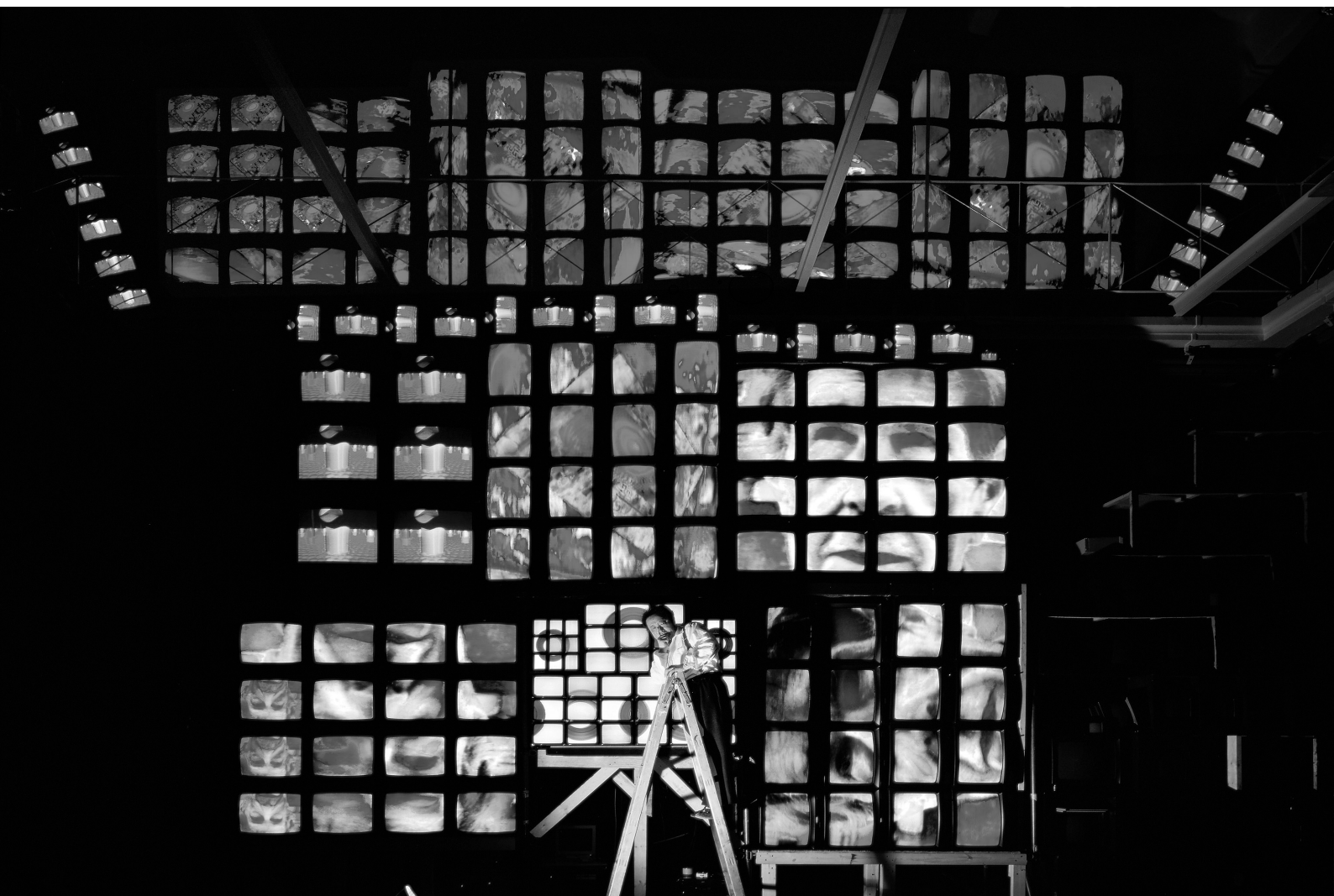


FIG. 2. Nam June Paik in front of his *Electronic Superhighway*, multi-colored multi-monitor video wall, installed at the German Pavilion of the *Venice Biennale 1993*. Photograph: Roman Mensing, artdoc.de.

Against this background, I will now discuss Paik's changing negotiation of East Asia and particularly Japan during the 1960s and his later recollections during the 1990s, especially regarding the lingering notion of national framings by museums in the West.

