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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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CHAPTER 4.

ZEN FOR FILM

4.1. Zen in Three Episodes

No.1 In a slightly darkened museum room I am standing in front of a white screen that fills a rectangular wall with a proportional cinematic rectangle. The image seems to diffuse towards its edges, its contour soft, its corners slightly curved. The film projector clatters relentlessly transporting a filmstrip through its inward mechanics, pushing its plastic body tooth by tooth through perforations – a rather monotone, yet persistently present mechanical ‘soundtrack.’ The machine is located on a pedestal slightly below my eye level; I feel the warmth it produces. The shutter interrupts the emitted light during the time the film is advanced to the next frame, unnoticeable but somewhat palpable. The projection is almost clear and at first sight static. I am attending the event standing inert, without any expectation of an image appearing – I have experienced the event before. Time lapses; on the screen of my imagination the whiteness delineates Paik’s black silhouette on the white background of this projection, from fifty years ago. In the next take Godard projects his imaginary pictures on the same blank screen. Thinking about the film’s physiology, I am trying to imagine how – in the perceptual process of my brain and on my retina – the image retains, evoking an illusion of the motion rather than an observation of singular frames. Yet nothing happens; I am observing the whiteness. I close my eyes and see a black negative of the projected surface. I am back to vision. People pass by, and in some sense able to register non-verbal cues I register their scepticism. Their shadows move away from the projected image unnoticed, effaced. I keep my view engaged on the whiteness. This contemplation pays out, gradually, when I realise that the whiteness, rather than showing nothing, contains random information – dark traces of different kinds appearing occasionally: smudges, particles, shadows. The eyes – I think – are somewhat trained to overlook this evidence of film’s materiality. It occurs to me that the longer my observation endures, the more I can see, the more that appears on the initially very hygienic projection. On the abstract bright ‘canvas’ of the image vertical smudges emerge: hairs, blurry greyish stains. In staccato, the image darkens and lightens slightly following the mechanic motion of the projector. I am drawn to its physicality, the audio of its mechanical

processes of display, the sober intensity of non-illusory real time, and the way in which it imposes contemplation and requires engaged spectatorship before it reveals itself.

No.2 A white cubic space right behind the passage from one part of an exhibition to another is enlightened by a perfectly bright rectangular image. I hardly noticed the entrance while passing through noisy displays and being overrun by various impressions of flickering, visual richness. I enter the room; I stand still; I wait. Nothing happens. Beethoven's *Mondscheinsonate* enters the space from the neighbouring video installation (perhaps *Global Groove*). The image projected in front of me is white, perfectly rectangular, showing regular, sharply-cut edges. It seems to just be there, unaffected by anything happening around it or anyone in the room; a white flag of pristine image. Slowly, somewhere from behind, the unobtrusive humming presence of a digital projector becomes recognisable. As I turn away from the image towards the source of the light, I can see the projector located right below the ceiling in the upper centre of the wall. I sit down on a chair situated beneath the projector. I sit and wait. My eyes hurt from the whiteness. The word 'hospitality' appears in my mind. I sense hospitality in the way I was received in this room, on that chair, but I also register the uncanny impression of being in a place ruled by emptiness and hygienic precaution – a hospital. I can hear lively sounds from behind the walls, a world reserved for somewhere or something else, and I am haunted by an unfulfilled wish to hear and see more, which becomes an unbearable disruption.

No.3 I bend over to view a round film can in a vitrine at an exhibition. The can is slightly open, and concealing a roll of a transparent film stock – barely recognisable. For a while I observe it, studying its dimensions and form, the stains of oxidation on the can's lid and some traces of tape once applied. The film itself is not particularly visible. I recall an online image depicting a similar can and two transparent boxes with film leaders, apparently a replacement for the loop wound on the reel. It occurs to me, all of a sudden, that there is hardly any difference between this film presented in front of me in a sealed museum vitrine and the virtual version delivered from a server somewhere. Both are distant, both deactivated, both a potentiality rather than an actuality. Still, gazing at the object behind the glass, I attempt to project this film onto the apparatus of my imagination and guess what it contains. What would it reveal if I were able to view it? I imagine the sound accompanying the projection and me inspecting the projecting device in the position enabling me to see the full image and its source at the same time. Yet the film I am looking at is still, somewhat useless, enclosed twofold in the can and in the museum vitrine – a sign of its valuable and exceptional status. I am neither able to view it, nor smell it. It is isolated from me and the surrounding exhibition – still and static, an artefact, or relic, one part of an unknown whole, a stagnated remnant of an unfulfilled spectacle.

The work described – *Zen for Film*, which Paik conceived sometime in 1962 – is one of the most fascinating examples of a Fluxus film. It is a prototypical Fluxus film, comprising originally around 1000 feet of a clear 16mm leader that was projected on a screen. Striped to its barest essentials – the film stock itself – it was an anti-film, which, following Cage's idea of non-sound-music, revealed nothing other than its own material qualities and the noises of a loop running endlessly through a projector.

