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# *Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Clara Kim*

## Colophon

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Perhaps it has to do something with capitalism, a market economy that has made art into a commodity for the wealthy elite, auctions that have inflated contemporary art values surpassing that of age-old treasures. I am not nostalgic, but if anything can characterize the last twenty years of art production it is the prevalence and domination of the market. Perhaps it is an inevitable fate of human development in a capitalist market world order that art too finds its monetary equivalent. While other forms of culture such as music seem to be going through radical changes as the Internet and digital technology transform the way we receive and disseminate information, contemporary art seems to be heading ever more towards a codified system with more professionalized players, powerful mainstream institutions and artists putting their marks on everything from t-shirts, luxury goods, handbags, window displays, architecture to reality television shows. Contemporary art finds its rise to legitimacy in popular culture proven to be an investment worth participating in - witness the cultural institutions being developed in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and the franchising of museums elsewhere where cultural capital equates to political and economic capital. Yet the question remains what is at stake and what are the anthropological dimensions of this era of hyper commodification?

What distinguished the social and economic context of artmaking in SoHo in the late 1950s and 1960s was the blank slate that artists, poets, musicians, composers and dancers were working and living in. Literally occupying the emptied out, abandoned warehouse buildings of SoHo, artists like Nam June Paik - whose experiments in music were as radical as those in video - were working in an unusual context that was a response to the dominance of abstract expressionism in production and discourse. This motley group - who

came to define the Fluxus movement - gathered in SoHo lofts or in self-organized festivals participating in messy, unformulated, but invigorating melding of various art forms, where everything was left unsacred and therefore possible. Their broad range of activities including performances, publications, concerts and festivals, and the distribution mechanism they created - through mail-order warehouses and fluxshops - characterized this particular moment. Artists were working against and between media (or intermedia, as it was called by Maciunas) in a collective spirit that merged work and life creating a context for vibrant new forms to emerge.

Visual art production today couldn't be more different. Commercialization has created a codification of forms supported by a system of distribution (i.e. galleries, magazines, art fairs, museums, etc.) that reinforces itself into neat categories of what is collectable and what is not. In the 21st century, even some forty years after Paik revolutionized video art, no new novel forms have emerged though technology has taken giant leaps forward transforming every facet of our everyday life from the way we read newspapers to the way we conduct business/research to social behavior. The dissemination, production, and absorption of information — the information superhighway, as Paik termed early on — radically changed visual culture and experience, yet much of artmaking today is still rooted in traditional forms (auction values of contemporary paintings still break records, while video art and media-based work hardly ever make their way to auction houses).

If one ventures to state that rampant commercialization and commodification of contemporary art has dampened creativity - however loosely one defines it - or a spirit of experimentation that characterized for example the Fluxus scene, what replaces that spirit? Do the systems of distribution dictate creative enterprise? If so, do we need a different set of terms to describe and define artistic achievement - in terms of press and promotions or who has the most hits, facebook friends and twitter feeds?

More than anything created within the realm of visual art exploring and exploiting the mediation of technology, the Wooster Group's sophisticated and riveting theatrical productions capture the chaos,



The Wooster Group  
**HAMLET**  
 Performance, New York City, United States, 2007.  
 Directed by Elizabeth LeCompte  
 Photo (c) Paula Court  
 Pictured (l to r) Casey Spooner, Scott Shepherd



The Wooster Group  
**HAMLET**  
 Performance, New York City, United States, 2007.  
 Directed by Elizabeth LeCompte  
 Photo (c) Paula Court  
 Pictured (l to r) Ari Fliakos, Kate Valk



The Wooster Group  
**HAMLET**  
 Performance, New York City, United States, 2007.  
 Directed by Elizabeth LeCompte  
 Photo (c) Paula Court  
 Pictured (l to r) Scott Shepherd

attention deficit syndrome, and simultaneity of visual experience today. Central to their multimedia productions is video and sound technology that is as much a character in their work as the ensemble of actors and artists. Their recent production of *Hamlet* takes its cues from Richard Burton's legendary 1964 Broadway version — a production that was recorded from seventeen camera angles and edited into a film to give viewers a live theatrical experience called Theatrofilm. The Wooster Group channels Burton via multiple video screens as a live cast “performs” their roles. These edited clips become the fodder of the production, the actors taking cues from the video footage. When the footage is in fast forward or in reverse, the actors mimic the movement of analog video reversing or forwarding time, while also channeling the ghosts of other *Hamlet* productions including Kenneth Branagh's Hollywood version pulled from Youtube during the performance. All takes place in fast-paced, almost hypnotic barrage of video information where memory, mediation, and live action collide into a meta-dimensional space. Perhaps the space of performing arts or performance art is where experiments in new media and technology are more radically played out, outside the commodified object, in a context that depends on collective skills, knowledge, and creativity.

Another example is a musical group called Lucky Dragons, based in Los Angeles, whose sonic experiments depend, in their words, on “fragile networks held together by things such as skin contact, unfamiliar language, temporary logic, the spirit of celebration and things that work but you don't know why.” Audience participation is required and becomes the mechanism by which sound is created through digital devices, producing new and temporary soundscapes between human contact and technological abyss. At the heart of their music is social engagement and collective production like “simple and ancient patterns coming together and falling apart in a sincere attempt to let wires and screens and words become clear and crystal.”

Somewhere here - in a space outside the current trends of visual production - are the lessons to be learned.