### **The exhibition Japanese art after 1945: Scream against the sky**

The large survey exhibition, *Japanese art after 1945: Scream against the sky*, was conceived as a cooperative event by the Japanese organizers and two American museums, opening in Japan in 1994 before travelling to the USA in 1995. From the curator's point of view, Paik must have been an ideal commentator occupying an intermediary position between both contexts. Alexandra Munroe, the main curator of the exhibition, had invited him to convey his memories with a particular view to Fluxus, Japan, and the 1960s in an essay for the catalogue.

According to the catalog's preface, by the President of the Japan Foundation, Shin'ichirō Asao, the show was the "first exhibition devoted to the history of post-war Japanese avant-garde culture ever presented in the US" (Asao, 1994: 7). Apart from its scope and time span covering five decades, this exhibition was unique due to having been initiated and organized in Japan, where it was advertised as "the nation's first survey of post-war Japanese art" (Munroe, 1994: 12).

The American guest curator, Alexandra Munroe, who grew up in Japan and had briefly also studied there (Guggenheim Museum, 2017), conceived the exhibition at the Yokohama Museum of Art from 1991 to 1993. The main sponsor was the Japan Foundation together with the collaborating American museums: Guggenheim, New York, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art along with the Yerba Buena Gardens<sup>11</sup>. Munroe had also conceived of slightly varying American displays early in the planning process and wrote

most of the separate English and moderately expanded catalogue version (Munroe and Bijutsukan, 1994)<sup>12</sup>.

Munroe's curatorial approach stressed that Western curators of the 1980s and 1990s had increasingly seen "Japan as ideal site for the current phenomenon known as 'transculturalism'" (Munroe, 1994: 19), even though Western research of modern Japanese art was still in its initial stages. She saw the research critically as Eurocentric, marked by essentialist concepts of modernism and the avant-garde inherent in conventional art histories. These concepts would significantly impede the reflection on an alternative Japanese modernity (Munroe, 1994: 20). Consequently, Munroe's introduction emphasizes the powerful, independent agency of the Japanese avant-garde in their exchanges with Western artistic practices, stylistic trends, and art concepts. She focused on pivotal local events, while mostly portraying the history of modernism and postmodernism as an entangled, transnational process.

One of the key passages of her introduction is characterized by a particular tension that demonstrates the risk of re-orientalization inherent in the attempt to articulate Japanese characteristics while expressing it through a modernist (art historical) terminology which has been complicit in (institutionally) excluding the Japanese Other:

While the work here [in post-war Japan] reveals a learned and contemporary engagement with the principles of modern and postmodern art - may indeed be original within a certain international movement or style - this study presents the confluence of international 'isms' and Japanese activity in a comparative context focusing on the artists' individual and cultural experience as the source of expression. Whereas other histories have seen the interaction between Japanese and Euro-American artist as a process of assimilation, this history highlights the Japanese artists' creative will to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture in an attempt to establish an autonomous modernity. Although frequently criticized for being derivative, the international work presented in 'Scream Against

the Sky' should prove the contrary: Originality, not imitation, guides the Japanese avant-garde way (Munroe, 1994: 23).

However, it seems that Munroe was also following post-colonial discussions that are more critical about discursively and curatorially up-holding Eurocentric categories – such as originality, autonomy, and the (artistic) avant-garde understood as a radical break with the past – when exploring the entanglements of Japanese and Western experimental art. Instead of accusing the Japanese artists of imitating or assimilating contemporary Western art uncritically and prolonging the popular notion “that Japanese modernism is essentially discontinuous and ahistorical” (Munroe, 1994: 20), she described them as independent and creative artists with the aim of highlighting Japan’s “autonomous modernity.” Although, she does not explicitly express it in this paragraph, the curator understands “autonomy” and “originality” not in a culturally essentialist, ontological or absolute sense, but rather through a detailed analysis that frames the Japanese developments as complex, conscious, and creative negotiations of international and national notions of art and artistic practices.

Munroe went to great lengths to contextualize the works of approximately 90 artists and several additional artist groups listed in the extensive appendix of both versions of the catalogue. The English volume is divided into two parts comprising altogether 14 chapters with detailed essays, most of them written by Munroe herself, complemented by a few contributions by Japanese and Western scholars (Munroe, 1994). The authors discuss the emergence of Butoh performance, the Gutai group, Hi Red Center and Fluxus artists, but also numerous other performative and action-centered art forms as well as cross-disciplinary practices in painting, sculpture, music, theatre, and film. Both versions of the catalogue are introduced with an essay. The first is titled “As Witness to Postwar Japanese Art” (Arata, 1994) authored by the Japanese architect Isozaki Arata (born 1931), while the second is Nam June Paik’s contribution, titled “To Catch

Up or Not to Catch Up with the West: Hijikata and Hi Red Center” (Paik, 1994). Given this parallel structure, Paik is implicitly positioned as a direct witness, too. However, his position differs from Arata’s in that he was only temporarily involved in the local art scene of Tokyo in the 1960s. In addition, his Korean background, experiences in Germany and his immigration to the USA allowed him to express a relatively distanced and partially critical perspective.

