

**Searching for Eur-Asia -
The Journeys of Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik
Towards the Unity of Europe and Asia**

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An imaginary division between "East" and "West" was created in European cultural history, mainly to make a distinction between European Christianity and the alien cultures to its east. Even Emmanuel Levinas, known as a philosopher of the "other" in post-war Europe, was disdainful of Asia and Buddhism, and considered Europe to be central.

Both Europe and Asia can exist in relation with what is to their east and west; neither can exist by itself. However, once a geographical and cultural entity is named "Europe" and "Asia," or "West" and "East," this creates an impression that such imaginary entities exist –, not in the relationship it has with its counterpart, but by itself.

Containing Europe and Asia, Eurasia is one continuous mass of land. The idea of a fixed division between Europe and Asia has made it difficult for many to understand that East and West share historical and cultural roots in the Eurasian land mass. When the process of capturing the world via *cogito*, which originated in Christianity and prepared the way for European Modernity, was proven to be contradictory, contemporary art needed to reconsider the roots of modernity in order to find alternatives. So far, the vocabulary of contemporary art has addressed how to conceptually deal with the symbols created by the contradictions of modernity, but in the 21st century, the act of going back to the origin of such contradictions will be the basis for a new vocabulary.

Following their first meeting in Cologne in 1962, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik began their lifelong series of collaboration called "Eur-Asia." Sharing a common interest in Europe and Asia, they became the first artists to consider Europe (=West) and Asia (=East) one continental culture, and tried to connect them as "Eur-Asia."

In 1984, their last collaborative performance "öö," a voice performance of *Coyote* by Beuys with Paik's piano improvisation, took place at Sogetsu Hall in Tokyo. Accompanying a solo exhibition and numerous lectures, Beuys's visit to Japan became one of his last activities, and had a large impact on the Japanese art scene.

Unfortunately, their artistic practices of Eur-Asia have not been well analyzed, especially because of the wide range of the subject, the language barrier, lack of information due to the loss of the video recording of Beuys's 1984 visit to Japan, and an absence of an Eastern point of view. However, the rediscovery of the video recording of Beuys's 1984 visit made it possible to understand Beuys's intentions for the "Eur-Asia" project.

This thesis analyzes not only Beuys and Paik's pioneering activity in "Eur-Asia," starting from Beuys's *Eurasia-Siberian Symphony* in 1963 and Paik's *Guadalcanal Requiem* in 1976, but also tries to analyze what they tried to achieve but left incomplete. Subsequently, I would like to connect these missing links pertaining to Eur-Asia, by demonstrating the spreading influence of Buddhism both from and toward Europe and Asia.

Beuys's first action as a Fluxus member was his *Eurasia-Siberian Symphony 1963, 32nd Fluxus Movement* at the Frobenstrasse Gallery in Berlin. Later in 1966, he performed *Eurasia: 32nd Movement of the Siberian Symphony* at Galerie René Block. Here Beuys tried to communicate to "other" spectators than human spectators, therefore he drew a

diagram with a hare. Beuys picked up two crosses with an alarm-clock function off the floor, and scratched a drawing of a cross onto a blackboard and began to erase it. After erasing half of the cross, he inscribed the word "Eurasia" there. Art historian Troels Andersen, who saw the 34th movement, explained that the divided cross is a metaphor representing the schism separating the Christian world into realms controlled by Rome and Byzantium, and the half cross represents a reunited Europe and Asia.¹

In 1963, Beuys formed the political party *EURASIA*. Through the concept of Eurasia, expressed as a metaphysical idea of the divided East and West, Beuys tried to unite East and West Germany, an Eastern and Western Europe then divided by ideology, and, most important of all, European and Asian spirituality.

For his happening book in 1965, Paik wrote of his personal relationship with the history of fascism in Korea and its relationship to fascism in Germany and the USSR. "1932, on 7/20, the day of the uprising against Hitler, I... was born in Seoul/Korea.... If the German people had been more against Hitler, the precious blood shed fighting Stalin would not have been necessary."²

In his 1967 action *Eurasian Staff*, Beuys cast himself in the role of "East - West nomad." By crossing the show sole, he formed a cross. Antje von Gravenitz explains that this cross represents not only geographical pointers, but also the directions of mind. What Beuys told was a staged story, a tale in fragments using healing materials, movement, sacred objects, and written words.³

Paik's 1976 visit to Guadalcanal, the largest of the Solomon Islands and the site of the fierce battles between the Japanese and American military, inspired his most political video collage, "Guadalcanal Requiem." While Paik drags a violin over a former battleground, Charlotte Moorman, wearing a G.I.'s uniform, crawls with Joseph Beuys's felt cello on her back. After crossing the beach, Moorman played "Sonata - Joseph Beuys" on aircraft wreckage that they had accidentally found.⁴ "Guadalcanal Requiem" became the intersection of Paik and Beuys directly related to their personal experiences of World War II.

