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32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly: Acquisition and Presentation of the Artwork

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〈20세기를 위한 32대의

자동차: 모차르트의

진혼곡을 조용히 연주하라〉의

소장과 전시

**32 Cars for the 20th
Century: Play Mozart's
Requiem Quietly:**

Acquisition and
Presentation of the
Artwork

TAE HYUNSUN

태현선은 리움미술관의 학예연구실장을 거쳐 현재 소장품연구실장으로 구입과 연구, 소장품 기반 전시 기획 업무를 맡고 있다. 이화여자대학교에서 미술사학과 석사를 취득하고 박사과정을 수료했다. 리움미술관의 현대미술 상설전과 기획전을 기획해왔으며 특히 작가 연구를 기반으로 여러 국내외 작가의 개인전들을 기획했다. 주요 전시로 《김수자: 세상을 엮는 바늘》(2000), 《나라 요시토모: 내 서랍 깊은 곳에서》(2005), 《마이클 주 개인전》(2006), 《나의 아름다운 하루》(2007), 《아니쉬 카푸어》(2012), 《양혜규 개인전》(2015), 《한 점 하늘_김환기》(2023) 등이 있다. 리움미술관의 한국근현대미술 소장품의 아카이브 구축과 활용 강화를 위한 방안을 연구 중이다.

Tae Hyunsun, former chief curator at Leeum Museum of Art, currently serves as the Head of Collections overseeing collection acquisition, research, and exhibition. She obtained her master's degree in Art History from Ewha Womans University and completed her doctoral studies. She has curated permanent and special exhibitions of contemporary art at Leeum Museum of Art, and organized solo exhibitions of various domestic and international artists with focus on artist research. Some of the notable exhibitions she has curated include **Kim Sooja: a Needle Woman** (2000), **Nara Yoshitomo: From the Depth of My Drawer** (2005), **Michael Joo Solo Exhibition** (2006), **My Beautiful Days** (2007), **Anish Kapoor** (2012), **Haegue Yang Solo Exhibition** (2015), and **A Dot, A Sky_Kim Whanki** (2023). She is currently researching ways to construct and utilize collection archives for Korean modern and contemporary art collections at Leeum Museum of Art.

In June 2006, to honor the memory of Nam June Paik, who had died the previous January, Samsung Foundation of Culture held the exhibition **Homage to Nam June Paik** at Leeum Museum of Art, which featured fourteen of the artist's works from the museum's collection (Fig. 1). As explained in the accompanying pamphlet, the museum had prepared the exhibition as a kind of requiem for Paik, with whom Samsung had maintained a special relationship as a patron since the early 1980s, including sponsoring many of his representative works.¹ At the core of this homage was Paik's installation **32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly** (hereinafter **32 Cars for the 20th Century**).



Fig. 1. *Homage to Nam June Paik* exhibition at Leeum Museum of Art in 2006

Memories of Acquisition

32 Cars for the 20th Century was originally created for Skulptur Projekte Münster 1997 (Jun. 22–Sep. 28) in Germany.

¹ Exhibition pamphlet of *Homage to Nam June Paik*, Leeum Museum of Art, 2006

Infused with Nam June Paik's characteristic wit and insight, this grand installation was an assemblage of thirty-two vintage cars dating from the 1920s to the 1950s, that were scavenged from across the United States. As described by Mark Patsfall, who oversaw the original installation in Münster, the work was a collaborative effort involving many people, who worked together to realize the artist's idea according to his instructions. Conceived during one of the most dramatic crises of the artist's life, the work represents the pinnacle of the special relationship between Samsung and Nam June Paik.

In 1984, the greater Korean public was still relatively unfamiliar with contemporary art, let alone video art. Even so, they were suddenly introduced to Nam June Paik, proudly billed as a native son who had become a pioneer of video art, through his satellite broadcast **Good Morning Mr. Orwell**, which aired globally on New Year's Day, 1984. Just as television was the most important media defining Nam June Paik's identity as video artist at the moment, televisions were one of the flagship products of Samsung, the leading company in Korea in the 1980s, before the rise of semiconductors. Thus, television was the key link connecting Nam June Paik and Samsung, which became the official sponsor of his video works.

