

MIŠKO ŠUVAKOVIĆ

Experiment, Rebus, and Tactical Media: Nam June Paik in Southeast Europe!?

Eksperiment, rebus i taktički mediji: Nam June Paik u Jugoistočnoj Europi!?

Sažetak

U sažetoj raspravi postavljaju se tri interpretativna gledišta na Nam June Paika: (1) Nam June Paik kao kultni korejsko-američki umjetnik zenovske provokacije unutar fluksusa i eksperimentalnih novih medija i tehnologija; (2) moj susret s Nam June Paikom u Guggenheimu – SOHO na memorijalnoj Cageovoj izložbi: Cage Circus (23. travnja – 31. srpnja 1994.); i (3) Nam June Paik i složena hibridna recepcija njegovih umjetničkih eksperimenata, ideja i projekata kod umjetnika u Jugoistočnoj Europi (Hrvatska, Slovenija, Srbija, Vojvodina). Umjetničko, kustosko, povjesničarsko i teorijsko zanimanje za Nam June Paika upravo je paikovsko (Paik) ali i kejdžovsko (Cage), koliko i maćijuniso (Maciunas). To znači da su ključne riječi ovakvog istraživanja: sličnosti ili usporednosti, a ne podudarnosti; eksperimenti, a ne kanonizirane poetike; bivanje između umjetničkih disciplina, a ne unutar sigurne zatvorene disciplinarnosti; te permanentno kretanje, a ne zasjedanje kulturalne, estetske, etičke ili političke istine. Riječ je o paradoksima, zen koanima, skepticizmu i emancipatorskim provokacijama kojima se suočavaju intelekt i čulnost: nova ili asimetrična osjetljivost kojom se izražava uspon instinkta života nad agresivnošću. Aktualne fascinacije i opsesije Nam June Paikom javljaju se nakon iscrpnih istraživanja povezanih s ulogama Johna Cagea u hladnoratovskom svijetu; istraživanja dubokih anticipatorskih koreografskih, terapijskih, plesnih i performerskih praksi Anne Halprin; te beskrajskih rasprava i prijevoda povezanih s Allanom Kaprowom kao početnikom happeninga. Nam June Paik razlikovao se od bitnih imena druge polovine 20. vijeka istovremenom prisutnošću-ili-odsutnošću iz dominantnog kanona. Taj moderni kanon bespoštedno je provocirao zenovskim humorom, tehnološkom kontemplativnom fokusiranošću na novo i novije od novog – fokusiranošću na videoumjetnost, analogna računala, asamblažnu robotiku, svjetlosne ekranske instalacije i nedokučive zvuke između glazbe i antiglazbe, odnosno fokusiranošću na mišljenje u filozofskim detaljima paradoksa (misli u kapi vode) i na nemišljenje antifilozofije (govora tijela u brzom vožnji autocestom). Kada pišemo o Paiku u Jugoistočnoj Evropi, ne mogu se tražiti formalni ili stilski utjecaji na druge umjetnike. Sličnosti usporednih realnosti mogu se identificirati, prije svega, u žudnji da se dosegne novije od novog u egzistenciji, zatim da se pronađu, konstruiraju i

*upotrijebe nove tehnologije i novi mediji te da se indeksiraju granične zone drugačije svijesti. Dok je John Cage bio simbol novog kanona, Nam June Paik simbol je novog antikanona koji se pokazuje kao ostvariva vizija budućnosti. Riječ je o kanonu koji nije još osvojen i utvrđen. Riječ je o kanonu ka kome se permanentno teži u istovremenom stvaranju i kontemplaciji. Umjetnici koje u ovoj sažetoj studiji paradoksalno, projektivno i fascina-
cijski ili faktografski povezujem s Paikom jesu neokonstruktivist Aleksandar Srnec; teh-
noestetski eksperimentator Vladimir Bonačić; kompozitor i višemedijski umjetnik Vladan
Radovanović; eksperimentalni filmski radnik Vladimir Petek; postdadaistička i protokon-
ceptualistička grupa Gorgona; konceptualistička grupa OHO i umjetnički par Nuša i Srečo
Dragan; eksperimentalna pjesnikinja i performerka Katalin Ladik; umjetnik novih medija
i nove duhovnosti Ivan Ladislav Galeta; neoavangardni romanopisac i eksperimentalni
urednik Bora Ćosić; performans umjetnica Marina Abramović; konceptualni umjetnici
Sanja Iveković i Dalibor Martinis; konceptualni umjetnik Goran Trbuljak; postminimali-
stički eksperimentatori s muzikom i zvukom Nada Kolundžija, Miodrag Lazarev Pashu,
Miša Savić, Milomir Draškić, Vladimir Tošić; eksperimentalni kompozitor i performer
Paul Pignon; postkonceptualni umjetnici Zoran Belić W., Nenad Petrović i Mihailo Ristić;
novomedijski glazbenik Silvio Foretić; medijski i filmski umjetnik Andrej Zdravić; post-
konceptualni umjetnik Ivo Deković i dr.*

Nam June Paik becomes a challenge for a curatorial reexamination of the relationship among Southeast Europe, the Far East, and the political West, meaning Central European phantasms about freedom, American projections of the new media image of the world, and Far Eastern gestural provocations of the autonomy of art – of the body, consciousness, and media. Current fascinations and obsessions with Nam June Paik arose after: exhaustive research related to the roles of John Cage (Székely, 2013) in the world of the Cold War; research into the deep anticipatory choreographic, therapeutic, dance, and performance practices of Anna Halprin; and the endless discussions and translations associated with Allan Kaprow as originator of the happening.