I have chosen to describe my impressions from viewing *Zen for Film* in three episodes, matching exactly my three different encounters with this work. The first episode relates to *Zen for Film* (No.1, analogue film loop, film projector) exhibited on the occasion of the show *Bild für Bild – Film und zeitgenössische Kunst* at the Museum Ostwall, Dortmund U in Dortmund (12 December 2010 – 25 April 2011, Fig. 4.1), the second (No.2, digital video projection, 8 min, loop) – in the exhibition *Nam June Paik: Video Artist, Performance Artist, Composer and Visionary* at Tate Liverpool (17 December 2010 – 13 March 2011, Fig. 4.2), while the third describes *Zen for Film* (No.3, canned film reel) encountered in the exhibition *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 – 1989* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (30 January – 19 April 2009, Fig. 4.3). The three forms of *Zen for Film* could not be more different – the first is a filmic projection, the second a digital projection and the third a film reel. Yet they carry the same title and claim to be the same work of art.

Zen for Film in Museum Ostwall (No. 1) was loaned from Centre Pompidou and consisted of a filmstrip (a loop) run through a film projector. Resembling closely the early concept of *Zen for Film* from the *Fluxhall* festival, the artwork exposes the process of collecting traces and aspects of cinematic event as a possibility of experience, which I address thoroughly in the following paragraphs.

The Tate Liverpool variant of *Zen for Film* (No. 2) is an example of a rather controversial instance of physical manipulation, in which the analogue film projection became a digital file beamed on the wall in the frozen condition of a hygienic, empty light rectangle. The wall caption revealed that *Zen for Film* is a single-channel video, black and white, silent, eight minutes in duration. Apparently a curatorial decision, the projection included a digital version of the film that lacked the materiality of filmic spectacle. The indication on a wall label also includes the reference 'courtesy of the Electronic Art Intermix, EAI, New York.' EAI, in fact, distributes a digital file of *Zen for Film*; its database caption reveals: 'Zen for Film, 1962–64, 8 min, b&w, silent.'⁶ Interestingly, both the EAI and the Tate captions hint at Paik's description of his film as a 'clear film, accumulating in time dust and scratches.'⁷ Whereas the EAI description read in an online catalogue might serve as information for educational purposes, the Tate Liverpool installation claims a status of *Zen for Film* and signifies a mutation of the artist's initial intention contained in the choice of a certain materiality of

6 EAI online database, accessed January 02, 2012, <http://eai.org/title.htm?id=11976>.

7 Ibid.; and author's documentation of the Tate show.

display. Clearly, the viewer is not seeing what the description promises, which is nowadays symptomatic for a number of exhibitions that include moving images, where DVD projections substitute film (often in the case of Warhol). So *Zen for Film* became, despite the absence of the film projector, an installation with a finite relation to time – the loop has been transferred through the digital file with the clear determination of duration, or a partial ‘documentation’ of the work, as it were, a digital palimpsest of one of its screenings. The infinite loop projecting itself endlessly, or a film leader, ceased to exist, lending a different element to the conceptual layer of the work. The progress of collecting traces of its usage – the witness of endless hours of ‘analogue’ display intrinsic to the initial concept of *Zen for Film* – has been neglected with its digitisation, which reveals traces other than just scratches, dust and chance events – but rather digital forms of decay. Additionally, the transformation into digital video projection has a further implication: the screening becomes ‘silent,’ a radical reinterpretation of the initially rich sound experience dictated by the clattering mechanics of the projector. The cinematic character of this analogue medium, like the experience of duration, has ceased to exist. As I will explain in section 5.5, the noise of the apparatus may gain great importance and be considered as preservable in the form of a recording. Clearly, stripping *Zen for Film* of the audible qualities of its mechanics is a radical gesture.

The film can encasing an empty film leader (No.3) is a remnant of film projections of the 1960s and stems from the Silverman Fluxus Collection at MoMA, New York. Cage recalls that Paik invited his partner, the avant-garde dancer Merce Cunningham, to his studio on Canal Street to watch a ‘one hour long imageless film.’⁸ It was a deactivated element of the earlier projection, with which time has a simple relation to things that decay. As Jon Hendricks, Fluxus artist and curator of the Lilla and Gilbert Silverman Fluxus Collection, reveals, the Silverman Fluxus Collection holds the only film version of *Zen for Film*.⁹ According to Hendricks, it was played only twice and when the work was loaned for external exhibitions it was not allowed to be played due to its brittle and fragile condition. With the approval of the executor of Paik’s estate, Ken Hakuta, the work was presented increasingly often in a film can, whereas the projection of a new film leader (a loop) took place on a historical film projector. Hendricks legitimises this by claiming that *Zen for Film*, being an experience rather than an object, is about the reconstruction of an experience, and that the usage of the old leader, which lies safely in the can, is unnecessary for this reconstruction.¹⁰

8 John Cage, “Zum Werk von Nam June Paik,” in *Nam June Paik. Video Time – Video Space*, eds. Toni Stooss and Thomas Kellein (Ostfildern-Ruit: Edition Cantz, 1991), 22.

9 Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection is considered one of the largest and most significant worldwide and was acquired by MoMA in 2008.

10 Hendricks recalls a video version of *Zen for Film* that was created in the past and which he a posteriori classifies as a radical misinterpretation: ‘We did make a video copy of *Zen for Film*, which is against the idea of the piece, I think. It is better to get the film leader projected and recover the experience, exactly the same experience that people had 50 years ago. We have the projector, the sound of the projector; perhaps we do not have the smoke in the room, but we have the clear, beautiful projection.’ Hendricks, discussion.