The paper "Eurasianausea" examines the 1982 meeting between Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama. Beuys requested "Permanent Cooperation" with Dalai Lama, and invited him to the opening of Documenta 7 in 1982, which he started 7,000 Oaks. Beuys said "In a co-operation with the Dalai Lama we will realize Eurasia. My old concept Eurasia...."⁵ Dalai Lama could not participate in the opening of Documenta, but they were able to have a discussion on October 27, 1982. Finding some linkage between Beuys's art work and his own activity, the Dalai Lama said, "Aha, this artist is working on the same thing as we are: impermanence."⁶

¹ Anderson, Troels. *Blockade 69*. Berlin, Galerie René Block, 1969.

² Becker, Jürgen and Vostell, Wolf. *Happenings: Fluxus Pop Art Nouveau Realisme*. Hamburg, Rowohlt Verlag, 1965. P444-445

³ Gravenitz, von Antje. *The Old and the New Initiation Rites*. In: Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art. Edited by Cooke, Lynne, and Kelly, Karen. New York, Dia Center for the Arts, 1996. P69-71

⁴ Decker-Phillips, Edith. *Nam June Paik: Idea and Chance*. In: Nam June Paik. Edited by Lee, Sook-Kyung and Rennert, Susanne. London, Tate Publishing, 2011. P199

⁵ Thompson, Chris. *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011. P283

⁶ Wijers, Louwrien. *Unpublished interview with the author*. Amsterdam, February 2000.

There, Beuys suggested that the Dalai Lama makes Tibet an example of a human community which practices "Spiritual Economy," as embodied in Beuys's "Social Sculpture." Beuys tried to define human creativity as a function of capital, and 7,000 Oaks as enactments of both "Social Sculpture" and a "Spiritualized Economy." Beuys tried to integrate the highly developed Western economy and the highly developed Eastern spirituality as a means of resisting against western materialism. However, Beuys's idea of Eurasia overflowed, and lost track of itself. Afterwards, because of the political pressure exerted by Communist China, the Dalai Lama was subsequently unable to meet with Beuys.

Years after the death of Beuys, the Dalai Lama purchased seven oaks, "commemorating Joseph Beuys, his 7,000 Oaks project, and his permanent cooperation with H.H. the Dalai Lama."⁷ Under the influence of Beuys, the Dalai Lama asked an economist, Stanislav Menshikov, to make a model of "Compassionate Economy."

Right after the death of Beuys in 1986, Nam June Paik made a large-scale satellite art work, *Bye Bye Kipling*, to bid farewell to the stereotypical image of Asia and Europe. Motivated by Rudyard Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West*, which begins with the sentence "Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet," Paik tries to say farewell to this standpoint.⁸ This ambitious satellite-TV art project linked up New York, Tokyo, and Seoul, and featured interviews with Keith Haring and Arata Isozaki, and performances by Philip Glass and Lou Reed and more. Also performance in Japan of classical Western music was accompanied by a group of Kabuki dancers.

Nam June Paik thought that understanding the deep roots of Korean culture required knowledge of time before the rule of Han dynasty. The roots of Korea are in Siberia, and because of the cooling down of the earth, people living in Siberia moved down to the Korean peninsula. This ancestry appears in the shamanistic rhythm of Korean traditional music, formed with odd numbers. Paik thought that this rhythm is common in both East and West, so while connecting East and West by satellite technology, Paik used the rhythm to bid farewell to Kipling's stereotypical idea that the East and West would forever be divided.

In 1993, as a memorial service for Beuys, Paik made an artwork called "Eurasian Way." This installation shows the "North Way" of Eurasia, using daily objects and three videos. This video was the traveling record from Moscow to Irkutsk, the city built by the forced labor of captured Japanese military personnel. Also, at the Venice Biennale in 1993, Paik made a video sculpture entitled "The rehabilitation of Genghis Kahn," in which he appeared not as a ruthless warrior, but as a thoughtful driver on an old Korean bicycle. Being aware about the misinformation about the East and the resulting fear toward it in Western society, Paik kept saying that the Mongol Empire was an empire of friendship, not the image propagated in Western Europe.

When Genghis Khan's sons were leading the Mongols' first European reconnaissance, they met their first Europeans: Venetian merchants. They befriended them and realized the future value of the partnership. Henceforward, in exchange for the Venetians supplying detailed reports of the economic and military strength of all countries that the

⁷ Claus, U We. *Der Baum, der Stein*. Stiftung Museum Scholoss Moyland, 1998. P25-26.

⁸ There is a misinterpretation of Paik about Kipling's work, since Kipling tried to overcome the idea of East and West, as Paik tried also. For more details, read J. K. Buda's "Rudyard Kipling's 'The Ballad of East and West'," Otsuma Women's University Faculty of Literature Annual Report, Vol. XVIII. No. 19, 1986.

merchants visited and spreading the propaganda that the Mongols required in these countries, the Mongols agreed to destroy all trading stations except those of the Venetians so that the Venetians could monopolize the trade.⁹ The first of the Mongol acts directed toward this goal was their destruction of the Genovese station in Crimea. This was where Joseph Beuys's Luftwaffe airplane would crash during World War II, and where he would be saved by Tatars; it was also the site of the Yalta Conference, which divided Germany among the victorious Allied powers.

