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KOREAN CONTEMPORARY ART ON BRITISH SOIL IN THE TRANSNATIONAL ERA*

Abstract

The question that initiated this article was: ‘What does national identity mean in this transnational era, given Okwui Enwezor’s comment that one can witness “the terrible nearness of distant places” within the globalized circuits of international exhibitions?’ It may well be that thinking about ‘difference’ would be better understood in light of these nearnesses and distances. In this article we are attuned to these spaces as a means of thinking about national identity as what is to be grappled with for a realistic rendering of cultural translation.

Starting from Walter Benjamin’s discussion of translation’s vital emphasis on there having to be a reciprocal relationship between languages, this article’s main concern lies in the cultural translation taking place in the visual. When transmitting certain meanings of artworks from one culture to another, there is no such thing as a ‘transparent’ translation between the two in the visual. As a consequence, we are led to turn to the realm of un-translatability, with all of the challenges that this presents. In this article, we intend to examine this global issue in a ‘local’ way, so it is fitting, then, to consider Korean contemporary art on British soil in terms of cultural translation.

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In reading Korean art within a British context, we seek to reveal the distance between the two cultures; a cultural distance which is at once both translatable and un-translatable. To this end, we first consider the works of contemporary artists such as Chan Hyo Bae, Eem Yun Kang and U Ram Choe, who have either exhibited or are currently working in Britain. These works are utilized as examples in which the artists are seen to expose different ways of keeping their 'transnational' position in representing their work while being categorized as 'Korean'. Following this, we then concentrate on two extended case studies: Nam June Paik and his nomadic way of eluding nationality by way of global resettling; and Mee Kyoung Shin's concern with cultural translation as sculpture. We examine how, through her work, she sheds light on the translation taking place between different cultures when crossing the dubious border of 'nationality'.

Keywords

Transnationality / globalization / nomad / cultural translation / un-translatability / Korean contemporary art / Rhizome / Nam June Paik / Mee Kyoung Shin/

Introduction

Certain transnational experiences represented in many art works today prove that 'distance' and 'nearness' are surely geographical terms but they are likely to expand into cultural discourse. In amongst the globalized circuits of international exhibitions, one can witness 'the terrible nearness of distant places' as curator Okwui Enwezor writes insightfully.² 'Nearness' in this sense is a state in which meanings collapse to such an extent that differences are erased. In cultural terms, it corresponds to standardization. This is the price, may be, that has to be paid for global networking and transnational communication.

Despite such a dilemma of 'the terrible nearness of distant places' in the context of globalization, differences are still much hoped for if art making is to be creative. When artworks are presented in a culture other than that of the artist's, the locality of one culture in its singularity should be translated into another's language, however difficult such a task might be. In this process, some meanings

² Enwezor, Okwui (2002). 'The Black Box', in the exhibition catalogue *Documenta 11, Platform 5*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, p. 44; quoted in Cherry, Deborah (2007). 'A Sea of Senses,' in *Right about Now: Art and Theory since the 1990s*. Amsterdam: Valiz Publishers, 25.

in the artwork, yet to be named, emerge. If those potential meanings could be communicated by translating them at the level of the semiotic, one could possibly see how, as art historian Deborah Cherry puts it, one can ‘probe the transmission of the sense memories between cultures.’³ In so doing, we could keep the ‘minimal distance’ in our words while still comprehending meanings retained in them. This is precisely what is desired from Korean art on British soil which we will examine in this article.

In terms of geographical as well as cultural distance, while British art in Korea has become familiar, certainly since the advent globally of the loosely termed group known as the Young British Artists, and while Britain is the favored destination for Korean students studying art-related subjects abroad, Korean art has arrived in British culture relatively recently. Strangely, after over 130 years of diplomatic relations, noteworthy exchange between these two countries has only just begun, and this is particularly true of art. A brief historical overview of Korean contemporary art in the UK throws up a couple of anomalies: in 1992 the exhibition ‘Working With Nature: Traditional Thought in Contemporary Art from Korea’ was held at Tate Liverpool for the first time, introducing Korean Modern artists such as U Fan Lee and Suh Bo Park. In 1995, the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh held the exhibition ‘Information & Reality’ in which Soo Ja Kim’s work was shown. But in the main, Korean art was largely invisible in Britain until the middle of 2007 when the exhibition project ‘4482’ was launched, showing the works of a group of Korean artists, and this exhibition has since become an annual event.⁴ Most young Korean artists have exhibited works in this show. In that same year, several relevant exhibitions opened in London, including one in Asia House in which Duck Hyun Cho, Jeong Hwa Choi, and Yeon Doo Jung took part, and another in London’s Korea Centre, showing the works of Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys. It was in 2008 that U Ram Choe participated at Tate in the Liverpool Biennial as did Do Ho Suh in 2010. On a grander scale, the globe-trotting art world project ‘Korean Eye’ has now been held three times: 2009 (‘Moon Generation’), 2010 (‘Fantastic Ordinary’), and

³ Cherry states: ‘A number of artists have deployed the senses to conjure sense memories and to probe their transmission between cultures.’ Cherry, ‘A Sea of Senses,’ 24.

⁴ The title of ‘4482’ derives from the combination of the international dialing codes, 44 for UK and 82 for Korea. This represents the cross-cultural dialogue in which the artists are engaged. For more details, see www.4482.info.

2011/12 ('Energy and Matter').⁵ 2012 also saw the most recent iteration of the annual exhibition '4482'.

When looking at the emergence of Korean artists and their presence in Britain and more globally, it is not easy – perhaps futile – to attempt to discern a shaped sense of identity – national or otherwise – in their work. Forced to draw out some commonalities, in terms of the work's subject matter, one might point to interests in the changing nature of everyday life, and a sense of disquiet and criticality towards Korea's rapid economic development, and the inevitable resulting tensions between material abundance and mental confusion.

At an international level, then, we seek here to analyze questions such as: 'How do we conceive the nearness and distance, translation and untranslatability of national identity in this era of globalization?' Or, more specifically: 'How do we view the exhibitions of '4482' or 'Korean eye', for example, conceived of and realized under the banner of a specific national identity in this transnational epoch?' Furthermore: 'Why do we continue to attempt to delineate a cultural identity for art and artists on the basis of nationality when nationalism in art practice is radically challenged and called into question?'