### **To Catch Up or Not to Catch Up with the West**

How did Paik then portray the Japanese avant-garde scene when recalling the 1960s and how did he situate himself in the field?

At first glance, his argumentation sidelines Munroe’s curatorial position because the artist emphasizes the originality and independent stance of the Japanese artists. The title of the essay directly confronts the stereotype that non-Western artists would only (belatedly) imitate Western modernism. Paik strategically conveys various anecdotes to answer the question of how Japanese artists responded to the Eurocentric perspective. He positions himself as a mediating figure of the debate in direct and indirect ways.

As the second part of his title suggests, his five-page essay largely focuses on the Japanese founder of Butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-1986) and the artist collective Hi Red Center (1963-1964). George Maciunas readily subsumed them under the label of “Tokyo Fluxus” on the basis of their groundbreaking and often participatory action art<sup>13</sup>. Paik follows the trajectory of Akasegawa, one of the three founders of Hi Red Center, in detail, starting with a recollection of the Collective’s *Shelter Plan* event in which Paik himself participated in January 1964, as documented in the photograph that heads his essay (Munroe, 1994: 74, 177f). He recounts Akasegawa’s spectacular trial for money forgery, because the police had found many mock-up bills that formed part of works for his solo exhibition

and its affiliated invitation card (Marotti, 2001; Tomii, 2002). Paik concludes his account with an enthusiastic comment about Akasegawa winning a prestigious literature award in the mid-1970s, signaling the artist's final public establishment as a great interdisciplinary artist.

Paik, thus, answers the question of whether the radical Japanese post-war artists tried “to catch up” with Western avant-gardes and their ideals, or if they, on the contrary, rejected them in order to challenge the hegemony of the Euro-American art world. His strategically chosen case studies emphasize the indispensability of the Japanese context for the (self-) understanding of these artists. He insists that the cultural background is a *conditio sine qua non* for their work, calling his Japanese colleagues “earth-bound” several times (Paik, 1994: 77, 81), “unexportable geniuses of Japan” (Paik, 1994: 79), and “impossible to transplant (...) into another cultural milieu” (Paik, 1994: 81). These thoughts are reflected in the concluding sentence of his essay:

The Japanese economy and society is geared to catch up with the West. Therefore, Japanese society also expects their artists to catch up with the West. But maybe catching up, or down, is not culture's business. This also applies to Dieter Rot's [sic] Iceland (Paik, 1994: 81).

On the one hand, Paik argues that the artists did not see culture and consequently art as facilitating such a competition. Rather, he sees vanguard artists as an *opposing* force and the cultural sector as providing the grounds for opposition. On the other hand, his abrupt reference to the Swiss action and object artist, Dieter Roth (1930-1998), born and working part-time in Germany, indicates that it was not easy for Paik and his colleagues to completely negate or reject the suggestion of “catching up” with the West as a center increasingly identified with New York as the dominating art hub of the time. This is why the tension between Euro-American center(s) and (non-Western) peripheries remained prominently in the title. The



economic, discursive, and political power of the center(s) categorized places as different as Japan and Iceland in the same peripheral plane, based on the imperialist and colonial self-understanding of modernism, temporally and geographically defined. The concept still lingered despite various post-colonial independence movements and the disillusion with Western notions of rational enlightenment and civilizational superiority caused by World War II.

In several passages, Paik implicitly points to the relevance of catching up in his own career – even though the competition was only instigated by leading international art institutions or economic dynamics of the art market. Consequently, Paik’s argumentation is characteristically ambivalent: he sees Akasegawa as one of the “indigenous and unexportable geniuses of Japan” just like Dieter Roth in Iceland. At the same time, the description of these artists as singular, authoritative figures in the romantic sense of “geniuses” contradicts Paik’s understanding of Fluxus and other action art that follows the ideals of collaborative authorship and border-crossing participation in order to challenge and change conventional art reception and national or colonial institutional conditions.