Perhaps most famously, Samsung provided the 1,003 TVs that make up Paik's colossal 18.5-meter video tower **The More, The Better** (1988), which stands in the main hall of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon. **The More, The Better** was introduced through an extensive publicity campaign in conjunction with the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, further ingraining Paik's name and video art in the minds of the Korean people. At that time, however, Korea still lacked a strong infrastructure for art exhibition and promotion in its few museums and galleries, and even the wide media attention given to Nam June Paik proved to be fragmentary and superficial.

Paik's first solo exhibition in Korea was **Nam June Paik: Video Time, Video Space**, held at the National Museum of



Fig. 2. Nam June Paik and Lee Kun-hee, former chairman of Samsung, at the Ho-Am Prize ceremony in 1995 (source: <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/23906484#home>)

Modern and Contemporary Art in 1992, a crucial moment when there was an increasing demand from the Korean art audience for a faithful survey of Nam June Paik's oeuvre. Sponsored by Samsung, this exhibition came to Korea after previously being held in major art museums in Switzerland and Germany. It proved to be a great success, drawing around 118,000 visitors in Korea, which was a significant number at the time.

Less than ten years after he had set foot in the country for the first time, Nam June Paik's free-spirited ideas, innovative practices, and progressive attitude had already made a significant impact on Korean art. Believing strongly in the potential of Korean art, he devoted himself to its international growth. He used his extensive experience on the global art stage to stimulate the Korean art scene, spearheading a project to bring the Whitney Biennial to South Korea in 1993, facilitating the establishment of the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1995, and laying the foundation for the Gwangju Biennale. In March 1995, Samsung established an arts category for the Ho-Am Prize and selected Nam June Paik as its first recipient in honor of these accomplishments (Fig. 2).

In this context, Samsung's acquisition of **32 Cars for the 20th Century** through its museum can be seen as part of a series of actions to support Nam June Paik and his important activities. Notably, when Paik originally presented **32 Cars for the 20th Century** at Skulptur Projekte Münster 1997, he was undergoing rehabilitation therapy after suffering a stroke that resulted in the paralysis of the left side of his body. For the final Skulptur Projekte Münster of the twentieth century, Nam June Paik conceived a magnificent new work that reassessed the technological development and social culture of the century through the automobile. Recognizing this project as a crucial opportunity for the artist's resurgence, Samsung supported the production costs for the work, in which thirty-two classic cars from the early twentieth century were painted in gleaming silver, transforming them into thirty-two beautiful metal sculptures. Arranged within the wide square (approximately 4,300m²) in front of a Baroque-style palace, the silver cars were simply stunning. The spectacle immediately attracted massive attention from the art world, the public, and the media, propelling Skulptur Projekte Münster 1997 into a global sensation. Recognizing the work's central role in this success, as well as in Nam June Paik's successful comeback, Leeum Museum of Art (then named Samsung Museum of Art) decided to acquire **32 Cars for the 20th Century**.²

The acquisition, however, raised the immediate issue of how to store (let alone exhibit) a work of such massive scale, comprising thirty-two full-size cars. Yet at that precise moment, as if through divine intervention, an ideal solution presented itself. At the same time that Nam June Paik's

2 Around this time, Nam June Paik was already preparing for his retrospective exhibition **The Worlds of Nam June Paik**, scheduled to open in 2000 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. It was to be the museum's first exhibition of the new century and its first solo exhibition by an

Asian artist. Hoping to stimulate the growth of Korean art through Nam June Paik, the Samsung Foundation of Culture sponsored this exhibition and later brought it to Seoul, where it was simultaneously held at Ho-Am Gallery and Rodin Gallery.