Nam June Paik is distinguished from the important names of the second half of the 20th century by his simultaneous presence-or-absence from the dominant canon. He mercilessly provoked this canon with Zen humor and a technological and contemplative focus on the new and the newer than the new – a focus on video art, analog computers, assemblage robotics, light screen installations, and inconceivable sounds between music and anti-music, that is, a focus on thinking within the philosophical details of a paradox (thoughts in a drop of water) and the non-thinking of anti-philosophy (body language while driving fast on the highway).

How Did I Use Nam June Paik with Auto-theory?

I was drawn to the intensity of the images and sounds generated by analog machines – the turn from gears and cathode ray tubes and potentiometers to transistors and then an unsuspected multitude of mobile digital devices. One mythical analog media artist is the Korean American Fluxus artist Nam June Paik (백남준) (Hanhardt, Zinman and Decker-Philips 2019). If John Cage was saying that everything is music, Paik would say that everything is media, from the human body and a Buddha statue to an installation with analog televisions or the digital control of analog assemblages; from a fragile robot to unstable systems of generated dynamic synthesis, or the dissemination of image and sound.

I crossed paths with Paik one early afternoon at the Guggenheim Museum in Soho (New York), on April 24, 1994. At that time there was a big exhibition dedicated to John Cage, called *RolyWholyOver John Cage Circus* (April 23-July 31, 1994). The exhibition featured projects by Cage's students, friends, admirers, and followers. It was a real *cagesque* circus back then. In the lobby of the museum there was a group of very old women and men. Among them I recognized Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, and Henry Flint. Paik was sitting in a wheelchair. He was completely motionless. He looked like a Buddha statue. I stared at him. He wasn't staring at me. Our eyes passed over each other, speechless!

Were There Fluxus Analogies, Correspondences, or Comparative Practices?

It is not possible to seek any influences. Similarities between comparative realities can be identified, first of all, in the desire to reach the newer than the new in existence and then to find, construct, and use new technologies and new media, and finally to index the border zones of a different consciousness.

Neoconstructivist Aleksandar Srnec, with his luminokinetic objects – objects of moving and transformed light – was searching for the moment when the assembly machine becomes a sensory, active participant in the transformation of a mechanism into a *form of life*. The sensual attraction between the organic body and the inorganic machine is essential.

Vladimir Bonačić was a researcher of analog electronic and programmable technologies which changed the perceptual appearances of artistic constructions. Both Paik and Bonačić share a desire to bring technology and art face to

face with each other. Paik was looking for a media turn that was initiated by a Zen koan. Bonačić sought the crystallization of reason in a techno-gesture by which abstract thought becomes a bodily-sensual affect.

Composer and multimedia artist Vladan Radovanović initiated the experimental field of permanently changing the nature of the art of one medium into the hybrid nature of multimedia expression. Paik and Radovanović operate in different registers of electronic music, but in the parallel worlds of the visual arts and the behaviorality of performance.

Vladimir Petek worked in the domains of experimental film and video. He researched multi-screen projections that anticipated multi-channel analog and digital video technologies. In terms of his focus on media, he is close to Paik's multi-channel projections of screen systems or screened objects.

Within very different systems of the criticism of high socialist modernism, the members of the Zagreb Gorgona group and the members of the Kranj/Ljubljana OHO group tended to utilize a correlation of concepts, contemplative impact, and behavioral action close to the tactical interventions of Fluxus (Cage, Paik, Ono, Flint, Maciunas). Media contemplative-behavioral interventionism – the new communicativeness – arose from the context of OHO in the early work of Nuša and Srečo Dragan.

Katalin Ladik denormalized the relationships of nudity, the modulated voice, esoteric sexuality, and individual micro-self-reflexive rituals. Her existing between different territories of experience and the deterritorialization of identity were opening the potentialities of an artistic experiment that would be more of a challenge to Paik than a transfer of Paik into Eastern European art.

Ivan Ladislav Galeta, as a dedicated researcher, practitioner, and proto-theoretician of new media, is completely in the field marked by Paik's experimental media work. They both share a fascination with the esoteric and the technological – yet they differ in the geopolitical and geoaesthetic positioning of the performative living or mechanical body.

We must not forget the interventionist editorial-writing work of the writer Bora Ćosić, who functioned in the field of Fluxus strategies and tactical interventions in the magazine *Rok* and the book *Mixed Media* (Belgrade, 1969). In the text "Fluxus," he wrote about actions involving soiling and pouring water on Nam June Paik.

The Zagreb magazine *ČIP* (No. 312, March 1979) published a black and white photo of Charlotte Moorman, from her and Paik's *TV Cello* performance, on the cover. At this point, Paik is already a mythical figure of new art.