In the course of my research for this thesis, I also encountered *Zen for Film* in the form of a *multiple* – an object, as the name suggests, that exists as an edition comprising a transparent box with a short strip of a film leader.¹¹ (Fig. 4.4) Was it a replacement for the film run through the projector or was it an object in its own right? I asked myself this up until October 2012 when I was able to hold the filmstrip in my hands.¹² The yellowed film was obviously too brittle and fragile to be projected.¹³ The answer to this and other questions can only be sought by looking more closely in the following sections at the logic behind *Zen for Film* and its emergence in the broader context.

The encounters presented with *Zen for Film* open up the question of what the artwork is in relation to the change it has experienced. This question relates to the artwork's identity, meaning what is at stake if we face its conservation – an experience, an object, a projection or a relic, or perhaps all of these – simultaneously? Furthermore, it opens up the aspect of the changeability that pushes the limits of what can be understood as still the same object and when it becomes something else. Can a work of art invite a change by its very nature? The different forms of exhibiting *Zen for Film* also raise the question of how curation – as a strategy of presenting the artwork to the viewer – may influence its changeability by the choice of certain technology. These different forms also question how an artwork functions within a certain historical moment when the availability of technology dictates its aesthetic qualities, and, in the same vein, when this technology changes following the unstoppable process of its development. In the course of this chapter, and the following two, I will attempt to answer these questions.

4.2 The Event, Object and Process: *Zen for Film* (1962–64)

Zen for Film is an example of one of many artworks that share the same fate in contemporary collections and pose striking questions about its status, identity and, just as much, about its material authenticity. But what exactly is *Zen for Film*?

Zen for Film was really 'born' into the world during the influential six-week Fluxus festival – Fluxhall – at Maciunas' loft on New York's Canal Street on 8 May, 1964.¹⁴ The

11 The multiple was part of the exhibition *Thing/Thought: Fluxus Editions, 1962–1978* at MoMA, New York (21 September 2011 – 16 January 2012). The exhibition catalogue "FLUXUS" published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel (21 August – 31 October 1994), describes this variant as: '*Zen for Film*, 1964, Fluxus Edition, Plastic Box containing 16mm leader loop 3x12x9'.

12 Erik Andersch Collection, Nam June Paik Art Center.

13 The degradation processes of a film relates to its composition. Whereas polyester stock is rather stable and only embrittles when exposed to certain atmospheric conditions (ambient light and weather), in the case of nitrate stock, the tri-acetate deterioration include a 'vinegar syndrome' (the acetic acid affects the film base) and a colour shift towards red spectrum. For an analytic essay on the characteristics and degradation of a polyester film, see Hanna Szczepanowska and Wayne Wilson, "Permanency of Reprographic Images on Polyester Film," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation JAIC* 39/3 (2000).

14 Bruce Jenkins, "Fluxfilm in Three False Starts," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing/Afterall, 2008), 68–71.

work's early history may be reconstructed on the basis of photographs, such as the little known photograph taken by Peter Moore during the *Fluxhall* festival.¹⁵ It reveals that the first screening of *Zen for Film*, as Bruce Jenkins puts it, barely filled 'half of a home movie-sized screen that was positioned at the front of the loft space adjacent to an upright piano and a double bass,¹⁶ evoking a home-movie atmosphere. Yet the most prominent photograph, which shows Paik facing the screen and casting his shadow on the projection, was taken by Moore during the New Cinema Festival I, Filmmakers' Cinematheque in New York on 2 November 1965 (Fig. 4.5).¹⁷

As an imageless and anti-illusionist work, *Zen for Film* circumvented the traditional technologies of production and employment of actors, camera, montage, script, sets and narrative in a conventional sense. It presented the viewer with an effect of a pure electric light meeting the flatness of the surface on which it was projected and filtered only through a transparent film leader. The image contemplated by the spectator would thus consist of light, but its impression would at first sight be perceived as apparently static whiteness, an image that, in the age of analogue projectors, might well have signified a failure in projection, a rapture of the filmstrip, a non-image. At first glimpse, and partially rightly, *Zen for Film* appears as being far from presenting a viewer with complicated imaginary associations requiring decipherment. Yet in its simplistic, reduced demonstration of pure material qualities, the work demands an immediate and careful apprehension of the relational dynamics of time in which the psychophysical world immerses. What is at stake here are at least three kinds of temporalities: the intrinsic temporality of the projector with its ability to manipulate time by means of the very projection, the temporality of the film leader that is determined by the number of traces gathered during the repetitive circulation (its replacements signifying new sequences of alteration) and, last but not least, the temporality of the viewer perceiving the spectacle. In these entangled temporalities of subject and object, the projection of film becomes a performance, or, in other words, Paik puts the screening of his film on display. While Paik's film is collecting traces in a rather processual manner, the point is not so much about the object marked by time that results from this procedure, but rather the cinematic performance, which has the character of an event that cannot be experienced in the same form at another time – it has a temporal singularity. As opposed to the traditional cinema of illusion, where the time of the narrative takes primacy over any other temporality, the time in *Zen for Film* – in the vein of materialistic film – becomes tangible.

The audience plays a crucial role in Paik's spectacle in that it participates in and witnesses the chance process of alteration of the film unfolding each time in a different

15 For the image of the world premiere of Paik's *Zen for Film* during Fluxhall, see Jenkins, *ibid.*, 69.

16 *Ibid.*, 68.