In reality though, contrary to the theoretical ideal of trans-nationalism, it is still national identity that takes centre stage when defining an artwork originating from a different culture. It might be appropriate here to refer to writer and curator Nicolas Bourriaud who points out that in this stage of postmodernism, defined as being multi-cultural, there is a tendency toward 'the mythification of origins' or a 'neurotic preoccupation with origins typical of the era of globalization'.⁶ As Bourriaud writes, "Where do you come from?" appears to be globalization's most pressing question and essentialism its critical paradigm.⁷ We

⁵ For more information, see <http://www.koreaneyeye.org/>. Additionally, other references that might be worth noting are the Korean Cultural Centre UK <http://london.korean-culture.org/> and The Korean Artists' Association UK: <http://koreanartists.co.uk/>

⁶ Bourriaud, Nicolas (2009). *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* [ex. cat.], ed Nicolas Bourriaud, London: Tate Publishing, 20.

⁷ Bourriaud, *Altermodern*, 20.

thus may think that the multi-cultural version of cultural diversity is seen as a restriction in its definition of national origin rather than as emancipation.

Art historian Karen Fiss speaks of a 'theme park' as one of the side effects of globalization. Pointing to the simulated nature of authenticity of cultural differences and characteristics, she states, 'this de-territorializing of culture allows it to be "theme-parked," creating a type of cultural diversity that is merely a simulacrum, and which is no longer tied to any "authentic" origin.'⁸ Not having any connection to its origin, cultural difference is thus rendered 'fake' because it does not purport to have its own cultural creativity born of its own context.

What is at stake then is this: 'How can we reclaim difference and still make it translatable to other cultural contexts?' In explaining translation as a 'mode', Walter Benjamin points out that 'a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability.'⁹ Though premised on Benjamin's concept of translatability, we need to introduce the term 'un-translatability' in order to articulate a different aspect in the visual. Here we can refer to postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's reading of Benjamin where he writes that, 'with the concept of "foreignness" Benjamin comes closest to describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference.' Relating such a concept of foreignness with that of the un-translatable, Bhabha explains the latter as 'the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural translation.'¹⁰ Drawing on Bhabha's account of un-translatability and its relation to foreignness rather than Benjamin's focus on originality, we suggest that the realm of the un-translatable could be one in which two different cultures come face to face in a somewhat stark encounter due to the lack of mutually familiar cultural references, yet may nevertheless have a deep recognition of each other on another level.

Let us elaborate briefly on this notion of the 'un-translatable' by comparing it to the 'un-readable'. Deborah Cherry has written that celebrated Chinese artist

⁸ Fiss, Karen (2009). 'Design in a Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities', *Design Issues*, vol. 25, no. 3, Summer, 4.

⁹ Benjamin, Walter (1969). *Illuminations*, (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zhon). New York: Schocken Books, 71.

¹⁰ Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 227.

Wanda Gu's work *United Nations – China Monument: Temple of Heaven* (1998) is 'one of a number of installations that assail the senses and conjure up sense memories in a raft of unpredictable ways, so prompting reflection on un-translatability in these circuits of transnational curating'.¹¹ Cherry found this installation work to be 'un-translatable,' in that the artist included the inscriptions of 'un-readable characters' on the walls and ceiling from scripts based on several languages.¹² Although Cherry does not clarify her use of the 'un-translatability' it could be triggered by the context from which the artwork comes, accumulated histories pertaining to it, or political sanctions in relation to it. This leads us to suppose that un-translatability is then different from non-meaning, and to think, therefore, of the gap (a difference in kind, not just degree) between the un-translatable and the un-readable. In this article it is un-translatability, not un-readability, to which we turn our attention since a certain chasm or lack lying in the former needs to have our attention called to it in order for any meaningful encounters between two (written, spoken, or for that matter visual) languages. Herein, we look at this global issue by discussing Korean contemporary art works exhibited in Britain. Taking into account the differences in viewing Korean artists' works in Britain, we will be concerned with the different cultural background from which they are seen, and seek to make this uneasily graspable distance emerge, thus marking the difference between what it means to come from a Korean culture and how this is (and also isn't) communicable within a British context. Enwezor's invocation of the 'terrible nearness of distant places' thus shows itself to be a question for national identity, for globalized circuits, for historical detours, for the potential delights of connecting and mis-connecting, and, ultimately, for the inevitable (if productive) dangers of un-translatability itself.

In what follows, we begin with the young artists' exhibition '4482' (2011), the title of which was 'Rhyzosphere: Direction in Motion'.¹³ As a voluntary group in

¹¹ Wenda Gu's work brings together human hair collected from all over the world, Ming furniture, TV monitors, lamp chairs, spring stools, tea tables. It was shown in PS1 Contemporary Art Centre, New York, 1998. Cherry, 'A Sea of Senses,' 25.

¹² Cherry, 'A Sea of Senses,' 25.

¹³ We quote from the official site of '4482' as follows: "Rhizome is a subterranean stem spreading out in any direction. It is a system of connections with no hierarchy and no order. With its

which most young Korean artists in the U.K. take part, the annual show of 4482 is a useful starting point, and we will go on to consider briefly several of the artists who participated in either the 2011 exhibition or previous shows, in order to discern a sense of what Korea's national traits are currently, and of how they are presented, represented, and mobilized by this young generation of Korean artists living and working in the U.K. We will, soon enough, get to the main section of this article: our two extended case studies, Nam June Paik and Mee Kyung Shin.

Body

The 4th annual exhibition of '4482,' displaying the works of a group of young Korean artists, was held in 2011 at the Barge House on London's South Bank. As its title 'Rhizosphere' implies, sixty artists presented work that interconnects with British soil by way of their own different approaches. However, their individual works could not be summarised under the banner 'Korean,' since 'there was very little by way of explicit reference to Korea or the East.'¹⁴ It is surely interesting to ponder on the fact that the works of a group of artists, who were presented under the banner of Korean contemporary art, did not indeed show much in the way of their national character such as Korean motifs or scripts. Does this irony assume that we are now in a transnational age? If so, why then, do we still curate exhibitions such as this under the name of a national identity? And finally, how can we explain such contradictions with regards to the cosmopolitan subject and his/her relation (or non-relation) to nation and national identity in the age of globalization?

