



*Re:Paik. On Time, Changeability and Identity in the Conservation of Nam June Paik's Multimedia Installations*

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**RE:PAIK**  
**ON TIME, CHANGEABILITY AND IDENTITY**  
**IN THE CONSERVATION OF NAM JUNE PAIK'S MULTIMEDIA**  
**INSTALLATIONS**

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**Résumé**

As no other artworks, multimedia installations that have been created since the 1960s and that are comprised of a wide range of components test the ruling conventions in conservation, presentation and museum practices. Through the cycles of their materialisations, performed and performative qualities, on and off status, distributed authorship and with the involvement of display and playback apparatus, various formats of film and video, sculptural and painted elements, organic components and photography they dispute the validity of what has for decennia been understood under the notion of a static, unique or singular 'conservation object.'

Consequently, the thesis poses questions that consider the constitution of 'conservation objects' in relation to our understanding of what the artwork is and how it functions within a certain historical moment. Furthermore, it engages with the aspects of transformation of multimedia artworks and installations with regard to their nature and behaviour. Departing from the issues involved in conservation, and looking through the prism of the history of techniques, material culture studies and my professional background as a conservator, I pose questions with both philosophical and historical ramifications concerning what, in the case of multimedia artworks and installations, the artwork is in relation to the change it experiences and how this might affect our understanding of time in which and as which the change occurs. A crucial role in this discussion is played by the rethinking of time in conservation through its intrinsically changeable 'objects,' as well as by the consideration of the archive as a final destination of artworks, but also as their beginning.

The focus of this thesis is on Nam June Paik's multimedia artworks and installations as representative of proto new media. Paik (1932 – 2006) is one of the most manifold media artists when it comes to his selection of material, constant readiness to test the implementation of new technologies and cross-boundary activities. Due to the variety and historical specificity of the media he uses, Paik can be regarded as a key figure in relation to the questions of the presentation, maintenance and conservation of a wide range of media art installations in the institutional domain. My engagement with his oeuvre owes much to his pioneering role in the introduction of video, television and global communication technologies to the visual arts and their implications for the transformation of the understanding of material uniqueness embedded in an object that endures. A further reason for choosing this topic was my professional involvement as a museum conservator at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in the care and presentation of one of the major collections of Paik's artworks in Europe.

This thesis is built on three pillars that reflect three stages of my intellectual involvement with time, changeability and identity in Paik's artworks. Part one is

concerned with a basic analysis of what is at stake when observing trajectories of Paik's two distinct works – *Arche Noah* (1989) and *TV Garden* (1974) – using a linear narrative. The second part takes on the aspect of the changeability of artworks under the consideration of the many variants extrinsic and intrinsic to the works; it introduces three encounters with *Zen for Film* (1962–64), and conducts a critical contestation with the notion of time that underpins conservation and its 'objects.' At the highest level of my argument, opened with the philosophical fable of the Ship of Theseus, the third part of the thesis resolves the question of the identity of changeable artworks and is a plea for the necessary engagement of conservation with the archive as the site where this identity is produced. The development of my argument is underpinned by the introduction of further multimedia artworks that supplement and expand upon the main examples.

In **Part I *Concept and Materiality***, by tracing the changeability of artworks, their diverse embodiments and incarnations, I problematise the relation of their identity to the processes of transformation they undergo. The novelty of my approach lies in the way I reconsider the very materiality of complex media installations with reference to their conceptual dimension from the perspective of their conservation. In studying media installations of the 1960–90s, I observe commonalities with early conceptual art in the 1960–70s, to name a few: the importance assigned to the pure idea, the presence of instruction, score and/or a certificate, delegation of the material realisation (fabrication), and the simultaneous existence of a number of physical realisations of a concept in time. The idea of delegated labour is explored in the notion of 'extended collaborations' that apply to Paik's (historically changing) practices. In tracing Paik's extensive network of fabricators, collaborators and, later, following his death in 2006, the custodians of his legacy, I revisit the concept of the studio, explore Paik's factory in Cincinnati and test the applicability of film theories to his collaborative practices.

In their changeability, multimedia installations appear as complex entities that embody different stances in relation to space and time; they are – following Umberto Eco's concept of an open work – works in progress, committed to an everlasting process of becoming. Their behaviour is similar to musical performance as they reject the adaptation of common notions of nominal authenticity applicable to traditional visual arts. Following the musical analogy, and referring to Richard Taruskin's critique of authenticity in music, I examine the role of the historical instrumentalisation in the understanding of the authentic artwork based on score or instruction and look into the ways Randall R. Dipert's higher and lower intentionality might play a role in this process. Making use of Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols, I examine the applicability of the notion of allographic and autographic art to Paik's multimedia. In my project, I propose a different approach to installations – as allographic works experiencing autographic moments.

The association with music as a temporal form of art and the concept of indeterminism propagated in New Music has led my thinking towards changeability as a phenomenon occurring in connection with time in **Part II *Time and Changeability***. I address changeability as a potentiality of the artwork to change, including a fundamental change as a historical practice. Independently of its desirability, which is subject to judgment, changeability goes beyond the notion of variability that presupposes sameness rather than difference and variation within set parameters. The extrinsic and intrinsic change in multimedia installations may result in variants of changeability related to the conceptual layer of an artwork, deactivated status in the case of participatory works, aspects of site-specificity and manipulations

of the display and playback apparatus and formats. Finally, in discussing a work's further development, I touch upon the limits of changeability.

