

W hates the word, “meditation”. He also hates the words zen, calm, and mindfulness. He especially hates the sound of the Tibetan bowl without a good reason.

W has recently started learning how to meditate. He clicked on a Youtube video on the list of “suggestions” designed to introduce meditation to a complete beginner. He was desperate to do something about his anxiety.

He has always been the type of person that loses his appetite before a job interview. His chest would tighten. And his bladder would shrink. Now, he feels like that all the time. His problem is that his body believes something bad is about to happen. His mind continuously runs simulations on that thought. Most of the time, a person of authority accuses him with a darting question. He forms an answer,  
then revises his answer,  
then revises his answer,  
then revises his answer,  
then revises his answer and so on.

---

*“Start by finding a chair and get comfortable”*

---

W sits down on the floor and pushes his lower back against the couch. W rarely sits on the couch. He is more comfortable on the floor using the couch as the backrest. It didn't strike him as a weird behaviour until it became “something only Koreans would do”. He is secretly proud of how Korean he is.

---

*“Allow yourself to listen to the sounds around you. Don’t react but just acknowledge.”*

---

W hears a choir of electrical hums. They are coming from his computer, the WIFI router, and the desk lamp. “It’s there”, he is instructed to say to himself by the voice in the guide video. He didn’t realize the buzzing was there until now. He wonders if the slightly different pitches of the hums are playing a minor chord making his workspace sad. But he is not musically talented enough to tell.

---



W remembers the electrical hum of a thousand televisions. He remembers the heat generated by 80's TVs. He remembers the tingly static on his fingertips as he snuck under the wooden barricade to touch convex glass screens. He remembers the smell of burning electronic parts. He remembers the strain of excessively tilting his head up to look at a towering mass of plastic and metal radiating electromagnetic pulses.

At his eye level, large TVs flashed neon graphics. On top of them were smaller TVs that show similar images. On top of them were even smaller TVs. On top of them were even smaller TVs. On top of them were even smaller TVs. The pattern continued until you couldn't see the images on the TVs because they were way too high and way too small.

---

W likes running his fingertips on the handrail as he walks up the spiraling ramp of the Guggenheim-like architecture. It is always sticky. He is not sure whether it is just the old lacquer or a build-up of hand grease. He doesn't really care. Doing this makes his walk up to the top more interesting than looking at the TVs.

From the top, he sees the same video playing, but on smaller monitors. The only reason for anyone to come up the ramp is the higher vantage point. It adds fear that they might fall if they lean in to see the work up close. It makes the viewing experience better.

The artwork is called *Da Da Ik Sun* (다다익선), meaning the more the better. The piece was made by Nam June Paik at the National Museum of Contemporary art in Korea. It is the first artwork W ever saw.

---

W's family lived 15 minutes away, by walking, from the museum. Admission is free. His mom came here several times a week to exercise when she was pregnant. Since then, W visited the gallery in the stroller, then as a toddler, then as a student on field trips, and then as an adult son who dedicates a day to visit the gallery with his mom whenever he visits from Canada.

W's mom tells him how much she hates *Da Da Ik Sun* every time they see the artwork. W always agrees. But really, he doesn't mind. He is indifferent about the work. It is just something that has always been a part of his life



*"Focus on the physical sensation of your body. What feels good? What is aching?"*

---

W pulls more air than his usual breath into his lungs. As he exhales, he scans his body for a spot that is tensed up. It is usually his chest and the trapezius muscle. He exhales slowly and relaxes those parts. It feels good. The muscles on his upper body had been sending signals of pain. But they blend in with the surrounding like the electrical hums in his room. The signals from the body rarely interrupt the thoughts in his head

---

Pop!

W remembers a sudden and unexpected sensation. His leg is hit. It feels numb. It feels wet. He looks down to his left thigh. He realizes that a McDonald's drink cup has hit his leg judging by the beads of cola rolling down his pants and the ice cubes on the ground. Something like this only happens in movies. A mean-looking person would poke their head out the window and yell something offensive. That didn't happen. The passenger of a small red hatchback didn't even allow him to put a face to his anger.

W looked around for someone to acknowledge the injustice that just happened or someone who would offer a napkin to wipe the sugar drink off his leg.

There was no one around.

---

*"Start counting your breaths"*

---

W realizes how shallow his breaths have been. He draws in twice more air, twice longer and exhales twice slower.

One.