How Did Nam June Paik Become an Index of Post-conceptual Work?

One unexpected observation: a certain number of artists from Southeast Europe interactively reacted to the ideas, actions, and impact of Fluxus – including Nam June Paik – at the moment of transcending their positions in a pragmatically and critically oriented conceptual and post-conceptual art. There was a turn from conceptual art in the areas of the dematerialization of art, post-object phenomena, and institutional criticism, towards the activation of sensory affects and bodily or spatial impact. This was not a return to Fluxus, but the use of Fluxus tactical media, which led beyond a sensory or bodily neutrality – Marcel Duchamp would say the total anesthesia of the senses – into the area of emphasized sensory, bodily, and behavioral provocations that led beyond conceptually strict rigor and critical/analytical pragmatism.

A characteristic turn in Marina Abramović's performances moves from tautological and self-reflexive bodily effects (*Rhythm 10-Rhythm 0*, 1973-1974) towards anthropological appropriations of performing figures of otherness, for example in the performances enacted with Ulay, a Tibetan lama, and an Aboriginal: *Nightsea Crossing / Conjunction* (1983). This is about a turn away from the tautological and asemantic relation of mind and body to the plastic theatricality of a relation of body and mind among the behavioral, symbolic, and contemplative. These are *triggers* for questioning and abandoning the Western fascination with alienation and tautological reductivism.

Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis, in contrast to Marina Abramović, began with the fascination of a direct meeting with Nam June Paik in New York, during which they also held a TV interview with him (around 1982). For them, although certainly in different ways, this was a confrontation with post-conceptual media art and the hybrid technological packaging necessary to create an auratic impact, an affective provocation and, above all, an ambient media theatrical effect on their viewers. Reference examples are Martinis' installation *Stone Garden* (1986) or Sanja Iveković's installation *Frozen Pictures* (1992).

On one occasion, Goran Trbuljak, in a quiet but persuasive voice, emphasized that for him, it wasn't conceptual artists that were important, but Fluxus gestures. From this perspective, Trbuljak's early work can be viewed not as an institutional pragmatic critique of the then-current art system, but as a thoughtful, physical, or cultural gesture. This can relate to the effective interaction of the artist and the surrounding social/artistic world. It is a provocation that uses the void – for example, an empty gallery or undisplayable art – as an interventional medium to cast doubt on the usual truth of art.

Belgrade artists – musicians Nada Kolundžija, Miodrag Lazarev Pashu, and Miša Savić, similar to Milomir Draškić, Vladimir Tošić, and Paul Pignon, or non-musicians such as painter Zoran Belić W. or sculptor Nenad Petrović, or media artist Mihailo Ristić – entered into a risky experiment with the post-minimalist and post-conceptual Fluxus. Paul Pignon was a contemporary to the origin and development of Fluxus. His first actions were documented in the magazine *Rok* (“Yeah” No. 2, 1969). Nada Kolundžija, a researcher of the borders of pianistic performance and thus, of the borders between music and sound. Composers Miodrag Lazarev Pashu, Miša Savić, Milomir Draškić, and Vladimir Tošić went through the experience of minimal – repetitive – music in order, through retrospectively reexamining the *cagesque* tradition, to enter the field of a post-minimalist reset Fluxus. Performances and media productions (Savić, Draškić), lecture performances (Pashu), and the paradigmatic dissemination of music through linguistic concept notes (Pashu, Savić, Draškić, *Primeri ideosema* 1983) also took place. Cage, Flint, Paik, and Charlotte Moorman, as well as La Monte Young, were the referenced artists for their transgressive research and productions in opening the field of minimalism to an unknown experience.

Silvio Foretić works within the framework of the new and experimental, that is, new media music. This work is about testing the limits of the appearance of a musical piece and its media transposition into direct experience.

The field of experiments and cross-media, or cross-disciplinary, work is also connected with the production of the artist Andrej Zdravič. Zdravič studied in the media studies program at SUNY in Buffalo. He works in the hybrid field of experimental film, multi-screen projections, experimental music, and Zen Buddhism. His work involves a vibrant and dynamic movement among image, sound, and physical actionism.

Ivo Deković had direct contact with Nam June Paik’s poetics and pedagogy. He was taught by Klaus Rinke and Paik at the State Academy in Düsseldorf from 1975 to 1979. He dealt and is dealing with the emancipation of sensory, experiential, and post-object work between nature and human creations, i.e., between the local environment and the global *flux*.

The artistic, curatorial, historical, and theoretical interest in Nam June Paik is exactly *paikesque* (Paik), as well as *cagesque* (Cage), as much as it is *maciunian* (Maciunas). This means that the key terms of this kind of research are: similarities or comparisons, not equivalence; experiments, not canonized poetics; being between artistic disciplines rather than within a safe closed one; and permanent movement, not the settling of cultural, aesthetic, ethical, or political truths. This work is about paradoxes, Zen koans, skepticism, and emancipatory provocations through which intellect and are confronted – a new or asymmetric sensitivity that expresses the rise of the instinct of life over aggressiveness (Marcuse 1972: 151-170).

Works cited

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