In the exhibition, apart from the various media and ways of representation, there were in fact a few artists who touched on some issues around national identity.

Taking part in the show, the photographic piece by Jin Kyun Ahn (1983-), for example, was easily recognized as such. In his project *En Cave* (2010), Ahn made

features of connectivity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity, the concept of rhizome was explored by Deleuze and Guattari's book, *A Thousand Plateaus*. 'Rhizo + Sphere' refer to both time and space of the exhibition."; quoted from www.4482.info.

¹⁴ Gowman, Philip (2011). 'Exhibition visit: the 4th 4482 exhibition – Rhizosphere,' *London Korean Links*, 7 March.



Fig. 1. Chan Hyo Bae, *Existing in Costume 1*, 2006, C-Print, 100 x 80 cm, Collection of Museum of Fine Art, Houston, TX and Statoil Art Collection, Norway, copyright the artist

a construction of a cave in which he and his parents ‘act’ by performing the Confucian tradition of him bowing down on his knees in a formal ceremony to show respect to them. Making a stage for the performance, that consciously takes the form of the simulacra referring to Plato’s cave, he reveals the ways in which replication, mimicry, and simulation are imposed by way of Korean cultural traditions. Having been raised in the West, the artist is thus aware of his critical distance from the act, and yet nonetheless exposes his helplessness at having himself to embody such social customs. That said, it is difficult for the British viewer to perceive the artist’s unease toward his own cultural customs, so that unease, as well as the unfamiliar customs themselves from that distant culture, remain untranslatable.

A photograph by independent artist, Chan Hyo Bae (1975-), retains a more personal experience of himself in Britain as he reveals the honest self-confessions

of an avowedly Korean man *Existing in Costume I* (Fig. 1). There is an ironic humour involved in this artist's work as he reveals an awareness of his own situation, 'trapped' as he is by race and sexuality. By masquerading as a noble English lady, he plays amusingly with his own 'otherness.' With exaggeration and reversals, Bae somehow manages to negotiate his cultural disconnection and feelings of alienation as an Asian man dwelling in Britain. Here, there is a sense of complete identification with the other, as he takes on the roles of Western female protagonists in historical portraits or fairy tales. Simulacra in Bae's case is evidently maximized by taking on the other's customs in his masterful performance. In doing so, his being as a Korean man seems to exist perfectly only in costume as is affirmed by the title of the series 'Existing in Costume.' Transformed skillfully into a Western noble lady, for the viewer in Britain such a masquerade performs an uncanny correspondence of the fluency of nearness (vis-à-vis Western fashion) with the unbearable distance of self-identity (for the subject is still an Asian man).

In the work of artist Eem Yun Kang (1981-), somewhat differently her cross-cultural experience is merged imperceptibly into a sophisticated rhetoric using various myths and legends. Most crucial to Kang's work is the question of dislocation, which shows itself by way of both subject matter and style. The subject's instability in its dislocation from Korea to Britain allows her to focus on the flexible and freer composition of her painting as is seen in her *Fungal Land series* (2006), and 'Scroll Paintings' (2007). In *Fungalland I-VIII* (2006) (Fig. 2), for example, her interest in expanding space is evident in the work's structure in which we can see simultaneously the eight pieces of huge canvas of a landscape composed together. There is a structural similarity to the Korean traditional screen of which several units are attached. The composition of Kang's landscape is not limited to within the pictorial frame, and her 'continuous landscape' as such denies boundaries defined either by way of form or colour. Resonating with the artist's travelling from Asia to Europe, her painting stretches out from any fixed location; always expanding to somewhere else. In doing so, her imaginative trajectory in painting becomes interminable as she continues in this *Fungalland series*. In her triptych *Metamorphosis* (2008) (Fig. 3), Kang shows her concern for the state of 'becoming' both in its theme and in its mode of expression. In this painting, she represents the images of mythical Korean folklore



Fig. 2. Eem Yun Kang, *Fungalland I-VIII*, 2006, canvas, 240 x 150 cm, 8 pieces, Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, copyright the artist.



Fig. 3. Eem Yun Kang, *Metamorphosis*, 2008, oil on canvas (Triptych), 240 x 450 cm, Collection of W R Trean (Royal Academy of Arts, London), copyright the artist, Photo: Sönke Faltien

depicting the initial formation of the nation with its symbolic figures of a tiger and a bear. In the myth, a bear transforms into a woman from whom Koreans supposedly originated. Compared to the figurative of the two animals on both sides of the triptych, she paints the middle panel in the most abstract way to emphasize the bear's metamorphosis. By making the Korean cultural symbol merge into the abstract landscape as it moves into the central panel, reference to Korean identity becomes blurred, and hence the work can flow freely into and embrace the surrounding space without being restricted by glaring cultural symbolism. It seeps naturally into the other panel in both form and colour as if to show a gradual cultural transformation from one to another. In Kang's case, the distance of the Korean narrative is concealed through abstraction, thus rendering the painting familiar or near to the West, which leads to a partial translation in the visual.

Another trajectory to evade or ignore the matter of national identity in this transnational era is evidenced by the cybernetic creatures of U Ram Choe's work, *Opertus Lunula Umbra* (2008) (Fig. 4). Exhibited in the Liverpool Biennale in 2008, a giant metallic insect-like creature with organic movement, transcending the boundaries between technology and nature, is suspended in the air. Choe also provides a detailed description of his organic creature, including its habitats, nutritional needs, and growing mechanism. With the extra-terrestrial names and forms based on pseudo scientific research, his highly mechanical works do not belong to any given category, and, invented as an entirely new species, we feel as if these sci-fi creatures, with their sophisticated organic structures, are presented to us as if they were discovered as real creatures with 'biological' origins. Here, such science fictions make distance wholly meaningless, makes cultural distance disappear, as any and all viewers will have a relatively equal facility to understand and translate such fabrications.