---

W notices how unusually sunny it is for Vancouver's winter. There is no smell of rain. Dry air smells different. Or rather, dry air feels different in the nose. Small but a difference nonetheless. The dry air from Siberia stings the inside of the nose. The wet air from the Pacific settles into the back of the throat.

---

W remembers the smell of tree shade. It is the smell of tree perspiration evaporating under the summer heat. The sun is going down now. The disintegrating radiation becomes orange beams that everybody loves. Now, the fragile smell can survive to reach his nose. It was the perfect summer evening to drink beer on the balcony.

"This must be boring for you." M didn't want to exclude J, W's wife. She was a cancer research technician. She is a person of exactitude. M worried that their conversation about art has made the gathering unbearable for J. M and W had been talking about W's experience of going through BFA at UBC as a Korean.

"No, I really don't mind" J has become skilled at finding odd interesting details in conversations about art which she has established as "boring" a long time ago.

"But why is contemporary art white?", J asked.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Two.

---

W remembers the smell of yellowing lacquer on old wooden desktops in room 102 in the Lasserre building at UBC. The smell amplifies with the muffled stillness of air created by the windowless soundproof walls. He is sure that the air he breathed 10 years ago is still there. He took many art history classes in that room. Like H. G. Wells' time machine, he watched slides go from Greek columns to Byzantine mosaics to Tintoretto to Matisse to Matthew Barney over the 4 years. Also like the time machine, the lectures made huge jumps through more than three thousand years of foreign history. Perhaps for many of W's classmates, it was their history. They looked like figures in Reubens' paintings. Michelangelo chiseled their traditional religion. Delacroix painted their history. For W, it was the mandatory training to participate in the game.

---

Only once in that room, W saw a relatable person. Nam June Paik. W didn't know anything about Paik, other than the fact that he made *Da Da Ik Sun*. In the black and white photo, Paik was dipping his hands into a bowl of ink and painting a line on paper. W noticed the resemblance to a calligraphy master writing Chinese letters on the floor. Two knees and a hand act as a tripod supporting the writing hand. He was making an artwork like a Korean person.





---

Inhale.  
Exhale.

Three.

---

“You are a good Asian,” L said as they were loading up the grocery in front of the Canadian Superstore. “Some people have prejudices against Asian people here. There are a few families who stick to themselves. But you are fitting in nicely.”

W was genuinely happy to receive that compliment. He was the only person of colour in that parking lot.

---

Inhale.  
Exhale.

Four.

---

W is worried that he might have said something wrong during his last meeting between the POC students and the black students. He doesn't understand why two different groups are working for equity at the same time. But the tension in the meeting tells him that is precisely why this meeting is happening. He didn't say a word during the meeting because he was afraid he would say something wrong. Nonetheless, he is worried that his lack of participation has somehow labelled him of something. He knows that at the end of the day, nobody is thinking about how distanced he was in a small zoom window. But his heart pumps a bit faster as he thinks about it again.

---

W had received an email containing information about the POC affinity group and its agenda a few weeks before. He felt uneasy about it. Of course, he is a person of colour. But are Asians a historically oppressed group? Or perhaps it was because he spent the last 10 years trying to fit in, to not be spotted as the only Asian kid in the parking lot. To claim it as his identity felt like an indirect acknowledgement that he has been subjected to systemic racism. He was afraid that he wouldn't have a convincing answer if someone asked him, “How have you been affected by racism?”.

---

W wouldn't have signed up to be a part of the POC affinity group if he had a choice. His face granted him an automatic membership. He feels like he doesn't qualify to be a part of a group asking for an apology and a change.

---

Inhale.  
Exhale.

Five.

---

“Cultural shock means you experience the difference between cultures. You can talk to me about it. I think it is a natural process of learning Canadian culture.” L told W.

W was still learning English. “Cultural shock” is one of the first phrases he learned after arriving in Canada.

---

Sitting in Lasseres 102, W wondered whether Paik had similar experiences as an immigrant. W was 23 studying art in Canada. Paik was 25 when he moved to Germany.

Did people around Paik joke about how fresh-off-the-boat he was? Did he also feel the desire to dissociate from the Korean ways of thinking, talking, eating and dressing? Did he also repeatedly tell himself that it is not racism but a cultural misunderstanding. But since he is the newcomer, the responsibility of understanding falls on him? Did he have to do all these to be accepted into art history? To be on the slide after John Cage? Did he have to be a good Asian to be a recognized Asian?