Akasegawa’s work is thus not considered singular and an exclusively Japanese phenomenon but imagined as part of a connected action and a conceptual art approach that stretches from Japan via India and Africa to Iceland, challenging modernist assumptions about the universality of Western art notions. Paik also implicitly positions himself as an artist who cannot be understood without specific cultural backgrounds – like Hijikata or Akasegawa, but different from them and similar to the nomadic lifestyle of “Dieter Roth from Iceland”. As Roth, he moves between several cultural contexts, later succumbing to the attraction of Western art centers. In Paik’s case, as well as temporarily for Roth, this was New York.

Ultimately, Paik’s stress on Fluxus’ collaborative, even collective ideals, international aspirations, and the contrasting portrayal of the Japanese

participants as less itinerant, while equally internationally informed, results in a productive tension that pervades the whole essay. Rather than ultimately denying the relevance of the issue of “catching up” as indicated in the quoted conclusion, Paik actually reinforces the basic tension marked by the two poles: to catch up or not to catch up. He is thus able to discuss what it means to operate in such a polarized framework. Paik’s anecdotal narration demonstrates the resulting translational creativity in precise terms, which at the same time also results from the transcultural *dispositif*/apparatus. Building on Michel Foucault’s seminal definition this means to acknowledge that our (cultural) knowledge production is fundamentally formed and informed by underlying power relations. Paradoxically, the *dispositif*/apparatus results in the production of (new) knowledge while at the same time conditioning it, i.e. often limiting it (Foucault in Gordon, 1980: 194-196; Koch, 2016: 33-70)<sup>14</sup>.

### **Untranslatabilities: Paik negotiates transculturality**

Other passages of the essay show how Paik’s choice of evocative metaphors and the way he peppers his English narration with foreign words attest to the crucial translational labor involved. Programmatically, he situates himself on the first page of the text, subtitled “Flashback I” and “Flashback II”. In the first, the artist implores Fluxus as an attitude and a network that was not recognized by mainstream institutions for a long time, but has since become the “best-documented and the best-cross-indexed art movement in history” (Paik, 1994: 77). In the second flashback, Paik recalls his shock, upon buying the *New York Times* in order to read the obituary of Joseph Beuys, to find an article about Hijikata’s death, too. Paik elaborates on what he interprets as an emblematic coincidence, emphasizing the similarities of their approaches with the German word “unheimlich”: “Beuys and Hijikata

shared the same characteristics – each a kind of watchdog of the Siberian night at the two ends of the Steppe. (...) Both were *unheimlich* – inscrutable and scary” (Paik, 1994: 77). The strong image of two dogs watching over the ends of an ultimately connected, even a shared, Eurasian continent mirror one another in their *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) conveys the idea of a mystically entangled, creative community.

With *unheimlich*, Paik also seems to refer to shamanist practices in line with Beuys, who projected himself as a shaman in his “individual mythology” (a term coined by Harald Szeeman at *documenta 5*) (Grasskamp, 2017) that imagined Eurasia as a coherent cultural space. Meanwhile, Hijikata’s Butoh appropriated aspects of traditional Japanese shamanism. Both, Hijikata and Beuys, connected transcendental concepts with a body and earth-bound aesthetic that helps overcome nationalist or culturally essentialist ideologies, while – at the same time – not being entirely free of universalist claims or culturally essentialist assumptions as (art) critics on the occasion of Beuys’ current centenary have re-iterated (Maak, 2021).

A characteristic textual strategy of Paik, when articulating his transcultural stance, is evident where he deals critically with cultural differences that he clearly experienced. His response was to bring people into dialogue to challenge established boundaries. Where differences seemed unbridgeable or concepts untranslatable, he let them be and marked them as rationally unfathomable driving forces. This strategy produces ambivalence, since on the one hand the artist shows what is unfathomable (to him), thereby stressing difference, while on the other hand, he attributes a higher, transcendental power to untranslatability. In case of doubt, it also allows him to refrain elegantly from any (rational) explanation.

Paik’s trickster strategy is evident in his description of the Butoh founder Hijikata with the Freudian term *Unheimliches* and the resonating metaphor of darkness, “the Siberian night”, when he recalls a performance by Hijikata (Paik, 1994: 78). Insinuating that “the dark source of the deep

Asian soul” is mystic, inscrutable, and thus a rationally inaccessible other, he renders Hijikata’s performance untranslatable. Ultimately, remaining *unheimlich* is what seems to make the performance artistically so impressive and affective. In the same phrase, however, Paik also provides the reader with no less than five approximate translations of the German term in order to make it understandable, pointing to the fact that untranslatability is the driving force that inspires the desire to grasp and comprehend the other. While shrouding the other in mystery is a comfortable way to evade rational examination and historical or cultural contextualization of either Beuys or Hijikata, at the same time, Paik’s elliptic descriptions demonstrate what motivates border-crossing creative negotiations of Asian and European positions alike. For Paik, this was not a naïve or completely romantic notion, as we can see when looking into a third anecdote he provides.