In these cases, the artist's stance in dealing with national identity is thought through in relation to the international art world and as a kind of passageway to reach out to this international realm, the artist sets his/her own relation to his / her national identity whether via confrontation, indifference, love, or

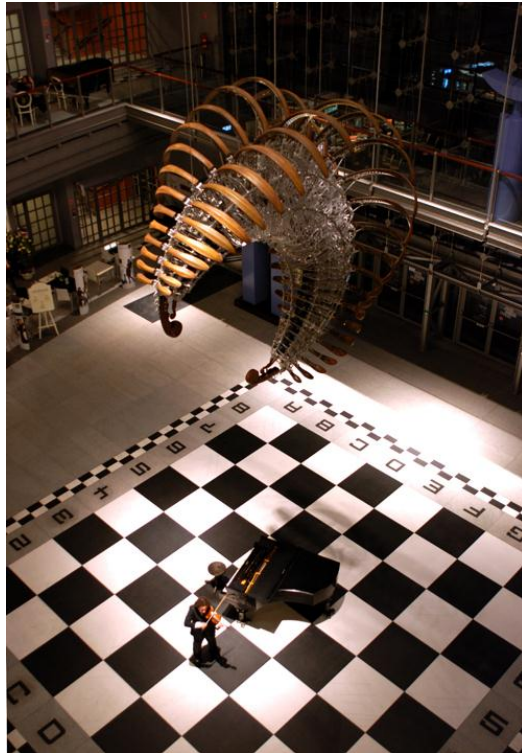


Fig. 4. U Ram Choi, *Opertus Lunula Umbra*, 2008, aluminum, stainless steel, plastic, electronic device, closed 420 x 130 x 420 cm, open 490 x 360 x 500 cm. Installation view: Art Station Foundation, Poznan, copyright the artist.

transcendence. Akin to this, in what follows, we will consider one of the most renowned Korean artists, Nam June Paik, an 'artist nomad' who offered a cosmopolitan way to come to terms with his nationality in this transnational era. In the case of Paik, this is done by way of the artist displaying the humorous and incessant moving force of nomadic art.

A Utopian Desire for Global Networking: The Case of Nam June Paik

In Liverpool (from Dec. 2010 to March 2011), the first major exhibition in Britain of Nam June Paik (1932-2006)¹⁵ could be visited across two venues: Tate

¹⁵ Paik was born in 1932 in Seoul, Korea. Leaving the country in 1950 at the age of 18, he went to Japan and studied music and aesthetics for 4 years. Then he left for Germany starting his career

Liverpool and FACT. It was the first retrospective of Paik's art shown in Britain since 1988. As he is not as well-known in Britain as he is in America or Germany, where he is revered as the father of video art, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that his work was introduced only quite recently to Britain. Paik, who is 'the patron saint of the YouTube generation, deserves recognition on these shores, too' as journalist Alastair Sooke notes.¹⁶ While technology has developed since Paik's time, there is still distinctive value in the work of an artist rightly revered as one of the pioneers of forms of visual communication that are still most valued in this globalized world. To see the idea of global communication realised, one need look no further than Paik's *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*.¹⁷ On New Year's Day 1984, Paik presented the work to over 25 million viewers. As the first international satellite installation, it linked New York, Paris, Berlin and Seoul. It was a satellite broadcast on a grand scale across continents. Having unlimited connection in its geographical range, by connecting distinct places through global communication networks in order to facilitate trans-national and trans-cultural contact, this is perhaps an early instance, contra Enwezor, of the *wonderful* nearness of distant places.

To comprehend the multicultural ambition in Paik's art, one can refer to his biographical trajectory starting from his life in Korea as a teenager, then his time in Japan for his undergraduate studies, later in Germany for his further studies and debut as a Fluxus artist, and, from his early thirties until the end of his life, in New York as an internationally renowned video artist. In that art, Paik managed to achieve a kind of communication that random, non-linear, that had no one direction, but rather expanded multi-directionally. It was perhaps, as artist and writer Peter Merrington puts it, 'a response to Orwell's dystopian vision of the use of totalitarian television control in 1984'.¹⁸ Paik's passion for global communication via satellite encouraged him to launch several more projects

there as a member of Fluxus. After moving to New York in 1964, he worked and died in the States in 2006

¹⁶ Sooke, Alastair (2010). 'A visionary who switched the world on to video art,' *The Telegraph*, 21 December.

¹⁷ This work featured Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Merce Cunningham, and Charlotte Moorman with her and Paik's TV Cello and it was surely perceived as an avant-garde art variety show.

¹⁸ Merrington, Peter (2011). 'Rewind the BETAMAX of life: Nam June Paik at Tate Liverpool and FACT,' *Rhizome*, 5 Jan.

successively after *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1984), among them *Bye, Bye Kipling* (1986), and *Wrap around the World* (1988). Broadcasting around the world as such was set up to fulfill his wish for what he called ‘communication without confusion and interference.’¹⁹

In such operations of horizontal connectivity, there is a common structure between Paik’s global satellite work and philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s concept of rhizomes in the way in which direct intra-textual links have no centre from which the network grows. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the concept of rhizome is summarized as ‘unlike trees or their roots, it connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs [...]’.²⁰ Similarly, since Paik’s network piece goes beyond the strict boundary of the nation, it is relevant to refer to such a rhizomatic apparatus in that, as anthropologist M. Kearney’s writes, it suggests ‘the form and physiology of nomadic transnational and global communities that flourish outside the striated space of the state’.²¹ Paik’s vision of video as an ‘essential democratic media to unite and connect people’²² and his communicating network exemplify the nomadic mode of rhizomatic structure that has neither centre nor marginal. One can see there is a connection with ‘Rhizosphere’, the title of 4482’s exhibition testifying to Paik’s influence on this young generation of Korean artists.

In fact, it was media studies visionary, Marshall McLuhan who, as far back as 1964, proposed the term ‘nomadic’ as it has become used in contemporary parlance, emphasizing, as it does, the prospect of its capacity to connect by way of

¹⁹ Paik states: the ‘ultimate goal of video revolution is the establishment of space to space, or plain to plain, communication without confusion and interference,’ Woody Vasulka, ‘Nam June Paik & Shuya Abe,’ (1992). *Eigenwelt der Apparatewelt: Pioneers of Electronic Art*, [ex. cat.] ed David Dunn, The Vasulkas, Linz, 128.

