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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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# **I. CONCEPT AND MATERIALITY**

## Weighing up the Concept and Material in Multimedia Installations

The practice of conservation and re-installation of a multimedia work of art often faces the problem of its existence as a concept and as a material object simultaneously. Frequently, artworks rematerialise anew with the help of new elements of technological equipment and other constituents on the occasion of subsequent exhibition projects. The reason for this is often sought in and explained by their 'conceptual' character. Yet, while observing these various materialisations, the following needs to be considered: What does it mean exactly that a multimedia artwork exists as a concept? And how does the concept of such an artwork relate to its materialisation?<sup>63</sup> In this zone of great fluidity, definitions can fall flat. Whereas the material manifestations of artworks are clearly identifiable and might be translated into the language of documentation, instruction or script, their concept often appears encoded or enigmatic. The more fluid dimension of a pure idea, unless materialised, bears potentially unexhausted possibilities of realisation, fleeting in the creative sphere of the artist's mind. Moreover, its realisation does not prevent its further development, expressed often in the changing occurrence of works intended by the maker. In the enduring state of becoming, it holds a 'manual' for work-defining properties, a significant portion of the constitution of the artwork. What cannot be left unmentioned, however, is a possible pitfall of the strict opposition of a concept and material, since once artworks based on concept become materialised, their existence as a concept may be questioned. As the art critic and media theorist Boris Groys puts it, 'every art is material and can be only material.'<sup>64</sup>

The focus of this section on *Concept and Materiality* will be on the relation between the conceptual and the material aspects of Paik's installations, which is crucial both for understanding their nature and for thinking about possible conservation strategies that will take into account their future lives. In this part, the thesis sets off to explore the basic level of the museum's daily practice and questions that arise when dealing with multimedia, subsequently seeking possible solutions in both the historical and ontological context. Exploring the materiality of multimedia beyond their pure material aspects, I discuss in detail the history of the reinstallations of two of Paik's multimedia artworks, *Arche Noah* and *TV Garden*. I go on to compare examples of Paik's media art with some tenets of early conceptual art. This leads to the question of the implications for approaches to the conservation of works of art where the concept is contained in a set of instructions or something resembling a 'score'. Furthermore, rather than taking the musical connection to media art for granted, I consider

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63 In a debate that arose in effect of Paik's exhibition at the Tate Liverpool in 2010, the blurred boundaries between material and conceptual aspects of Paik's works are referred to as a 'lazy path of conceptuality'. Charles Turner, "December/January Theme on CRUMB: Nam June Paik," comment on Jon Ippolito, January 23, 2011 (4:01 p.m.) NEW-MEDIA-CURATING, accessed December 9, 2012, [www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind1101&L=new-media-curating&D=0&P=12528](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind1101&L=new-media-curating&D=0&P=12528).

64 Boris Groys, "Introduction: Global Conceptualism Revisited," *e-flux* 29 (11/2011), accessed November 11, 2010, [www.e-flux.com/journal/introduction%E2%80%94global-conceptualism-revisited/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/introduction%E2%80%94global-conceptualism-revisited/).

the origins of Paik's approach in his early involvement with Fluxus and New Music, and how this leads to questions of the relationships between the heterogeneous elements of his installations. I conclude by considering whether Umberto Eco's concept of the open work is helpful in understanding the ontological status of such works of art, and what implications this might have for the notion that the conservator should steer clear of the creative process.<sup>65</sup> Does the conservator, together with the curator and the assistants involved in installation, not become a collaborator in the materialisation of the concept of an open work?–

In the following discussion, two installations represent the correlation between the conceptual and material properties of a multimedia installation. *Arche Noah* (1989), from the collection of the ZKM, is an artwork that has been acquired and develops its trajectory in a context of one particular (museum) collection. It undergoes what I will call a process of 'musealisation' in which it is adapted to the constraints of a museum institution, its maintenance, habits and procedures. From this point onwards, seemingly untouchable and apparently 'preserved,' the work reaches a stage of transformation that questions the conventions of a classical museum approach to traditional collectable objects. The second artwork that I discuss concerns one of Paik's most popular multimedia installations entitled *TV Garden* (1974). It is particularly interesting for the discussion on the duality of concept and material in multimedia installations due to their assumed conceptual properties and infinite, as it may initially appear, potential for their modification. In contrast to *Arche Noah*, the physicality of which is expressed in sculptural elements, *TV Garden* comprises only exchangeable and modifiable components. This, on the one hand, eases the maintenance and re-installations of the piece on the occasion of various exhibitions, and, on the other, complicates the situation when it comes to questions of defining its nature. At times, the tangible material objects, being ingredients of a piece and shaping its occurrence, become contingent and malleable; the installation floats between the initial concept and an indefinite number of its modifications. These issues are made even more complex by the fact that *TV Garden*, in the course of the almost forty years of its lifespan, has entered the collections of three different institutions. This allows us to observe how heterogeneous stakeholders contribute to its transferability and changeability. In generating an institution-specific identity of the works, collections, as it becomes evident in this particular case, have a strong impact on how media installations are re-installed, conserved and stored, and the way in which they are presented for perception by the spectator.

Bringing together *TV Garden* and *Arche Noah* reveals, depending on one's perspective, as many similarities as differences. It would be too simplistic to see in this decision only the visual similarity in the decorative compilation of plants and TV sets. As I will explain, the

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65 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Harvard: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1989). For the prohibition of conservation (restoration) to enter the creative process, see Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, 62; and Barassi, "Dreaming of a Universal Approach."

relation of their material manifestations to the concept presents an intriguing combination of the outmost unexpected modification and the artist's (erratic) intentionality on the one hand, and presupposed variability and implications of verbal instructions on the other.

In creating the stories of *Arche Noah* and *TV Garden*, I found chronological accounts of their changeable lives in this stage of my argument helpful. Most importantly, however, I abstain from the evaluation of any of their occurrences, which will become crucial for the later discussion on alternative ways of understanding time in conservation (chapter 6).

Discussing both artworks I will shift my role from an actively involved conservator, in the case of *Arche Noah*, to an observer, in the case of *TV Garden*. Due to the former, I will attempt to present an overview of how decisions have been made and how transformation processes are triggered by the system of the museum institution. This example also reflects the lack of documentation and the necessity of the reconstruction on the basis of pictorial data and oral recounting that took place on the occasion of this thesis. In the latter, I will remain an observer, a researcher being involved in an archival exploration in three institutions in possession of *TV Garden*. Simultaneously, I base my account on archival records and assemble an archive, drawing from a wide range of resources.