This time, Paik reinforces his transcultural stance by contrasting himself with the Japanese poet and painter Takiguchi Shūzō (1903-1979). Shūzō had introduced the work of Marcel Duchamp and European Surrealists to Japan and, later, advocated Hi Red Center and Butoh as a renowned art critic (Munroe, 1994: 150, 215-216). Paik recalls meeting Shūzō after the above-mentioned performance of Hijikata:

On the way out, I met Takiguchi Shūzō in the lobby. Takiguchi is the Grand Daddy of the Japanese avant-garde (...). He visited Henri Michaux in postwar Paris. He wrote surrealistic poems and quite dandy art criticism and reviews. I told him rather enthusiastically, what I felt and that I wished, ‘Tokyo was at least as close as Cairo is to Paris so that this kind of genius [Hijikata] could be appreciated by the Western audience’. Takiguchi said with a charming smile, ‘This far is just about right (*chōdo ii desuyo*)’ (Paik, 1994: 78).

While Paik used the German word in the previous passages as a means to signal the creative tension, resulting from the attempt to negotiate otherness, even inscrutable darkness, in this instance, it is the other way

around. Paik, who was a fluent speaker and writer of Japanese, includes Shūzō's original answer in brackets after the English translation although the readership of the English catalogue was primarily a Western one, who would mostly not be able to savor the original Japanese quote. Arguably, the Japanese words serve Paik to emphasize Shūzō's insistence on Tokyo's distance from Paris as part of a self-assured Japanese stance that positively reclaims difference; since the Japanese words literally embody the difference in the English text. In addition, Paik's humorous description of how Shūzō as "Grand Daddy of the Japanese Avant-garde" pointedly disarmed his own, youthful enthusiasm about cultural exchanges seems to consciously hover between admiration and critique of those preceding cultural mediators like Shūzō, who actively related the pre-war art scenes of Japan and Europe before Paik's own generation. Moreover, stating the reply of Shūzō also in Japanese renders it doubly cryptic and works to highlight Paik's own polyglot and dialogical stance as one that actively works to bridge generational and cultural distances of kind. Ultimately, Paik emerges from the contrast as a proponent of the younger generation, a multi-lingual translator propelling and championing transcultural dialogue.

However, Paik is clear about such a dialogue being a relational and procedural event that cannot be forced upon interlocutors. This is why he also signals understanding, even appreciation, for colleagues and peers such as the Japanese vanguard composer Takehisa Kosugi. Paik associated Kosugi with a critical stance resonating with that of Shūzō in a passage written after the "Flashbacks". He effectively sympathizes with their insistence on cultural difference and active attempts to keep a critical distance from the (Western) Other:

I told [Takehisa] Kosugi, when I stay in Tokyo for two weeks, I dream about a hamburger. Kosugi laughed. He did not miss the greasy hamburger. When Kosugi came to New York, he said, 'I came to New York to teach New Yorkers how to be shy'. I have not heard a more pertinent cultural critique

than this one (Paik, 1994: 81).

It becomes clear that a transcultural position and meta-reflection do not allow locating oneself unambiguously or permanently. It demands respect for the relativity and relationality of the Self and the Other. A normative critique of the Other or the foreign becomes impossible, while the awareness of the fundamentally procedural, dynamic, and creative constructions of difference dominates. Ultimately, Paik positions himself with these anecdotes as a border-crossing artist and discursive mediator, who advocates for international recognition as well as local contextualization of those Japanese colleagues who did not travel extensively or moved out of the country for longer periods, the so-called earth-bound vanguards. Although Paik marks them as partially distinct from those Japanese (Fluxus) artists who eventually migrated intentionally – similar to himself – ultimately he supports a better understanding of both factions and their entangled cultural negotiations.