²⁰ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 23.

²¹ M. Kearney (2005). ‘The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 34, 558-559.

²² Merrington, ‘Rewind the BETAMAX of life’.

social networks.²³ McLuhan wrote that people are ‘suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmentary specialism as never before’²⁴ As a contemporary of McLuhan, Paik realized this nomadic vision of globalization by making the most out of the revolutionary age of social networking in the 1960s. However, as Dieter Daniels, the historian of art and media puts it, unlike McLuhan’s theory of the ‘global village’ soliciting assimilation among different cultures, Paik’s work ‘places instead the understanding for cultural diversity in the foreground.’²⁵ Moreover, it is appropriate that Daniels would emphasize both the innate relevance of Paik’s work and his cultural identity in terms of ‘hybridisation.’²⁶

Cultural diversity was highlighted by the first incident in 1964 for which Paik has come to be remembered as the forerunner of video art, a multiculturalism with a certain amusing ‘irony,’ as film and television historian Patricia Mellencamp puts it: ‘The irony of Japanese consumer technology in the hands of a Korean in New York filming the Pope and triggering an art movement funded by NEA and the Rockefeller Foundation is delightful indeed.’²⁷ As a global artist traversing the cultural boundaries of a typically nomadic quality in Paik’s art, an analogy can be made to the mode of the nomadic subject, that is, a state of being ‘constantly on the move, connecting with others, assuming heterogeneous identities, and celebrating plurality [...]’²⁸ Unrestricted by cultural boundaries Paik was outgoing, made friends easily, including internationally famous ones such as John Cage, Joseph Beuys, and George Maciunas.²⁹ Despite his flat Asian accent, he

²³ McLuhan stresses that people are ‘suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmentary specialism as never before.’ See McLuhan, Marshall (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 358; quoted in Zembylas, Michalinos and Vrasidas, Charalambos (2005). ‘Globalization, information and communication technologies, and the prospect of a “global village”: promises of inclusion or electronic colonization?’, *Journal of curriculum studies*, vol. 37, 69.

²⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 358; quoted in Zembylas and Vrasidas, ‘Globalization, information and communication technologies’, 69.

²⁵ Daniels, Dieter (2011). ‘John Cage and Nam June Paik’, *Nam June Paik* [ex. cat.], Sook-Kyoung Lee and Susanne Rennert, eds, Liverpool: Tate Publishing, 125.

²⁶ Daniels, ‘John Cage and Nam June Paik’, 125.

²⁷ Mellencamp, Patricia. (1995). ‘The Old and the New: Nam June Paik’, *Art Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, Video Art, Winter, 41.

²⁸ Zembylas and Vrasidas, ‘Globalization, information and communication technologies’, 66.

²⁹ Kate Millett delivers those difficulties in reality which Paik must have had identifying with the artist’s position as she recalls, but with a wonder: ‘If Tokyo was hard [for a Korean], what was it

managed to show that art can actually foster interactivity within a global society; for Paik, the goal was to reduce distances and to make cultural translation effortless.

In his article 'Nomad Thought', Deleuze draws on the relation between counterculture and laughter in reading Nietzsche's work, highlighting the exterior movement of irony and humour.³⁰ In it, it is worth paying much attention to Deleuze when he stresses that nomads, whether they move or not, 'evade the codes of settled people.'³¹ Drawing on Deleuze's emphasis on nomadic force out of settlement, Paik's active exterior movement of the countercultural practice is comprehensible: it pushes the artist from one national boundary to another, and from one medium of art to another. For the latter, we see his movement from music to video art, video to sculpture, and sculpture to installation. There occurred also a transference from the human body to the mechanics when he performed with the classical cellist Charlotte Moorman, attaching small televisions onto her body and synchronizing her cello playing with the television working. Regarding such exterior movement in nomadism, Paik's use of humour works as an efficient strategy. In Paik's case, humour works well for him as a way to transgress cultural boundaries, allowing him to evade being trapped inside certain categories of cultural definition. Curator Carla Hanzal likewise notices something similar in Paik's art when she wrote of, 'his strategy of using self parody to engage the audience and to traverse cultural boundaries.'³² More importantly, Paik's use of popular culture and comic irony lets his work take account of the viewers' response for completing itself, as Patricia Mellencamp stresses.³³

like in Germany? Maybe he had perfected that manner of being a foreigner, a refugee artist: thick skinned, a little strange, a little funny [...] ineffably an outsider.'; quoted in Mellencamp, 'The Old and the New', 42.

³⁰ Deleuze, Gilles (1985). 'Nomad Thought', in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed and intro by David B Allison. Cambridge, Mass And London, England: The MIT Press, 147.

³¹ Deleuze, 'Nomad Thought', 145 & 149.

³² Hanzal, Carla (2001). 'Traversing the Worlds of Nam June Paik,' *Sculpture*, June, 20.

³³ Mellencamp, 'The Old and the New', 42. Mellencamp refers to Hanhardt's writing here: See Hanhardt, John (1990). 'D6-Collage/Collage: Notes toward a Reexamination of the Origins of Video Art,' in, *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds. New York: Bay Area Video Coalition, 71-80. Mellencamp also suggests that Paik's respect for the audience resembles Deleuze's model of the simulacrum, explaining that for



Fig. 5. Nam June Paik, *Buddha*, 1989, Nam June Paik Estate Collection of the ZKM Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe, copyright the artist