Being aware of his Korean DNA originated with the Tatars, then succeeded to Mongol and Manchuria, Paik expressed his entire being as a way to reconceive contemporary art, which had evolved as Western Art since the Renaissance.¹⁰ Paik says, "I question again myself why was I interested in 'most extreme'? It is because my Mongolian DNA. – Mongolian – Ural – Altair horse back hunting people moved around the world in prehistoric age from Siberia to Peru to Korea to Nepal to Lapland. They were not center-oriented like Chinese agrarian society. They saw far and they see a horizon far away, they had to go and see far more."¹¹

Having both endured World War II, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik were aware of the contradictions of modernity originating in the West. Born in Korea under Japanese occupation, and fleeing to Japan during the Korean War, Nam June Paik was aware of the influence of colonialism and modernity. After studying musicology, art history, and philosophy at the University of Tokyo, he moved to West Germany to continue his studies. Describing their spiritual friendship, Paik says, "We actually met in 1943 when Beuys crashed in the war."¹²

Beuys had extensive interests about the East. In his childhood, Beuys carried a cane everywhere and imagined himself to be a nomadic horseman.¹³ His interests in Mongolia appeared in his works as early as his 1959 watercolor of Genghis Khan's daughter riding on an elk.¹⁴ Meanwhile, having learned about the East from Goethe, Beuys had a certain fear of the East.¹⁵ However, Beuys's visit to Japan in 1984 makes him realize that Japanese people understood him better than almost anyone else. By going to Japan, and listening to what people told him about the East, he changed his mind and lost his fear toward the East.¹⁶

Beuys says, "Most people ignore the fact that their own bodies also belong to the environment. They think only what which (sic) surrounds them is their environments."¹⁷ He also says, "Modernism cannot solve the problem."¹⁸ Beuys knew that Western modernity starting from Descartes's *cogito*, the existence of the self,

⁹ Chambers, David. The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe. London, Weidenfeld and Nocholson, 1979. P115

¹⁰ Paik, Nam June. Time Collage. Tokyo, Isshi Press, 1988. P12

¹¹ Nam June Paik, LP liner notes for *My Jubilee is unverhemmt* (Edition Lebeer Hossmann; Hamburg and Brussels, 1977)

¹² Interview with Peter Moritz Pickshaus "Nam June Paik", *Energien/Synergien* 7, published by Kunststiftung NRW 2009. P98

¹³ Ulmer, Gregory L. Applied grammatology: post(e)-pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985. P234

¹⁴ Wijers, Louwrien. Writing as sculpture, 1978-1987. Amsterdam, Wiley-Academy, 1996. P151

¹⁵ Optimism as Cultural Rebellion: Matthew Stone interviews Louwrien Wijers

¹⁶ Optimism as Cultural Rebellion: Matthew Stone interviews Louwrien Wijers

¹⁷ Filliou, Robert. Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts. Cologne, Verlag Gebr. König, 1970. P171

¹⁸ Adrianin, Göts, and Konnertz, Winfred, and Thomas, Karin. Translated by Woodbury, Patricia Lech. Joseph Beuys: Life and Work. New York: Baroon's, 1979. P78

invented a certain kind of consciousness which caused mind-body problems; such problems cannot be solved within the structure of modernity in Europe. Therefore, he thought that this form of awareness could be considered relatively, through the analysis of the sophisticated model of consciousness in Tibetan philosophy.

In Buddhism, nothing can exist by itself, but everything exists in relationship, starting from “Śūnyatā (Emptiness.)” This gives an answer to Beuys’s question of the contradiction of consciousness which cannot be solved in the context of modernity, and by doing so, both Europe and Asia exist in relation with what is to their east and west; neither can exist by itself.

Interestingly enough, this core concept of Buddhism even influenced Neo-Platonism and Celtic culture, which influenced Beuys. However, by trying to understand Asia through Rudolf Steiner, he lost the track to connect to this Asian model of consciousness. The origin of Buddhist art had been heavily influenced by the West, but this fact is not well considered in the East. Interested in the universal element of Buddhism, Paik made many series of art works about Buddha, but Paik himself could not connect it to European cultural history well. Furthermore, there was neither art historians nor curators who could connect Buddhism and Western cultural history at that time.

Therefore, this thesis first tries to analyze their challenge of Eur-Asia and articulate the incomplete parts of it, and second, by filling up these missing parts by demonstrating the spreading influence of Buddhism both from and toward Europe and Asia, I would like to complete the unified field of Eur-Asia - the dream of Beuys and Paik.

I would like to complete this research at Universität der Künste in Berlin, where the East and West were united. Through this research, I would like to reply to Europe from the Asian side, as Nam June Paik did, and would like to find an alternative to modernity for our future.

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