Changeability, which is necessarily bound with time, transfers my argument to the consideration of how time relates to objects and their changing conditions, and what position conservation might take in the face of physical and conceptual alterations of artworks. In this section, conservation becomes about time; it engages with the temporal materiality of artworks. To conserve an artwork signifies to deal with the effects that time has bequeathed on the material surface of an artefact as well as on its conceptual layer. Conservation may intend to pause the progress of the passage of time and arrest its traces on the artefact's surface or structure, inducing a deliberate stoppage in its trajectory and thus producing different temporalities; it may also allow for controlled changes in time of sorts, provoking an artificial flow of temporalities. Conservation also involves ways of understanding time. Time seen from the perspective of media installation – fugitive and impermanent materials, reproducibility, multiplicity and changeability – seems to reject the chronological matrix of conventional temporality. I discuss the conventional understanding of time as the method of its measurement and contrast it with time understood in other than sequential and chronological dimensions. Without dismissing the somewhat linear progress of ageing and decay, I have found, among a large body of philosophical concepts related to it, the Bergsonian theory of *duration* – and its continuation in the thinking of Gilles Deleuze – helpful in rethinking the temporalities of artworks in ways other than those of linearity, continuity and permanence that have tended to lie behind the assumptions of conservation. Revisiting the notions of a singular condition of a 'conservation object,' reversibility, minimal intervention, and the freeze paradigm, I trace back the implicit notion of time that has tended to underpin conservation. The 'captive moment' of the registration record, stasis rather than dynamism, becomes the focus of my temporal critique of conservation. Lastly, I take on the Bergsonian idea of the coexistence of various temporalities to analyse the temporality of TV, film, video and multimedia artworks. This also leads me to the acknowledgment of both the heterotemporal nature of multimedia, and of the difference between the time internal to and produced by the object to the time of the outside. The way in which artworks undergo change is expressed in them slower- and faster, and, respectively, passively and actively responding to time. I propose to regard multimedia installations as artworks that actively respond to time, as opposed to artworks that are essentially about decay and ageing, which, like technological ruins, are in accordance with the time of the outside. My concept of the conservation narrative, which leans on Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, connects the various temporalities involved in multimedia artworks. I extend Ricoeur's phenomenological time to technological time as a fundamental dimension of the human and one of the inner times of the object, where outer time involves physical processes such as ageing and decay that are not produced essentially by human intervention. The role of conservation narratives is to mediate these kinds of time through meaningful emplotment – a storytelling that may become explicated in the narrative of conservation documentation, the artwork's biography or even reside tacitly in the sphere of as yet unarticulated knowledge.

Pushing the idea of the temporal materiality of multimedia installations further, I have discovered that time governs not only objects but also their archive. This moves the argument onto the last part of the thesis: **Part III *Archive and Identity***. Being both of time and of material, as an index of evolving attitudes towards objects and subjects, contingency of time, discourse and culture, the archive takes on

an active role in creating the identity and maintaining the continuity of works of art. In its physical form, it harbours a variety of documentation of the work's past manifestations – reports, instructions, scores, contracts, correspondence and manuals. I trace various loci of archival information and sketch a decentralised, dispersed image of an archive both within and beyond museum walls. The archive, in my thinking, also takes on a non-physical dimension of tacit knowledge, memory, skill and metadata related to its own functionality. It solves the problem of the division of the concept and material with which my thesis began, and harbours the artwork's identity. Following different theories of persistence of identity through time, (either the mereological theory of identity or to the spatio-temporal continuity of objects), the archive allows the identity of multimedia installations to persist despite the experienced change. The decisions on the limits of changeability, or the acceptability of sameness or diversity of a changeable artwork are dependent on judgements. Borrowing the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* and its appropriation by Hannah Arendt, I explore how, distinct from traditional conservation ethics and in relation to works where it is impossible to apply old scenarios and principles, conservation decisions are based on judgements taking account of the specific situation and implementing not only rational and practical knowledge, but also using analogy with similar cases. Furthermore, I propose that multimedia installations are actualised on the basis of the physical and non-physical dimension of the archive. In a discussion concerning conservation's engagement with the archive, and moving away from the constraints of the realisation related to the *possibility* rather than *potentiality*, I use the dialectic of the virtual and actual derived from the philosophical projects of Bergson and Deleuze. The actualisation, which Bergson equates with creation, takes place on the basis of the archive only in the present and is only momentary mono-directional. New iterations of artworks produced from the archive in turn enter the archive and transform it; thus the formation of the archive is itself recursive. Conservation is henceforth no longer the return to a past 'original state,' or an occupation with the distant past, but rather, in its emancipated form, an active and creative 'presencing' of artworks; it is the creation of the archive that will guide future iterations. With implications reaching far beyond Paik's multimedia, the archive is the final destination of artworks; it is however, also their beginning, a dynamic source that – depending on judgment, ruling conventions and culture – prescribes, sustains and contains an artwork's identity.