This argument serves as a counter-theme to the leading quest for originality. The cultural specificity of Japanese post-war avant-garde culture permeates the English catalog as well as the exhibition at the Guggenheim. Paik does not completely negate the notion that there is a race to catch up with the West instigated and supported by economic and institutional agencies. However, by questioning the core relevance of the question and elaborating on the consequences of the tension it creates in the daily practice of the artists and their multi-sited reception, he points towards the complexity of the *dispositif*/apparatus that informs and at the same time results from transcultural processes of identification and differentiation. Like a seismograph of globalization and artistic canonization, Paik detects evidence that points to the increasing social and institutional acknowledgment of both migrating (Fluxus) artists and experimental artists remaining in Japan. He collects anecdotes that attest

to the ambivalent, but productive, exchanges and relations between the two groups. Paik saw himself as a creative agent who tried to affect the *dispositif*/apparatus by collaborating with colleagues in transcultural ways and by challenging various national boundaries as well as nationalist cultural framings.

### **Institutional framings: limits and differences**

Although Paik agreed to write the essay for the catalogue of *Scream against the sky*, he strongly objected to including his series of Fluxus mail art in the exhibition. The reasons for his objection become clear in two faxed letters signed by his lawyer Jerald Ordover that are preserved in the Nam June Paik Archives in Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup>.

The first letter is dated January 10, 1994, and addressed to Thomas Krens, Director of the Guggenheim Museum at the time (Ordover, 1994)<sup>16</sup>. Ordover states that Paik was shocked upon learning from Alexandra Munroe that some of his works were scheduled to be displayed, even after he had dismissed her suggestion when first approached for the exhibition a year earlier and, instead, had offered to contribute an essay as a token of his admiration for Japanese art:

The work in question is a series of mail art pieces which Mr. Paik mailed from Cologne, Istanbul, Athens, Tokyo and New York in the course of a worldwide trip in 1963-64. While Mr. Paik received his formal education at Japanese schools during the 1950's, this was before he ever thought of becoming an artist. During the entire decade of the 1960's, his time in Japan on various visits added up to no more than 13 months. Major artists like John Cage, David Tudor, and Stan Vanderbeck each performed and gave a number of concerts in Japan during those years and would be more worthy of inclusion in the exhibition than Mr. Paik, who performed but one concert in Japan during that time. All of this was pointed out to Ms.

Munroe. This is therefore Mr. Paik's formal and urgent request that neither this 1960's work nor any other work by him be included in the upcoming Guggenheim exhibition of Japanese art (Ordover, 1994: 1f).

Further, Ordover warns that Paik would make a "public outcry" should the works not be withdrawn, reasoning that

Korea and Japan have had a complicated history going back many decades. This history has not affected Mr. Paik's admiration and love of Japanese art and he has not hesitated to participate in exhibitions in Japan, but to include his work and thus treat him as part of Japanese art since 1945 would open past wounds and expose Mr. Paik to much pain and embarrassment needlessly. It would involve him in political and social issues that he has heretofore remained above (Ordover, 1994: 2).

The document is instructive in at least two respects. First, it highlights the power positions in play: the curator and the museum *versus* the internationally renowned artist. To be sure, Munroe's curatorial mission aimed at a broad inclusion of vanguard Japanese art into the dominant Western canon and institutional landscape. Putting Paik's work on display would have worked against a purely national or culturally essentialist framing of Japaneseness – indeed, by stressing his involvement with "Tokyo Fluxus", Japanese experimental post-war art would also become visible as part of the transcultural network in line with Munroe's corresponding catalogue chapter (Munroe, 1994: 215-255). After all, referring to the previous internationalism of post-war experimental art in Japan finally provided a historical context to critically assess the booming exhibitions of contemporary Japanese art in the US in the 1980s and 1990s, which had often favored an exceptionalist reading of the latest generation of Japanese artists as eccentrics without predecessors and genealogies<sup>17</sup>.

However, Paik's pointed mentioning of "Cage, ...Tudor, and ...Vanderbeck" in the quoted letter, who had all inspiringly collaborated with



experimental artists in Japan, makes clear that he was not disturbed by being included in (Tokyo) Fluxus as such. But he was upset about potentially and one-dimensionally being put into an orientalist Asian or even a nationalist Japanese frame that left out existent other, Western collaborating artists. He perceived the curatorial decision as an indication of long-standing, hidden institutional taxonomies. His concerns were well-founded because, when the art critic Mark Stevens reviewed the Guggenheim show, he actually produced an American version of Asianism when he associated Paik with Japan. Titled “Made in Japan”, his review boldly summarized Munroe’s concept as “a significant argument that some world-class art has been wrongly overlooked”. He made Paik’s fear real in claiming that “some of the country’s most prolific artists, such as Nam June Paik [sic] and On Kawara, have chosen to live outside Japan” (Stevens, 1994: 109)<sup>18</sup>.