vintage cars were being collected, Samsung Transportation Museum (since renamed the Mobility Museum) was being built on a huge plot of land (more than 65,000m²) in Yongin, Gyeonggi-do, with the intent of showcasing historical and valuable cars from Korea and abroad. Could there be a more perfect artwork for the opening of Korea's first automobile museum? Could there be a more perfect space to accommodate **32 Cars for the 20th Century**? Through the cooperation of the two institutions, Samsung Transportation Museum successfully opened in May 1998 with Paik's work as its special opening exhibition. Thanks to this serendipitous turn of events, all issues related to the storage and exhibition of **32 Cars for the 20th Century** seemed to have been resolved, as if it were destiny.

"Do Not Repair"

Unfortunately, a new problem soon arose, which did not come with such a ready solution. From the beginning, the artwork showed obvious signs of damage and deterioration. This was perhaps not surprising, given that many of the old cars had already been on the verge of being scrapped before Paik rescued them, and they had then been displayed outdoors for three months with no protection from the elements or the audience, who were free to touch the artwork. Leeum Museum of Art had never before found itself in the position of purchasing a major artwork that had previously been displayed in the worst possible environment, which raised some obvious concerns. Thus, as a mandatory process of the purchase, which was finalized with the artist's gallery on September 12, 1997, Leeum representatives requested an official inspection of each car with a report documenting all known damages. As a result, the museum received Mark Patsfall's condition report (Fig. 3), which confirmed the staff's concerns by detailing a wide range of damage to the cars, including flat tires, lost or stolen parts, rust, dents,

a smashed grille, graffiti, and various other damage to the bodies, glass, and lights.

Facing the prospect of purchasing an artwork with extensive damage, the museum's registrar adamantly and persistently requested that, before being shipped to Korea, all of the cars must be fully repaired, with all missing parts restored and flat tires replaced by identical new tires, and extra quantities of silver paint should also be sent. Interestingly, to the puzzlement of the Leeum staff, Patsfall's report did not indicate any concerns about the damage, even stating, "While there has been some damage to the cars during the course of the exhibition...the overall condition of the piece is good." This lack of alarm seems to reflect the attitude of Nam June Paik himself, who, according to the report, had "indicated that flat tires are 'a part of the piece,' and are not a concern." For Paik, the cars were symbols of twentieth-century technology that were being preserved as relics of a bygone era. As such, the exterior damage and physical defects had no significance for him.

After the purchase was finalized, discussions about the possible repairs continued for nearly twenty days, before apparently being resolved on October 14 when the artist sent Leeum a handwritten fax, seen below (Fig. 4), which read:

1. Don't repair the old car itself!!
2. Like at Taejon, you can make some dolls with old Korean dress. However, if it costs too much, you can show some Samsung old TV sets like at Münster. You can show global groove rented from E.A.I [...] However, video is not really necessary.

In December 1997, **32 Cars for the 20th Century** finally arrived in Korea and was transported to the museum over three days. However, a physical inspection soon revealed the full extent of the damage, which exceeded even the issues documented in the prior inspection report. Some of the vehicles had broken glass and bumpers caused by improper handling during

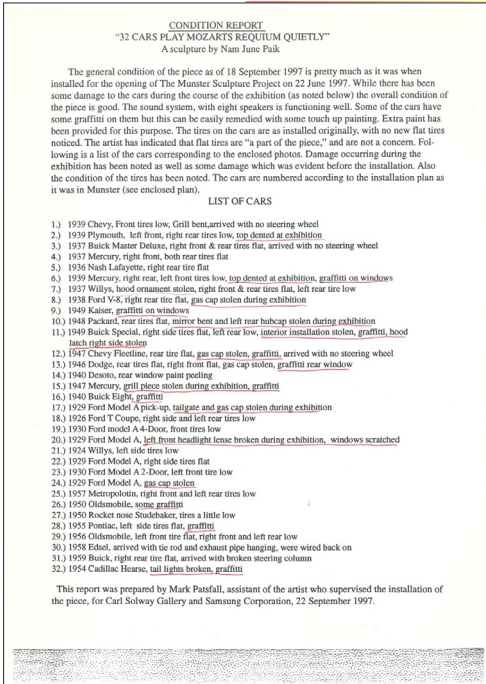


Fig. 3. Condition report by Mark Patsfall in 1997, with major problems underlined in red by Leelum Museum of Art