Not surprisingly, most of the journalistic reviews of Paik's Tate Liverpool/FACT exhibition highlighted his representative works imbued with this sense of humor. Paik's TV Buddha series, made in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, were well received in Britain during the show, especially for their ironical wit. What drew the most attention amongst these are: *Buddha* (1989) (ZKM) (Fig. 5), *Buddha Duchamp Beuys* (1989), and *TV Buddha* (1997). In *Buddha* (1989), he made an unlikely juxtaposition of the symbol of a respectable religion, and the ordinary object of most secular entertainment. This sense of humour, that is not satirical, conjures up a feeling of intimacy because of this secularization of the religious icon. It is accelerated by an innocent confrontation between the Buddha and TV, the symbol of the spiritual and media technology. If we identify it as certain affect of a 'Korean' joke, Paik succeeded in transferring cultural humour from the East to the West at the level of the visual. Thus, in *Lachelnder Buddha* (1992), for example, a black painted Buddha is watching television and journalist Adrian Searle described it as follows: 'He [the Buddha] sits giggling before the screen,

Deleuze 'the simulacrum circumvents mastery because it already includes the angle of the observer.' Mellencamp, 'the Old and the New', 43; Deleuze, Gilles. (1984). 'Plato and the Simulacrum,' *October*, vol. 27, 47-56.

and looks like he's enjoying a show. I imagine canned laughter blaring out.³⁴

Among Paik's works, *TV Garden* (1974-77/2002) and *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965/92) also drew much attention. These works involve codes of Eastern culture (including Korean) in the West, which are figured as 'nature' as opposed to 'industrialization,' and 'myth' in contrast to 'science.' Paik constructed his own way for electric communication with what is thought to be its counterpart - the moon, a candle, and grass. His way of representing can be said to juxtapose the objects coming from utterly different contexts. These works deftly show the distinct characteristic of his work: the unlikely juxtaposition of objects, or the combination of opposite impulses. As they bear the references of geographical distance between the East and the West, they reflect his nomadic trajectory from one to another.³⁵

In Paik's art, diverse cultural aspects of Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United States are combined in a way that, rather than being mutually excluding, in fact reciprocally enlighten one another. Because of the multi-cultural identity of his art practice, by not being restricted by any cultural position or boundary, by moving constantly, and in striving to realize cosmopolitan networking, Paik manages to show that his art can actually foster interactivity within a global society. By these means, his utopian desire for global networking by way of extended and extending networks of communicability with this audience turns out, in today's world, to be a utopian dream realized.

Cultural Translation in Mee Kyoung Shin's Work

When one sees an artwork from a different culture, cultural translation is involved in its interpretation. In such an interpretation, what matters is its

³⁴ Adrian Searle, 'Nam June Paik: Watch with Buddha', *the guardian*, 19 December, 2010

³⁵ In a similar vein, Matthew Hull notes: '[...] Sitting in contemplation in front of screens that house real-life flickering candles or live feeds of the [Buddha] statues themselves: the series deftly illustrates one of the defining characteristics of Paik's work: the yoking of opposite impulses, in this case East and West, or perhaps spirituality and technology.' Hull, Matthew. (2010). 'Global Groove', *Creativetourist.com*, 30 December.

foreignness and its relation to un-translatability, as Bhabha has highlighted. On un-translatability, Bhabha refers to Benjamin's conceptualization of the term, writing that 'in the act of translation the context or subject matter is made disjunct, overwhelmed and alienated by the form of signification.'³⁶ Our concern here lies in the reckoning of 'foreign' work as a disjunct, or with an alienating gap between forms of signification which could lead to un-translatability in the visual.

In Mee Kyoung Shin's case, the artist works on the borderline of nationalities in order to visualize the performance of cultural translation. Through the process of her practice, the foreign element of Shin's work gradually emerges from the un-translatable, and the unfamiliarity resulting from the cultural encounter is brought to the surface - the soap's surface in this case.

Holding her first major exhibition at the *Haunch of Venison* in London, 2011, Mee Kyoung Shin (1967-)³⁷ brought a different perspective into the British art scene *exhibition view* (Fig 6).³⁸ Among the reviews of her exhibition, the most dominant reaction was surprise at the sheer virtuosity of her craftsmanship in dealing with the fragile medium of soap. In Shin's production of 'highly refined works that are at first glance seemingly identical to the originals',³⁹ as in her replica of Chinese porcelain, Korean Buddhist sculptures, and Greek sculptures, she evoked reverential exclamations for her meticulous skill of replication. Admiration for the beautiful craftsmanship of this Korean artist was directed firstly to Shin's use of soap as an unusual medium for the sculptures themselves, and then to the way in which she executed such a delicate task. The material character of the sculptures is made up of meticulously detailed figurative and object-centered work and the skill in reproducing their surfaces is highly labour intensive. There is a sense of uncanny mastery that elicits certain skepticism that there must be something underneath the skin of her sculpture - something that deserves more attention than the sophisticated craftsmanship itself.

³⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 227.

³⁷ Born in 1967, South Korea, Shin lives and works in Seoul and London. She received her B.A. in 1990, her M.A. in 1993 in Sculpture, Seoul National University, and M.F.A. (1998) in Sculpture, Slade school of Fine Art, London. She finished the Specialist Research Development Program, also at the Slade School of Fine Art in 2005.

³⁸ The exhibition was held at the Haunch of Venison from 16 Feb to 2 April in 2011.

³⁹ Nicholson, Kate and Hoffman, Heston (2011). 'Korean Soap Sculptor Mee Kyoung Shin Gets Major London Solo - pictures,' *Art Radar Asia*, 2 March.



Fig. 6. Mee Kyung Shin, Installation view: *Haunch of Venison*, Courtesy of Haunch of Venison, London, Photo: Peter Mallet

Shin, with her two cultural backgrounds - Korean and British – has, starting from the end of the 1990s in London, made a series called ‘Translation’, obviously referring to her geographical migration. She chooses and draws inspiration from art objects which are closely attached to certain cultures and periods, such as Greek sculpture *Translation-Greek Sculpture* (1998)(Fig. 7), Chinese porcelain from the 16th century, or Korean Buddhist sculpture *Translation-Gilt Buddha* (2009)(Fig 8). Then, in her perfect reproduction of such artifacts, the viewer cannot help but think of their innate cultural background, religious connotation, social relations etc. In a sudden turn over however, such relations come to be radically challenged upon the viewer’s realization that those meticulously detailed sculptures are made of soap; a cheap material, in contrast, that would deny the very cultural significance invested in them. Not only is there here a ‘translation’ of the material itself, but there is often also ‘translation’ in the use of forms and colours. Shin often sculpts her soap works by initially replicating the traditional ancient Korean and Chinese porcelains or classical Greek and Roman sculptures, but then alters the forms, sometimes changing the human figure into versions of herself, installing them in different combinations, or partially