Secondly, Ordovery’s letter made clear that, although Paik often used Asian motifs in his works to explicitly and continuously refer to transcultural entanglements with non-Asian regions, he tried to remain above the political and social realities when confronted with the manifold official nationalisms in Asia, Europe, and the USA. Significantly, the letter positions him as “part [of the art communities] of New York, Germany, and Korea” (Ordovery, 1994: 1). These three references are telling since Paik specifically, and rather selectively, refers only to the city of New York and not to other places in the US where he had also lived. On the other hand, he mentions – probably more nostalgically – the whole of Germany and Korea. In reality, he had left the latter at the age of 18 and only re-visited it in 1984 when he was already a mature and internationally renowned artist, while his activities in Germany remained clearly confined to its Western part and Berlin. Arguably, this cultural (self-)identification was meant to characterize him as a cosmopolitan figure rather than ‘merely’ an American artist with Korean roots. In addition, the omission of Paik’s decade-long stay in Japan during his formative years as a student of music was deliberate, in

order to enforce his claim.

The correspondence does not entirely explain why Paik still tolerated his works being shown in Yokohama. Technically, he could have withdrawn from the exhibition even on a short notice. In line with Ordovery's reassurance that "Mr. Paik has no wish to publicize the issue or to embarrass the Museum or Publisher or any of the parties involved", it seems that he insisted on the works not being included in the English version of the catalogue and the Guggenheim display only because he felt "that it is too late to do anything about the Yokohama exhibition" (Ordovery, 1994: 2).

### **Transcultural artistic practice as a critical and collaborative process**

The contrast between Nam June Paik's transcultural self-positioning as a Fluxus artist in the essay and his critical objection to one of the curatorial strategies of *Scream against the sky* shows that cultural questions of belonging were central aspects for border-crossing and migrating Asian artists in the 1960s as well as in the 1990s. It becomes clear that emphatically expressed and consciously reflected transcultural approaches in theory and practice, as well as the emphasis on collaborative authorship, was not a position free from conflict either in the liberal and pluralist Western art scenes or in the emerging experimental art scenes of East Asia. Instead, transcultural approaches entail an uncomfortable, and not always successful, balancing act.

In general, institutional taxonomies in Europe and North America changed over the course of post-war globalization and opened up to increasingly include artists coming from Asia, India, Africa and Latin-America during the 1990s in particular, China being a prominent example (Koch, 2016: 127-152). This is also demonstrated in the multi-site collaboration

between Yokohama, New York, and San Francisco. Yet the inclusion of already successful migrant artists such as Paik was neither linear nor smooth. The conflict with the Guggenheim proves that conditions for inclusion were subject to continuous (mutual) negotiations even for artists who reached the peak of international recognition<sup>19</sup>. Yet this episode is also evidence of the critical and productive potential of Paik's transcultural artistic attitude and practice, ultimately representing a relational understanding of art. This practice remains a vital and powerful resource whenever market, museum, or media-related mechanisms of mediation and their agents evaluate artists and their work using one-dimensional, culturally essentialist, or national and regional taxonomies that support problematic constellations of power<sup>20</sup>.

Regarding the international reception of the experimental East Asian art scenes of the 1960s, Paik's recollections in his essay as well as the Guggenheim's survey exhibition demonstrate that a detailed mediation of complex vanguard practices (including their entanglements within Japan or East Asia) was heavily contingent and chiefly dependent upon the translational abilities and transcultural strategies of individual agents. Some of them, like Nam June Paik, chose to question or even oppose long-standing taxonomies of curatorial and institutional taxonomies in Western centers such as New York, while being critical of the oversimplification of the center-periphery concept as such. Even if these agents were not always successful, it has led museum stakeholders as well as art historians on paths that ultimately render our knowledge of art and artistic relations between Europe, America, and Asia in the 1960s in much more complex and critical ways than used to be the case.