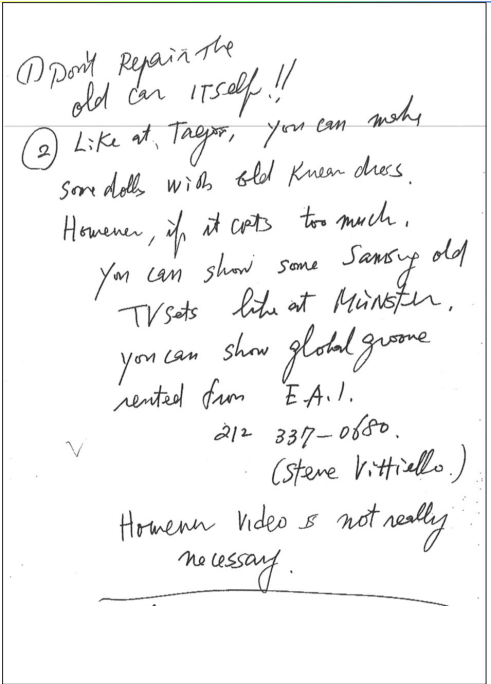


Fig. 4. Nam June Paik's handwritten fax sent to Leelum on October 14, 1997

transportation, while other stolen or missing parts were also identified. Despite the artist's explicit instructions not to repair the cars, it was determined that the artwork could not be featured as the centerpiece of the opening special exhibition of Samsung Transportation Museum in such a poor condition. Therefore, automobile experts from Samsung Transportation Museum and conservators from Leelum Museum of Art carried out necessary repairs to make the cars presentable for the opening exhibition, which was then held to great success. However, this marked the beginning of an endless cycle of damage and repair that has continued ever since.

Exhibitions

Since being acquired by Leelum, Nam June Paik's **32 Cars for the 20th Century** has been featured in six exhibitions. The

most significant of these was **Nam June Paik: Transmission** (Jun. 26–Sep. 2, 2002) by the Public Art Fund of New York City, which was the first exhibition of the work after Skulptur Projekte Münster 1997. This exhibition was organized by the artist himself, who selected sixteen of the thirty-two cars by era, and then arranged them in a new configuration in front of Rockefeller Center in New York, surrounding his new laser artwork, **Transmission Tower** (2002). The silver cars seemed to be in their element amongst the skyscrapers of Manhattan, as opposed to the quiet natural scenery of the Seoul suburbs. The juxtaposition of cars and a tower at Rockefeller Center, a bastion of both twentieth-century oil revenue and broadcast media, significantly amplified the context and meaning of the artwork. In addition, this exhibition marked the first and last time that Nam June Paik saw his installation of cars in person.

The spectacle at Rockefeller Center was such a success that it was then brought to Australia. For twenty days in January 2004, sixteen of Paik's cars were displayed with **Transmission Tower** in the square of the Sydney Opera House as

WELCOME AND WELCOME TO SYDNEY FESTIVAL 2004.

This year 12 months have been extraordinary for the Festival. Not only were we able to feature an artist of such international acclaim and artistic and technical prowess as the artist himself, but we received a call of words which were a great honour to the Festival team.

Included in these were the national Agreement Awards, for which 2002 Sydney Festival stands as a landmark in Australian arts and culture. From 11 nominations we presented, including our long awarded Best Special Award to the artist award.