17 "Zen for Film," database of the Nam June Paik Art Center, accessed June 26, 2012, <http://db.njpartcenter.kr/en/collections/show.asp?id=285&pos=1&page=1&query=zen+for+film&type=all&search=2>; and Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2000), 75.

manner. For once it is not involved in the conventional side of cinema, the side of the illusion and narrative (where the material of the film seems to disappear), but rather it stays on the less conventional side of the cinematic event, experiencing the materiality of the process of projection in the immateriality of the process of perception. This is perhaps the moment when the difference between 'looking' and 'seeing' becomes most discernible.¹⁸ The moment of spectatorship is not determined, making it possible to view the alteration of the loop either in its different stages of advancement or in its continuity, duration – its becoming. While the physicality of *Zen for Film* is being processed by the projector in the play of patterns and transformations, the consequent repetition of their sequence evokes a feeling of boredom. Paik's film follows Fluxus' attempt to reach the state of immersion that lies in the repetition, following Cage's assertion that, despite repetition, there is always change.¹⁹ Furthermore, *Zen for Film* reflects Dick Higgins' philosophy of *intermedia*, a concept that entails artistic activities between various genres and media.²⁰ The certain lack of fixity of this work oscillates between materiality and ephemerality, a non-film and film, cinematic event and a sculpture, an 'object', process and an environment, in line with Brecht's conviction of their interchangeability: 'every object is an event and every event has an object-like quality.'²¹ This also recalls the discussion from the previous chapter on the performed and sculptural qualities of multimedia.

The 'Zen' in the title suggests an involvement with the Zen Buddhist condition, which aims at attaining a profound unification with the world by abandoning one's own preconceptions of it and being able to perceive things as they manifest themselves in their 'fullness of being.'²² Similar to a number of artists at this time, Paik felt close to Zen aesthetics. Although Paik's Korean roots may suggest otherwise, the most powerful influence was in Paik's case indirect. In an interview with Otto Hahn (1992) Paik contended:

18 This distinction was made by Brecht and has been taken up by Jacques Rancière in the interview by Christian Kobald and Richard Steuer. Rancière claims that the pure gaze perceiving the appearance of the artwork is distinct from the act of seeing that has access to reality. Christian Kobald and Richard Steuer, "Nobody Ever Thought That Art Would be Somewhere Outside the Class Struggle: Interview with Jacques Rancière," *Spike 21* (2009): 28-35.

19 This echoes Gilles Deleuze's argument that 're-petition opposes re-presentation: the prefix changes its meaning, since in the one case difference is said only in relation to the identical, while in the other it is the univocal which is said of the different' (*Difference and Repetition*, 1968). Accordingly, if there was no difference in repetition, things would be identical: repetition is opposed to the fixity and identity of representation. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 57.

20 Intermedia include, among others, visual poetry or performance art. Higgins sought an inspiration in Duchamp's blurring media boundaries activities and valued continuity over categorisation. Dick Higgins, "Statement on Intermedia," in *Dé-coll/age*, ed. Wolf Vostell (Frankfurt: Typos and New York: Something Else Press, 1967).

21 Herman Asselberghs, "Beyond the Appearance of Imagelessness: Preliminary Notes on Zen for Film's Enchanted Materialism," *Afterall* Autumn/Winter (2009), accessed May 20, 2012, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.22/beyond.the.appearance.of.imagelessness.preliminary.notes.on.zen.for.films.enchanted.materialism>.

22 David Doris, "Zen Vaudeville. A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 94.

I am an artist. ... Because I am a friend of John Cage, people tend to see me as a Zen monk. ... I'm not a follower of Zen but I react to Zen in the same way as I react to Johann Sebastian Bach.²³

As I argued in section 3.1, Cage, whose spiritual dominance was unequivocal in Paik's works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, was clear in expressing his attachment to Zen.²⁴ Cage created a method of composition based on works of Zen artists, isolating the element of chance and providing random information based on procedures derived from *I Ching*, the *Classic of Changes*, an ancient Chinese book. As he later moved away from it, he commenced testing methods of indeterminate compositions, fully or partially silent scores, scores based on star maps, following the motto 'just let the sounds be themselves.'²⁵ One of the most famous Cage' compositions – 4'33" has precisely these origins, sharing the idea of both Zen aesthetics and indeterterminism with Paik's *Zen for Film*. I will return to this point shortly.

Although Zen originated in China in the sixth century and only later spread to Korea and Japan, the kind of Zen that reached the artistic circles in America was of Japanese origins.²⁶ It was Daisetz Taitaro Suzuki, Japanese scholar and author of books and essays on Buddhism, Zen and Shin, who was so essential in spreading far Eastern philosophy in the West. He was teaching at Columbia University, among others and his lectures were attended by Cage (1949–51), a catalyst for the later 'cagean revolution.' Although it can be said that Paik's position to Zen is ambivalent,²⁷ Zen Buddhism imprinted its mark on Paik's oeuvre, exemplified by Suzuki's withdrawal from pictorial content, the seeing of Nothing as being the real, eternal seeing.²⁸ In an interview with Justin Hoffman (Wiesbaden 22 May, 1989), Paik explained his attitude towards eastern thought for aesthetic reasons. In the case of the 'Zen' in *Zen for TV*, for instance, he maintained: "The title is an artistic coincidence, you know. It is a beautiful title."²⁹

Zen for Film shares a number of aspects with Zen compositions such as suggesting the inherent nature of an aesthetic object by the simplest possible means, understanding the

23 Quotation: The Guggenheim Museum website, accessed October 10, 2012, http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/thirdmind/paik_bio.swf. See also Rhee, "Reconstructing the Korean Body," 48.