Fig. 7. Mee Kyung Shin, *Translation-Greek Sculpture*, 1998, soap, 140 x 44 x 30 cm, Posco Art Museum, copyright the artist

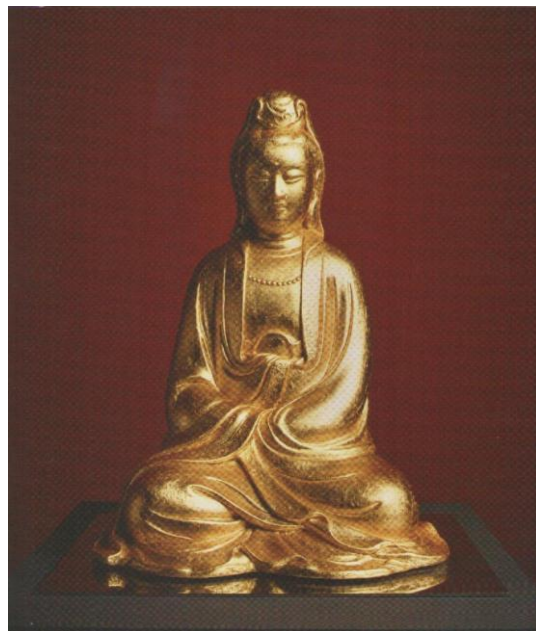


Fig. 8. Mee Kyung Shin, *Translation-Gilt Buddha*, 2009, soap, gold leaf, fragrance, 36.4 x 27 x 47.4 cm, Kukje gallery, copyright the artist, photo: Yong Don Suh.

colouring them. In the process of this visual translation, she detaches the culturally specific forms from the original traits or context accompanying them. That is to say, she separates the signifier from its signified, and thus widens the gap between the two. In this process, the viewer's perception of the artifacts themselves often becomes reversed, twisted, or led in a totally different contextual sphere.

By working on the border of cultural transference, Shin reveals the different perception that occurs when one looks at the other's artifact as it becomes detached from its cultural terrain. Interestingly, a sense of alienation or disjuncture is what the sensible artist felt when she looked at the Chinese vases and the Western sculptures back in Korea.⁴⁰ Alienation was also felt when she looked at the Greek and Roman sculptures in marble in the British Museum; the artist said that she felt the marble looked like soap.⁴¹

This was also a reflection of Shin's own experience in Korea. Her remark recollects the educational experiences of young Korean students who try to enter elite art colleges: In Seoul, they were trained to draw those sculptures that were usually in copied plaster at the art institutions. As a student, Shin had looked at these white replicas with their rough surface for many years to the point that they could be memorized in perfect detail. To her, it is quite likely that the surface of the original sculptures in the British Museum looked too polished and reflective, like soap, when compared to those plaster casts with which she was familiar. Her empirical experience was embedded in the 'translated' works that can only but escape the perception of the viewer in Britain. By transferring the solid marble artifacts into fragile soap sculptures, she touches on the idea of an 'invisible sensibility' of the viewer's perception of artworks residing on the border between two cultures, which could contribute to the works' un-translatability.⁴²

⁴⁰ Louise Jury states likewise: 'The vases she reproduces were made in China from the 16th century specifically for the West and so were as *alien* to her as the sculptures of Greek and Roman antiquity.' (Our emphasis) Jury, Louise (2011). 'Soap without a rope: sculptor's quirky take on ancient artifacts,' *London Evening Standard*, 22 Feb.

⁴¹ Shin said: 'To me, they looked as if they were made from soap'. Jury, 'Soap without a rope'.

⁴² Shin explained: 'By replicating culturally representative artifacts, I address *invisible sensibility* along with the question of movement at transmission.' (Our emphasis) Shin, Mee Kyoung (2009).

Shin uses the medium of soap, which is vulnerable and fragile. An extreme case in which she exploits the material's fragility is *Toilette Project* (2004 – ongoing). In these works, using the soap's intrinsic character, Shin articulates a radical denial of a definite state of identity. In the work, the artist heightens the myth of treasured sculptures with a surprisingly skillful craftsmanship of simulacra, and then lets it be destroyed by the hands of an anonymous public. Its process of disintegration undoes what appears to be the most solid and confirmative icons such as national treasures as much as it does the promise of religion or the myth of art embodied in them.

Revealed also in Shin's work are the chains of copying, in which meaning purportedly slides along the signifying network to 'the original' whose attainment is impossible. As an example of this we can take one of the series of her soap sculptures of Greek statues that were copied by the Romans. In exhibiting them in Britain, she exports the Roman statues from Korea, which are copies of the original Roman copies of the Greek original. There occurs inevitable mistranslation in our cognitive system as we 'slide through' such different cultural contexts. In this chain of reproduction, cultural attributes and periodical significances become added to the art object which is constantly in motion. Decodification and re-codification as a result of such shifting between cultural contexts, reveals the nomadic structure of her work. Referring to the transporting of the work itself, her 'export ware' in the late 2000s represents the artist's focus on its process of moving, which is itself closely related to operations of dislocation, and thus, possibly leading to cultural mistranslation.

As can be seen in *Translation-Vase* (2006) (Fig. 9), Shin makes a series of sculptures in soap 'after' antique Chinese or Korean porcelain. Then she inserts them in a narrative of the exportation of goods to the West. The works are usually exhibited in custom-made packing crates, signifying exporting and importing. The artist has mentioned that she does not indicate to the viewer whether the crates are leaving or arriving. Rather, she aims to show traveling; moving from one place to another, which is the very essence of those artworks. Art critic James

'The Concept of Translation,' *Mee Kyoung Shin: Translation* [ex. cat.], Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 2009, 10.