Our corporate sponsors were also honoured with three partnerships being recognised for their contribution to the Festival. These include Australian Airlines, the National Olympic Committee, and the Australian Olympic Committee.

And the Sydney Chamber of Commerce pulled a team of exhibitors and sponsors and found that the Festival is now Sydney's favourite event. Close the number of the Festival, commercial, and other organisations who have been able to take part in Sydney each year, in a growing and encouraging way that is a reflection on the Festival's success and its impact on the city.

Finally, the list of artists to date with you the year that are which is reflecting and growing, and expanding, of the highest calibre and quality, is an achievement.

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This is a great Festival, and we hope to make the most of it, and we'll see you in January!

David Mackay, Festival Director

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Fig. 5. Program of the Sydney Festival, 2004

part of the annual Sydney Festival (Fig. 5). After the festival, the cars were sent to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where they were showcased in an exhibition entitled **A Selection from 32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly**.

Two years later, Nam June Paik passed away. To honor his memory, Leeum Museum of Art presented **Homage to Nam June Paik**, which featured a partial display of **32 Cars for the 20th Century**, the first time the work had ever been shown at Leeum. Eight of the thirty-two cars were arranged in a circle in the exhibition hall, accompanied by **Beuys Car**, which Nam June Paik had made as a tribute to his friend and fellow artist Joseph Beuys. Since then, cars from **32 Cars for the 20th Century** have twice been loaned to Nam June Paik Art Center for special exhibitions. First, one car was symbolically displayed at the 2010 exhibition **Trickster Makes This World**, which highlighted Nam June Paik along with several contemporary artists. Finally, the 2023 exhibition **Transmission** marked a very significant occasion, as the cars were again reunited with **Transmission Tower** after nineteen years. This exhibition was especially profound in revisiting these two works within the context of today's technology and artistic thinking, when the future that Nam June Paik envisioned in 1997 and 2002 has become a reality.

As a curator responsible for researching the collection of Leeum Museum of Art, this exhibition caused me to seriously contemplate why **32 Cars for the 20th Century** has not been more actively exhibited, despite being such an important work for understanding the art and philosophy of Nam June Paik. Other than the permanent outdoor display at Samsung Transportation Museum, the work has never been shown in its entirety, with all thirty-two cars, since its debut at Skulptur Projekte Münster 1997. The most obvious reason for this is the sheer scale and weight of the artwork. Even exhibiting a few of the cars requires high shipping costs and an extremely large space, limiting the possibilities for the work to be loaned for outside exhibitions. Another factor

seems to be the work's close association with a specific era. **32 Cars for the 20th Century** shone brightest at the turn of the century, when various expectations and perspectives of the future intersected. But now that the twenty-first century has become the present, rather than the future, recollections of the twentieth century within the contemporary art discourse have significantly dwindled, as have opportunities for this work to be exhibited.

Epilogue

In 2022, **32 Cars for the 20th Century** was removed from Samsung Transportation Museum for long-term conservation treatment, an effort that raised many new questions and challenges for Leeum Museum of Art. Taken off the road and into the museum, out of the garage and into storage, the cars have been transformed from vehicles into art objects. As the “car owners,” do we simply need to meticulously clean and repair them for storage? Mirroring his attitude towards his video works, Paik did not expect the museum to permanently maintain **32 Cars for the 20th Century**. Before his death, he declared that the cars could simply be “bulldozed” if their condition deteriorated. While this lenient attitude relieved the museum of the burden of maintaining the work in perpetuity, the fact remains that it is not easy to simply dispose of the cars, which are both works of art and historical objects. Physically and conceptually embodying the twentieth century, this work strongly resonates with those of us living at the turn of the twenty-first century, and I believe it will have the same effect on people at the turn of the twenty-second century, and beyond. I look forward to studying new approaches for overcoming the inherent challenges associated **32 Cars for the 20th Century**, such as transportation costs, spatial limitations, and changing trends in discourse, so that the work can be widely viewed and appreciated long into the future.