24 Slavko Kacunko, *Closed Circuit Videoinstallationen: Ein Leitfaden zur Geschichte und Theorie der Medienkunst mit Bausteinen eines Künstlerlexikons auf DVD* (Berlin: Logos, 2004), 170.

25 John Cage, *Silence, Lectures and Writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 70.

26 For a discussion of Zen, its birth and alleged split between Northern and Southern schools, and the impact on Fluxus, see Ken Friedman, "Introduction: A Transformative Vision of Fluxus," in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), x.

27 Paik once criticised Suzuki arguing that 'cultural patriotism is more harmful than the political patriotism.' Rhee, "Reconstructing the Korean Body," 48.

28 Nina Zschocke, *Der irritierte Blick: Kunstrezeption und Aufmerksamkeit* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), 313.

29 Nam June Paik and Justin Hoffman, "Interview in a Station Restaurant: Nam June Paik in Conversation With Justin Hoffmann, Wiesbaden, May 22, 1989," in *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music, Electronic Television, Revisited*, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Köln: Walther König Verlag, 2009), 84.

inner nature of an object – its Buddha nature – before emphasising the essence (an artwork is already a work of natural art before the arrival of the artist on the scene), assigning less importance to the execution of the object since the comprehension of the essence renders the technique useless without it, and – also in line with Fluxus – experimentalism. The conceptual quality of *Zen for Film* reflecting Zen’s simplicity might be found in the emphasis of the nature of the filmic medium and the spectacle – one needs a blank film leader and a projector – and in the delegation of the labour; only in this case, Paik delegates the labour to the projector itself, which produces the tangible traces of its own process. Furthermore, in the early 1960s – the heyday of cinephilia and the beginnings of live electronic broadcast (and the time of the strong influence of the aforementioned Truffaut’s *auteur theory*) – it is only a superficial decontrol that Paik’s blank film evokes; in a more profound dimension *Zen for Film* pushes the perceptive abilities of the spectator to the extreme – what is being watched here is an extended dimension of the cinematic *timescape*, an anti-spectacle proximate with but equally too far from whiteness, an epitome of nothingness. Are we watching a no-thing? Are we not watching some-thing?

Zen for Film also known with the subtitle *Fluxfilm No. 1* opened up an entire tradition of Fluxus film experimentations engaged with time, image and the very materiality of the apparatus and its medium.³⁰ I am stating nothing new in saying that – in its enchanted materiality – *Zen for Film* certainly pays homage to Cage’s seminal *4’33”* (1952), in which the musician plays nothing for the entire duration of the piece, letting the ambient sounds of the environment do the work (Fig.4.6).³¹ Its significance lies certainly not only in the novelty of removing the musician’s active involvement, but also in the introduction of the laws of chance, questioning the role of the composer and imposing an agency on the listener. The sheer impossibility of silence in *4’33”* resonates in Paik’s blank film in the impossibility of visual nothingness, emptiness, a point zero; it is, namely, as impossible to experience pure silence as to experience a non-image – as something essentially about transparency, a clear frame proves the impossibility of an empty image.³² In his essay *Indeterminacy* (1973), Cage describes a Chinese poetry contest in which the mind is compared to a mirror collecting dust:

30 For instance, in Jackson Mac Low’s *Tree Movie* (1961), a still camera records a tree for an undetermined amount of time, and Higgins explored the possibility of blank film projection that burns down while being displayed. Ina Blom, “Boredom and Oblivion,” in *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman (Chichester, West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 84. It is also interesting to see how *Zen for Film* resonates in works of other artists such as Christine Kozlov: *No Title (Transparent Film#2)* (1967, transparent film in a can) and much more distant in Joseph Beuys’ *Das Schweigen* (1973) based on Bergman’s canned film. For other works with a focus on nothingness see Swantje Karich, “Ausstellung ‘Nichts:’ Eine Kartoffelen, zwei Kartoffelen” *F.A.Z.* 183, August 29, 2006.

31 Cage’s notorious *4’33”* consists of three ‘tacet’s indicating silence on the part of the performer. During the first performance at Woodstock, New York, on 29 August 1952, the young American pianist, David Tudor, himself a composer of experimental music, divided the piece into three sections marked by the closing and opening of the piano’s lid in intervals of 33”, 2’40”, and 1’20”. For a comparison between *Zen for Film* and *4’33”*, see Asselberghs, “Beyond the Appearance of Imagelessness.”