---

“Canada is like a mosaic. Each person retains their cultural colour while learning to fit together.”

Said P, who was W’s first English teacher after arriving in Canada. P spoke with pride. A Korean teenager, two older Japanese women, and a college student from Switzerland were struggling to learn Canadian culture in a language they could barely keep up.

It took W 13 years to be a piece in the mosaic of a maple leaf. The beauty of mosaic is the weight that makes his trapezius muscle tense. He was willing to cut corners off to fit into a hole in the picture. He tries not to remember the pieces that didn’t fit.

---

W remembers a comment he read on a news article reporting the “Cancel Canada Day” protest in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

“Not saying there isn’t more that can and will be done; however, generally speaking, there’s never been a better time or place to be, visible minority or otherwise, than today’s Canada.”

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Six.

---

“Boycott Paik Nam June!”

W stumbled on a petition to boycott showing Paik Nam June’s work in Korea. They argued that Paik Nam June’s father (Paik Nak-Seung) sided with Japan during the Japanese colonization (1910-45). He was one of the wealthiest people in Korea at the time. He ran a fabric business. His close relationship with Japan allowed him to amass wealth unthinkable for a Korean person. He supplied the Japan-China war. He expanded his business to weapon production. It involved collecting metal from Korean people to supply weapons to the Japanese military. His factories melted people’s livelihood to support the military that oppressed the same people. Paik’s achievement is funded by the people’s suffering. He shouldn’t be celebrated as Korea’s hero.

W knows that the wealth during the colonization period is proportional to the suffering of the Korean people.

---

“What would you do with a 60 feet tall tower made of 1000 TVs?” W thought.

---

Paik Nam June said in an interview, “My father was a Chin-il (친일 Meaning pro-Japan collaborator during colonization). He couldn’t be more chin-il even among chin-ils.”

---

W can’t believe that he has never thought about how a Korean person close to his grandma’s age could have had the money and opportunity to study art in Germany.

---

“I was 10. I heard adults saying Japanese people are taking all the virgins. People were marrying off teenage daughters in a hurry to keep them safe. Some girls were told by the Japanese that they would work in a factory. But instead got sent to sex slavery. Those girls are all dead. And there are not many left who remember that.” W’s grandma said before taking a long breath that made W hear how old she is.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Seven.

---

“I come from a very poor country, and I am poor. I have to entertain people every second.” Said Paik Nam June. He came from a very poor country. But he wasn’t poor. Who was he trying to entertain anyway?

---

“Have you heard the saying “ripping poor”?” W’s grandma once asked W.

“People ate tree bark. People would strip bark and boil them to soften it. But when you poop the next day, bunched-up tree bark would rip your anus! Ah ho!” She laughed with her signature exclamation at the end.

“All the trees were bare.” W’s grandma said as a matter-of-factly.

“Wouldn’t it be better to eat grass then?” Asked W.

“Anything edible had already been eaten at that point.”

---

W’s grandma is very picky about tofu. When the war ended, her family settled in a new town. His grandma took a year off the school and sold tofu at the local market. She thinks she knows everything about tofu. She criticizes tofu loudly in restaurants. W’s family never take her to a tofu restaurant.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Eight.

---

MOMA's bio on Paik says Paik's family fled Korea upon the outbreak of the Korean war. It makes Paik look like a war refugee. But his family left because their deep connection with Japan and the wealth they amassed through it had become a crime.

---



---

W's grandma laughs a lot when she talks about how her family fled from North Korea during the war. "Because people left in hurry, people didn't take their food. you could just go into abandoned homes and eat their rice and kimchi. We each carried a bundle on our shoulders. That was all we had. No food."

---

"We knew the Chinese and the North Korean military (중공군) was marching south. But we didn't know how close they were. We were desperate to keep moving south and cross the Han-Tan river. But It wasn't frozen solidly enough for people to cross. Some people couldn't wait. I saw them drop through the ice. Our family waited two days there." Said W's grandma. She is always high-spirited when talking to W. But her voice slows down and drops an octave when she talks about tragedies she has witnessed. She was 17 years old.