I believe that rather than focusing on aesthetic aspects of his oeuvre, Nam June Paik's catalogue writings and archival correspondence with curators can provide us with a glimpse into the active, non-scholarly, but very effective worlding of art history that his transcultural stance actually

set in motion. It provides a necessary critique of the epistemological conditions that frame our art institutions and scholarly art historiography in view of the rising nationalisms, re-occurring Cold War rhetoric, and other fundamentalist reifications emerging around the globe.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> This contribution is a revised and shortened elaboration of an earlier paper written in German (Koch, 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> See the text on the score card version (1963) (Fondazione Bonotto, 2018).
- <sup>3</sup> Such as Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi, Shigeko Kubota, and Charlotte Moorman. The considerable number of female artists marks Fluxus as the first post-war network that undermined patriarchal structures of the international art world (O'Dell, 1997). However, the canonical status of Fluxus in art historiographical, economic, and institutional regards has obscured and limited the efficacy of female and non-Western protagonists quickly (Richter, 2012: 36).
- <sup>4</sup> For exemplary case studies that explore the braided histories of avant-gardes between East-Asia, Europe and the USA see the studies by Alexandra Munroe, Reiko Tomii and others (Volk, 2010; Munroe, 2009; Tomii, 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Many more transcultural agents can be mentioned in this regard. For the increasing, sometimes comparative research regarding relations with Korea, see the writings of American art historian Joan Kee.
- <sup>6</sup> Exemplary collaborations that come to mind are Paik's performances with the cellist and experimental performance artist Charlotte Moorman (since the 1960s), the *Coyote III* concert with Joseph Beuys (1984), the coproduction of the video synthesizer with Shuya Abe or his global Satellite-TV transmitted project *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984) (Daniels, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Above all, Japan's artistic entanglements and exchanges with China, Taiwan, Korea, but also India, are increasingly the subject of research. An important archival hub in this respect is provided by the Asia Art Archive (Asia Art Archive, 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> The first official Fluxus concert in Germany was titled *FLUXUS: Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik* and organized from 1-23 September 1962, in the auditorium of the Museum Wiesbaden.
- <sup>9</sup> The label was also used in many exhibition announcements and recurs in almost every headline commemorating Paik's death.
- <sup>10</sup> Illustrations of Paik's contribution to the German Pavilion see Daniels (Daniels, 2005).
- <sup>11</sup> According to the catalogue's imprint, the exhibition was displayed 5.2.-30.3.1994 in the Yokohama Museum of Art, 14.9.1994 - 8.1.1995 in the Guggenheim Museum SoHo New York and 31.5.-27.8.1995 in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, as well as in the Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens.
- <sup>12</sup> In contrast to the Japanese catalogue, which published all articles in Japanese and English translation, the English version included a few more texts and additional prefaces by the American collaborators.
- <sup>13</sup> The Hi Red Center poster designed by Shigeko Kubota that mapped Tokyo Fluxus activities was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Carter, 2013; see also Chong, 2012).

- 14 The term *dispositif* has been widely applied in German theories of media studies. I have used it as a methodological frame to theorize art exhibitions in particular (Koch, 2016). In Foucault's philosophical writings on discourse and power the term designates a strategic aspect of power in mechanisms and arrangements that often operates invisibly. The *dispositif*, conventionally translated as "apparatus" into English, is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus [*dispositif*]. The apparatus [*dispositif*] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. [...It is] a sort of (...) formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need [*urgence*]. The apparatus [*dispositif*] thus has a dominant strategic function. [...It is] always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it. This is what the apparatus [*dispositif*] consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge" (italics are mine; Foucault in Gordon, 1980: here 194-196).
- 15 I thank Jeremy Ordovery, son and estate trustee of the late Jerald Ordovery, for the permission to quote verbatim from both documents and the Nam June Paik Archives, hosted by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, especially Christine Hennessey and Hanna Pacious, for their kind support.
- 16 The second faxed letter is addressed to Paul Gottlieb at Harry N. Abrams Inc., the publisher of the Guggenheim catalogue. The text is nearly identical and insists on promptly removing the illustrations of his works, given that the deadline for editorial changes was the same day.
- 17 I would like to thank Hayashi Michio, who pointed out this aspect to me in a conversation in June 2017 at Heidelberg University.
- 18 I have come across similar misattributions in the German context in a TV documentary on the "Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik" in Wiesbaden which took place in September 1962. It features Paik performing his *Zen for head*, introduced as "Paik from Japan" (Hessischer Rundfunk, 1962).
- 19 In a short conversation with the author in November 2017 at Oxford, UK, Alexandra Munroe confirmed the fact that the artist On Kawara was also opposed to having an artwork by him included in the display, despite being Japanese.
- 20 I would like to thank Christiane Dätsch for her constructive feedback that helped shape the initial German version of this article, and Jennifer Buerk and Hajra Haider for their meticulous copy-editing of the revised, shortened English version. It additionally benefitted from Anthony Barrett's subtle language corrections. Last, but not least, I like to thank Claire Farago for her generous and mindful editorial efforts.

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