32 Compare with Asselberghs’ discussion on the empty image. *Ibid.*

‘The Mind is like a mirror, it collects dust. The problem is to remove dust.’ This is continued in another poem that questions: ‘Where is the mirror and where is the dust?’³³ It is striking that, although Paik underlined his close connection to Cage, Cage himself stresses that it is *Zen for Film* that united and, simultaneously, separated Paik and him. According to Cage, Paik’s *Zen for Film* is his ‘4’33”, yet Paik’s stillness was produced in image, whereas Cage’s stillness comes from tone.³⁴

Zen for Film is also – and this is too often overlooked – a tribute to Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* (1951), which chronologically preceded Cage’s most prominent romance with silence (Fig.4.7).³⁵ ‘Offhand, you might say that all three actions are the same. But they are quite different’ stated Cage in reference to Rauschenberg’s, Paik’s and his own work. ‘Nam June Paik’s film which has no images on it, the room is darkened, the film is projected, and what you see is the dust that has collected on the film. I think that’s somewhat similar to the case of Rauschenberg painting, though the focus is more intense.’³⁶ (Fig.4.8) Indeed, in Moore’s photograph taken during the New Cinema Festival I, Paik’s silhouette remains captured as a shadow on the screen of the projection of *Zen for Film*, resembling Rauschenberg’s screens reflecting the slightest of ambient conditions in fleeting impressions.³⁷ Cage – Rauschenberg’s friend and close collaborator – often admitted to being inspired by Rauschenberg’s eccentricity. In his book entitled *Silence* (1973), Cage noticed: ‘The white paintings were airports of the lights, shadows, and particles,’ ‘mirrors of the air,’ seeing in them the substrate for the observation of change and infinite visual possibilities.³⁸ Somewhat naturally ‘Zen,’ the idea for *White Paintings* accords with Rauschenberg’s conviction that ‘a canvas is never empty,’ is mirrored in Cage’s approach to silence, and, subsequently, Paik’s

33 Cage, *Silence*, 272. I was inspired here by the presentation of Andrew Uroskie during the *Film, vidéo, télévision: autour du cinéma de Nam June Paik*, Colloque international, 21 – 22 June 2012, entitled *Situating Expanded Cinema in Post War Art*, in which he pointed to Cage’s statement with reference to *Zen for Film*.

34 Cage, “Zum Werk von Nam June Paik.”

35 The *White Paintings* – created using the simple means of a roller and Latex house paint – became open to re-iterations as a piece based on instruction with the possibility of remaking them ‘all white’ on two, three, four, five and six panels. For the instruction, see Yve-Alain Bois *at al.*, *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2010), 178.

36 Cage on Nam June Paik in exhibition catalogue, Galeria Bonino, New York, 1971 quoted in Herzogenrath, *Nam June Paik: Fluxus, Video*, 150.

37 Interestingly, this gesture has led Christopher Eamon to the interpretation of *Zen for Film* as a film about Paik’s movements within the frame. He also claims that the performer is necessary to complete the work, associating Paik’s film with Robert Whiteman’s *Prune Flat* (1965) and Guy Debord’s *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade* (Howls in Favour of Sade, 1952). Christopher Eamon, “An Art of Temporality,” in *Film and Video Art*, ed. Stuart Comer (London: Tate Publishing: 2009), 66-85.

38 John Cage, *On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work, Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 98-109.

empty film leader.³⁹ Cage maintained that when he first encountered *White Paintings*, he was already thinking about a composition entailing only silence, but it was Rauschenberg's paintings that triggered him to 'immediately respond to them' and finally encouraged the creation of 4'33".⁴⁰ 'Silence, like music, is non-existent' he contended; 'there are always sounds.'⁴¹

There is, however, a deeper level to Paik's cinematic Zen, and one chronologically more distant. Four decades earlier, Duchamp turned against what he called 'retinal art,' an idea that art is intended primarily for the eye, and created a sculpture out of air entitled *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919). It echoed in the beginnings of creations of invisible art, such as Yves Klein's exhibition of 'invisible art' in form of an empty gallery room (1958), air sculptures plans with Jean Tinguely (1958) and, nurturing spatial awareness, plans for *architecture de l'air*.⁴² Another link is provided by László Moholy-Nagy, who, in his treatise *New Vision* (1928) discusses Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918) as a projection surface, virtually ignoring the depiction of the square. Moholy-Nagy maintains: 'Here is to be found the interpretation of Malevich's last picture – the plain white surface, which constituted an ideal plane for kinetic light and shadow effect, which, originating in the surroundings, would fall upon it. In this way, Malevich's picture represents a miniature cinema screen.'⁴³

Despite these many associations and Moore's famous photograph, Paik's film is not about whiteness, rather, it is essentially about transparency and non-transparency.⁴⁴ I will address the loss of transparency, as intrinsically bound to the time in which it occurs, in

39 Joseph W. Branden, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 21. Although Rauschenberg did not confirm his attachment to Zen, Cage expressed: 'I spent years studying and trying to understand Zen. You, you have done nothing of the sort, you are just naturally Zen.' Bérénice Bailly, "'J'aime le mouvement de la main,'" *Le Monde*, August 9, 2005, accessed January 20, 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2005/08/09/robert-rauschenberg-j-aime-le-mouvement-de-la-main_678772_3246.html.

40 SFMOMA, "Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*," John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in the audio guide "The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now," accessed June 14, 2012, http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/audio/aop_tour_404.

41 Branden, *Random Order*.

42 *Invisible. Art about the Unseen. 1957–2012*, exhibition pamphlet (London: Hayward Publishing, 2012).