---

The cold air from Siberia stings the inside of the nose.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

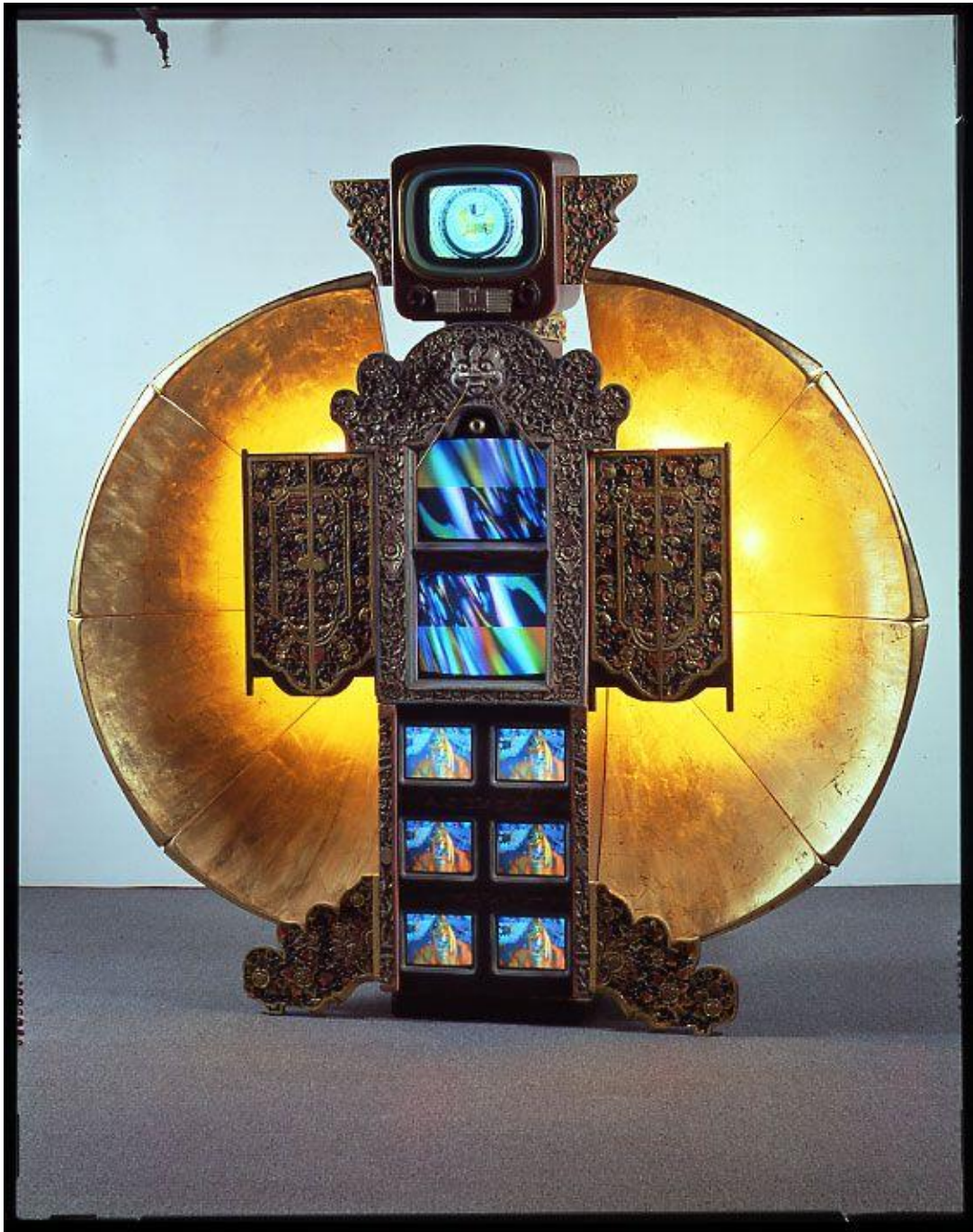
Nine.

---

UN photographers and the US army documented the war. So many photos of nameless Koreans. W likes to imagine that his grandma's family is in one of the unrecognizable faces in the crowd.

---

After moving to Japan, Paik's family bought a large Zenith television. It was said to be the only tv in the neighbourhood. Paik must have watched the aftermath of the war on his tv. He might have seen W's grandma in the crowd of people fleeing from the war.



Nam June Paik. *Zenith*. 1992



---

W remembers watching TV with his grandma. Family reunions were being broadcasted on live tv. The North Korean government and the South Korean government have exchanged a list of people who wish to meet family members separated by the border. Old people brought photos of their family from 50 years ago. They embrace and cry loudly while commenting on how much they have aged since they last saw each other.