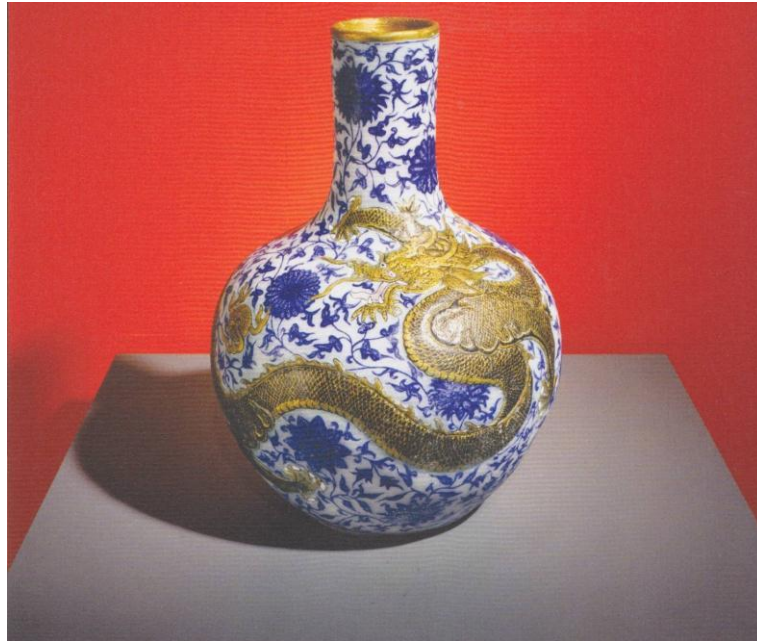


Fig. 9. Mee Kyoung Shin, *Translation-Vase*, 2006, soap, pigment, 30 x 30 x 40 cm, Mongin Art Centre, Copyright the artist, photo: Yong Don Suh.

Putnam's comment is pertinent when he says, 'Shin's reference to her vases "Translation" is also alluded to in the way they are installed or presented.[...]'⁴³ Teetering on the very border, Shin's work probes into transference itself between cultures.

In Shin's work, the process of transferring is what is intriguing. It is more like transformation than replicating or copying because the artist often works on the artifact itself by reforming or colouring it. Thus it is tempting to call what she does as 'remaking' and in this sense, it corresponds to a new way of considering translation, where the 'foreign' element is engaged in creating conditions through which 'newness comes into the world,' as Bhabha has suggested.⁴⁴ In actively transferring the meaning of what Shin intends to translate *from*, and in being unconcerned by the fact that she might lose certain meanings along the way, her

⁴³ Putnam, James (2009). *Mee Kyoung Shin: Translation* [ex. cat.]. Seoul: Kukje Gallery, 13-14; Putman notes: "This state of interim or constant moving seems to have much to do with "the artist's own migratory lifestyle and a lack of permanent base."

⁴⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 227.

work produces new meanings by adding onto what is conceived of as the 'original', proposing suggestively that when crossing borders one cannot avoid miscomprehension, distortion, exaggeration, transformation, and, as she says, the 'invisible sensibilities' that take place along with such acts of cultural transmission.

Shin distanced from specific cultural forms for her sculpture by forwarding them to a different cultural terrain. The artifacts in her work play on the borderline between the two cultures when they are placed in the process of being translated from one to the other. Some pieces in her 'Translation' work ironically confirm that unacknowledged un-translatability between the two cultures, bringing forth a certain newness for the means by which recognition of cultural difference takes place, while other pieces confirm the idea that 'translation is recreating.' This, to our mind, is also a current theme most relevant to those emerging artists in Korean contemporary art on British soil, and indeed an attribute they do share.

Conclusion

Starting from Walter Benjamin's discussion of translation's vital emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between languages, this article's main concern lay in cultural translation as it takes place in the visual. When transmitting certain meanings of artworks from one culture to another, there is no such thing as a 'transparent' translation between the two in the visual. As a consequence, we are led to turn to the realm of un-translatability, with all of the challenges that this entails.

What seems to have been enhanced in the last decade is an artist's individual capacity to utilise cultural resources for making art. Artists who are in situations of cultural displacement in this globalised world have shown diverse ways in which they manage to re-form their cultural identity in the visual according to their own choice of the pluralising cultural codes available to them. By detaching themselves and often their work from the located-ness and specificity of a cultural context, their stance is reinforced in and by their dealings with global networking as they travel between different cultural territories.

Taking into account such an artist's position, as it is relatively disconnected with their own 'home' culture, we can see through the signs of national identity to the point at which such cultural specificity can be translated into the international art context. In this process, individuality based on cultural specificity is accounted for as 'foreignness' in another language. This is how cultural translation could work to unveil such invisible meanings.

It is also worth considering that what is regarded as the 'un-translatable' could be more interesting still if it were left and observed as such rather than being subject to thorough interpretation in one language. A suspension of such interpretation or even just a pause in front of the un-translatable could be the best recognition of the other. This is a serious concern for the subject of cultural translation, but unfortunately too big an issue to do more than touch on in these concluding remarks.

In the globalised world, the destabilised condition of cultural displacement allows those artists to draw a bigger map around the world, weakening the delineations between cultural borders. 'Korean Artists on British Soil' has thus been taken as a case study for this. In this article, starting from emerging Korean artists whose works have been spotted in Britain recently, we then focused on two Korean artists in particular whose exhibitions have drawn much attention in the British art world. By exploring the works of Nam Jun Paik and Mee Kyoung Shin, we endeavoured to expose the works' distance from the artists' nationality, and show how this distancing functions as a creative strategy in their art making. This can be seen as introducing a sense of separation from, or as flexible relations among, the cultural identity of the artwork, the national background of its maker, and the historical/aesthetic context of its production.

In Paik's and Shin's cases, their national identity or innate identity becomes elusive and thus reduces the defining capability of such identity in their work. For those artists in the international realm, it is somehow necessary to deploy certain artistic 'strategies' in order for them to engage their individual differences within the globalised art world. Such strategies employed are undoubtedly various since they depend on the individual's choice of whether s/he would use it, satirize it, or

simply ignore it. In the end, the dilemma rests with the artists as to how they can keep a 'transnational' subjective position in the process of art making when they are still inevitably, and despite themselves and their best hopes, defined as a particular 'national' identity and mythologised as such.

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