43 Branden, *Random Order*, 36. Moholy-Nagy quoted in Branden, *ibid*.

44 In Paik's film the process of projecting the light through a filmstrip is more relevant than the apparent, temporary whiteness appearing on the projected surface. So rather than associating the whiteness with Brian O'Doherty's idea of a limbo-like gallery in which things to be exhibited must first die, I propose to look at Paik's projection as being in the state of constant becoming from translucent to opaque, circumventing the unshadowed and clean modernist gallery space. For the idea of a gallery as a limbo-like space, see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 15. The idea of subtraction put forward by the French theorist Alain Badiou in his book *The Century* (2005) may be helpful in understanding Paik's film. Discussing Malevich's *White on White* (1918), Badiou sees in it the epitome of purification, where the colour has been replaced for the geometrical allusion creating a minimal difference, subtraction of what was already there. Paik, too, shares this in the way he takes away the photograms, subtracts the content of the image and renders it something about deterioration. Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 55-57.

section 7.2. Furthermore, it should not be left unmentioned that the three artworks – 4'33", *White Paintings* and *Zen for Film* – all manifest fundamental differences concerning vision (Rauschenberg), sound (Cage) and time (Paik).

Both the Cagean silence and the 'emptiness' of Paik's film projection pose interesting questions related to what exactly there is to be preserved. The presence of a projector (in the majority of the viewed installations *Eiki*) has a rather functional value. We are neither able to capture any certain 'condition' of the work, nor reconstruct the contingent trace. There is no 'object' of conservation, but rather a set of elements evoking certain effects. The solution can only be sought by looking at the processual qualities of the work.

It is striking to what degree Cage's description of Rauschenberg's paintings as projection screens for the ambient noise applies to Paik's *Zen for Film*, which operates on the same level of pure materiality, refusing to provide its audience with a straightforward and pleasant visual illusion and exposing its own constituents not only as a carrier of the visual message but also as a message in itself. It also renders the effects of time visible and alters the way in which we watch moving images as traditional filmstrips, which – just as *Zen for Film*, less exposed and only somewhat visible – inevitably age, collecting scratches, smudges and dust. Drawn to the imaginary illusion, contemplating the depth of what is seen on the screen or following the cinematic narrative, the ageing of film is being overlooked; it does not exist. It appears as magic in front of us. The accumulation of dust on the film leader also recalls Duchamp's and Man Ray's *Dust Breeding* (*Duchamp's Large Glass with Dust Notes*), a photograph of a reverse of *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as *Large Glass*, 1915–23) taken by Duchamp's close friend and collaborator Man Ray in his studio in Broadway, New York, after Duchamp's return from Paris in 1920 (Fig.4.9). In a remarkably beautiful way, Man Ray's photograph captured the texture of the dust formations that laid atop the glass surface divided by delicate lines of lead wire. After the photograph was taken, Duchamp removed the dust by wiping the surface, leaving only a section of the cones covered, affixing it with diluted cement.⁴⁵ What *Zen for Film* and *Dust Breeding* share, despite the obvious ability to accumulate dust – the one as a filmic, the other as a more conventional object – is the emphasis of a process that leads to some contingent end result. Duchamp determines its finitude in a simple gesture of wiping the dust and introducing a stoppage in the process of dust accumulation. This is, simultaneously, concluded by an act of its partial physical 'conservation,' whereby the dust layer in its whole extent is fixed only in Man Ray's photographic image. Paik's film leader requires a similar determination in deciding how many circulations of the strip through the projector still render the film what it was intended to represent, before the random trace accumulation makes it entirely unreadable as a clear projection. It is also a matter of control left to the operator of the work – perhaps

45 *Dust Breeding* may be found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. MET online database, accessed June 14, 2012, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.521>.

a conservator, curator or technician – over the appearance of the projected image. In fact, during my research for this thesis, I was able to experience *Zen for Film* in different stages dictated by various conditions of the filmstrip. For example, during its screening on the occasion of the seminar *Auteur de Zen For Film* in Centre Pompidou in Paris (29 September 2010) the leader was extremely worn out, displaying a large number of particles, smudges and darkish stains, similar to its screening in Nam June Paik Art Center in October 2012. In December 2011, at the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund, Germany, *Zen for Film* was projected in a much ‘younger’ version, revealing a minor number of dust particles and scratches (the artwork was loaned from Centre Pompidou).⁴⁶ These variations between the different states of the leader might well be seen on platforms such as Youtube, Vimeo or UBUWEB in the form of videos recorded on different occasions.⁴⁷

Yet *Dust Breeding* and *Zen for Film* share another vital link, namely the apparent potentiality of their iteration. Richard Hamilton reconstructed *Large Glass* according to the instructions from a *Green Box* (1934) for Duchamp’s retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1966.⁴⁸ The reconstructions do not share with *Large Glass* the breakage of the glass, which happened to it during its shipment on the occasion of an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. In a slightly different way, the iteration of *Zen for Film*’s leader become an obvious gesture and an integral part of its maintenance since the process of display would otherwise become impossible due to the worn-out character of the film. It is not to say, however, that these artworks can be replicated. Both the *Large Glass* with its breakage and the traces on *Zen for Film*’s leader (in terms of experiencing an event) are unreplicable.