“Grandma, what happened to your relatives in North Korea?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know...Do you know how many families were separated by the war? Those people are there for the camera.”

---



---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Ten.

---

“It’s a huge fucking buddha.”, W thought looking at the photos of the famous Kamakura statue. After fleeing Korea, Paik’s family settled in Kamakura, Japan, home of the great buddha statue. W imagines Paik looking up to Buddha’s face as he looked up to the top of *Da Da Ik Sun*. It must have made a lasting impact on him.





---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Eleven.

---

W heard Kerry James Marshall talking about the lack of black representation in art history at his artist talk. The lack of role models. W wishes he had also talked about finding out your role model is the son of a traitor.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Twelve.

---

W's parents moved a few years ago. It is a strange experience to "go back home" and find yourself in an unfamiliar place. The condo is decorated with old family photos, recent photos of W's younger brother, and W's wedding photos. There are too many photos on the walls. It feels too home but foreign at the same time.

---

When W was young, there were many paintings by his mom on the walls. But every time they moved, many of them disappeared. Only one painting survived the last move. A large oil painting hangs by the doorway. It gets partially covered when the door opens.

---

W is sad because this painting shouldn't be by itself. There was another painting that is the same size. They used to hang side by side on the most prominent wall in the living room. They were always too big for a place that was already too small for four people.

W's mom kept the one that W drew over with her lipstick when he was too young to remember.

---



---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Thirteen.

---

“Desperate people don’t meditate” W’s mom often told W when he was young.

---

American Missionaries took many photos of Korean people. One of the photographs says, “Natives praying to wooden devils.” The carved poles are not devils. They are village guardians. But the captions speak louder than the people depicted in the photograph.

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Fourteen.

---

“My life started in an evening of August 1958 in Darmstadt”, said Paik reflecting on his first encounter with John Cage.

John Cage was influenced by Suzuki Daisetsu (or D. T. Suzuki in the West). It is easy to talk about Zen when John Cage talks about it. It is so hard to be a devil worshipper though. W wondered, “Do I have to be a good Asian to be a recognized Asian?”

---

To be a devil worshipper means to constantly feel the pressure to change. They get photographed, never photographing. The caption is written for them, not by them. And most importantly, it means to be misunderstood.

---





14089—Natives Praying to Wooden Devils, Chosen (Korea)

---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Fifteen.

---

"I took care of your grandma when her cancer got bad. And soon after she died, I was pregnant. Your dad promised that he would try his best to help me get to a grad school in a few years. I dreamed of going to America. I believed him. But I knew it wasn't possible." W's mom said it like it was someone else's story.

---

Two years ago, W visited the national contemporary art museum with his mom.

"Mom, I wish I can have a small show in this museum and come see it with you. Maybe one day..."

"You will never have a spot in Korean art. They will never accept you. You need to make a spot in Canadian or American art. Then they will see someone who speaks Korean."

---

W wondered how she felt as she walked around the museum with W in the stroller. She was 27 then. W is 28 walking around the museum with his mom. They have seen some works more than a hundred times. This place feels too home but foreign at the same time.

---



---

Inhale.

Exhale.

Sixteen.

---

Last year, W visited the National Museum of contemporary art. He was surprised to find *Da Da Ik Sun* turned off. There was a sign saying that the televisions, now more than 40 years old, are failing. The museum technicians assessed that the installation has become a fire hazard.

The museum was thinking about ways to bring back the work. One proposal was to replace the inside of the televisions with newer parts while maintaining the old casings. Another proposal was to replace the old TVs with curved display LCD TVs altogether. Then some people said the public should accept the course of the work. The work should be displayed turned off.

The things he remembered of *Da Da Ik Sun* were gone. No more flashing graphics. No more TV heat. No more sound of electronic buzzing. No more electromagnetic pulses. The rotunda is much darker without 1000 tv lights. There's even a faint smell of oil paintings from the adjacent rooms.

W likes the work more this way. It doesn't try to appear artsy. The ambitious installation by Paik Nam June at the most prominent spot in Korea's national contemporary art museum looks almost like a junkyard. *Da Da Ik Sun* (More the Better) is something that has always been part of W's life. It is only when it turns off, he realizes how much noise it has been making every time he remembers the museum he grew up in.