In this analytical inquiry of Paik’s clear filmstrip, I cannot resist including another reflection. If there is nothing to conserve in the sense of an ‘object,’ should we conserve the ‘used’ film strips? Would they then become collectables or rather documents that form an evolving archive of the recording of time and mechanic traces of the projector on the celluloid body of the leader?⁴⁹ This would accord with the drive to conserve every piece of material evidence of artworks known from contemporary conservation practice.

White paintings, 4’33”, *Dust Breeding* and *Zen for Film* share here not only the contingency of performance and the processual becoming. They also all pose a very similar question, namely the one of an impossibility to capture chance events and arresting the moment as essential for a traditional conservation approach, which I will discuss shortly.

46 Exhibition *Bild für Bild*.

47 Interestingly, while watching these mostly low-quality recordings taken frequently using a mobile phone camera, it becomes obvious that the attention of the viewer/cameraman is directed to the image rather than to the projector (which is visible on these videos rather sporadically), thus dismissing its role in the aesthetic whole of the work.

48 The work has also been reconstructed by Ulf Linde and Per Olof Ultvedt for Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1961, and, subsequently, by Linde in 1990-91.

49 Interestingly, however, when it comes to the film roll in the can, Hendricks refers to it as a relic: ‘you can see it and you can imagine what it is.’ Hendricks, discussion.

Whereas Duchamp seemed to find a solution to this problem before it appeared – in wiping off the dust from the glass with the exception of the cones where it was affixed, the fate of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, which exists in a number of executions, provokes debates in the professional field. Rauschenberg died in 2008 and, although he practised repainting the canvasses (the series of *Black Paintings* (1951 – 52) following the white panels, for instance, were modified at least three times, the latest in 1985), the question remains whether they should still be 'refreshed' to retain their pristine condition or should display alteration processes – yellowing, darkening, staining and cracking.⁵⁰ There is a difference in the reading of a tan, stained painting that was initially conceived to be purely white, expressing Rauschenberg's interest in 'getting complexity without their revealing much' and 'the fact that there was much to see but not much shown.' Interestingly, during this research, I encountered both repainted and patinated versions of *White Paintings*. The earlier, according to David White, curator of the Rauschenberg Foundation, accords with the artist's intention that there was never to be any patina or sense of age.⁵¹ The latter reveals a documentary value;⁵² rather than being an airport for light, the change in time renders the work signed by alteration and patina, an artefact witnessing its own material transformation just as *Zen for Film* does.

To resume, *Zen for Film*'s various occurrences – as an object, projection and process – that I related to the various aesthetic, technological and historical aspects in the previous sections, owes much to the dissemination and exhibition procedures triggered by people involved at different stages of the artwork's carrier. Whereas the care taken for the static film leader and the multiple relates to the strategies of the monitoring the physical alteration of materials (and in this sense is no different from the care taken for traditional artworks), *Zen for Film* as a projection escapes the common presumptions about it being a 'conservation object.' It demonstrates that, when thinking about conservation, we need to take into account the artistic and curatorial decisions that have shaped the work during numerous displays, maintenance and dissemination processes. Curation here may overtake the role of

50 On the matter of the restoration of Rauschenberg's white panels, see the discussion by Jeffrey Levin (Getty Conservation Institute Los Angeles) with conservators Jim Coddington (MoMA New York), Carol Mancusi Ungaro (Whitney Museum of American Art New York) and art historian Kirk Varnedoe (Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey). Jeffrey Levin, "Time and Change: A Discussion About the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art," *The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter* 17/ 3 (2002): 11-19.

51 According to White, most versions of *White Paintings*, if not all, have undergone such a process of 'touching up.' The repainting follows the artist's exact instructions. Personal correspondence with curatorial staff at the Barbican Art Gallery, April 23, 2013. The *White Paintings* were exhibited on the occasion of *The Bride and the Bachelors: Duchamp with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns*, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 14 February – 9 June 2013.

52 The same could be said considering Piero Manzoni's *Achrome* (1960) – a white painting manifesting its materiality through the reduction of the painterly surface to pure whiteness. Manzoni's intention was to repaint the work on the occasion of its exhibitions, which is contradicted by conservation's attitude towards the 'original.' Hikka Hiop, "The Possibility of Patina in Contemporary Art or, Does the 'New Art' Have a Right to Get Old?," accessed September 5, 2012. http://www.eki.ee/km/place/pdf/kp6_10_hiiop.pdf.

preservation of the work in the sense of maintaining its presentation, but it may also radically change the object's appearance. In turn, the temptation of conservation would be to preserve the historic experience of the work, which, as I showed in the discussion on Taruskin's critique of authentic historical performance (section 3.4), does not have much to succeed. So in the approximation to the reconstruction of the event from the 1960s, a new leader is always being run through the projector. Obviously, if we were to preserve the leader, we could not run it through the projector. This is precisely the logic behind the decision that resulted in the emergence of *Zen for Film* as a canned film reel. Because the historic projector had not been preserved, *Zen for Film* as a projection becomes an entirely new assemblage of materials every time it is exhibited. In that (physical) sense and also in the sense of the impossibility of the 'conservation' of an experience (and a reconstruction of a historical performance), it is unconservable.

In sum, as an object, projection and process, *Zen for Film* confronts us with a complexity that reaches beyond presumptions about the identity of works of art in our collections, and forces us to acknowledge changeability as an intrinsic and irreducible factor constituting what an artwork is.