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III. ARCHIVE AND IDENTITY

Heraclitus, you know, says that everything moves on and that nothing is at rest; and, comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you could not step into the same river twice.
Plato¹

Persistence of Identity Through Change: The Ship of Theseus

In the account of Plutarch (*Vita Thesei*, 22-3) the person of Theseus, mythological demigod and hero, surfaces as the leader of the youth of classical Athens who is responsible for a certain type of preservation of a ship during a sea journey.

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.²

Plutarch raises a philosophical paradox that is known from antiquity and which continues to be intensively debated in contemporary ontology. This paradox addresses the problem of the retention of identity by objects experiencing change. As subject to change, when does an object become something else and when may we still speak about the same object? How much change can an object bear while still retaining its identity and how much would change transform it to become something else?³ The account of the ship of Theseus provides a basis for thinking about the changeability of objects in relation to their identity. Plutarch reports that in the good faith of its preservation the ship of Theseus has been entirely rebuilt. If Theseus had completely rebuilt his ship, some of us may argue that the ship would not be the same. Would it then stay the same if Theseus had included one or two planks from the old ship? How many parts needed to remain the same to consider his ship still being the same?⁴ Where do we draw the line? This thought experiment can be even pushed further. Let us consider the following situation. If Theseus' ship was rebuilt during a sea journey and another ship was reconstructed by a follower of his based on the elements that he threw overboard, and both ships, at the end of the journey, were to turn back to the harbour, which ship would then be Theseus' ship: the new one sailed by Theseus, or the reconstructed one sailed by his follower? Such a situation might well be possible given that Theseus had transported all the

1 Plato, *Cratylus*, 402A.

2 Plutarch, "Vita Thesei 23," trans. Wilhelm K. Essler, in "Was ist und zu welchem Ende betreibt man Metaphysik?" *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 281-315; see also Marc Cohen, *History of Ancient Philosophy*, University Washington, accessed September 8, 2012, <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html>.

3 The paradox of the ship of Theseus surfaces also in Kapelauzou, "Harming Works of Art;" Lowenthal, "Material Preservation and its Alternatives;" and Van Saaze, "Doing Artworks."

4 In this context, German language differentiates between 'dasselbe' and 'das gleiche.'

spare parts on board in the anticipation of damage to the ship and that his follower would bother himself with a reconstruction of the ship while sailing in the proximity of the one captained by Theseus. So if the new ship is not the ship on which Theseus left the harbour before sailing off but also the reconstructed ship of the follower seems to not be the one of Theseus (he obviously never left his ship), could we also assume that both ships – the one on which Theseus finished his journey and the reconstructed ship – are the ships of Theseus? This rather paradoxical situation may become clearer if we consider the conceptual mechanism governing our thoughts. The view that the identity of the object is entailed in the identity of its component parts is expressed in the *Mereological Theory of Identity* (MTI). The MTI presumes that if every compound object is composed of the same elements seen from two different time perspectives so the object continues to exist maintaining its identity. If this were true, the ship of the follower would be the one that maintained the identity, being numerically the same as the one on which Theseus left the harbour. This theory would, however, appear too strong if we consider that Theseus never left his ship; it was gradually rebuilt while he was sailing it on his sea journey. So of necessity the ship that he sailed into the harbour has to be Theseus' ship because he never 'exchanged' it. Now, are perhaps both ships the ship of Theseus? This is an incorrect proposition due to the impossibility of material objects to co-occupy the same place at the same time, or, so to say, to be spatially coincident. Admittedly, one could also argue that these ships do not occupy the same space since they are placed at different points on the harbour. Considering this, there is still the impossible task of conceiving one single object occupying two places and times.

Another view on Theseus' ship paradox explicating the aspect of the persistence of identity of things through space and time is offered by the river metaphor. It holds that things can retain their identity through time despite the change of their physicality. It could be maintained that one cannot step into the same river twice because its waters change; yet, although not in numerical sense, it is still the same river into which we step. So compositionally, just as the ship on which Theseus sailed into the harbour, the river has changed yet, in some sense, it is still the same river.⁵ The French philosopher Jacques Lacan pushes the aspect of things being materially and compositionally different even further. The paradox of the 10.15 express train, which he relates to the signifier and signified, is based on the system of differences.⁶ Lacan notes that a 10.15 express train, despite its varying material constitution and even despite its delays or multiple occurrences as many 10.15 expresses succeeding each other every day, is not hindered from being identified as a '10.15 express train.' So even though the train has a different structure and components, it is still the same 10.15 express train.

5 Two further concepts pertaining to the unstoppable changeability of things in time is the one of *fluxism* and four dimensionality.

6 Jacques Lacan, *Seminars: Book IX: Identification*, 1961–62, transl. Cormac Gallagher, accessed October 29, 2012, http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-IX_identification.pdf.

Lacan claims that what gives the train its identity is thus neither its material constitution, nor even the time it departs, but what he calls a ‘signifier,’ which gains its signification through its difference from other signifiers (the other train times on the timetable for example), in terms of which the ‘signified’ is designated. Rather than being filled with intrinsic meaning, a signifier functions within a symbolic system or structure of differences. So the 10.15 train functions within the structure of a timetable, similarly to a ‘Theseus ship’ that by bearing Theseus’ name (rather than any other of the possible names) and despite its different material constitution, may also function as a signifier. It is this that gives the ship its identity, which is based on difference and not on intrinsic properties. The relation of this to art might be sought in Duchamp’s gesture of the nomination of an object as a work of art. With consequences for conservation, Paik parallels Duchamp by exerting his right to name the constituents as the work of art (*Arche Noah’s* animals and plants and electro trash from the technological graveyard of *Something Pacific*, among others).⁷

Dealing with the problem of identity we might be served by an alternative theory that echoes the Lacanian proposition by circumventing the numerical sameness of things in time. The theory of *spatio-temporal continuity* (SPC) is based on intuition and presumes that objects may persist in maintaining their identity by tracing a continuous path through space-time. Unless the form and shape of an object is maintained, the gradual exchange of its components does not affect its identity that continues to persist in time. The example of the spatio-temporal continuity of the wooden *Shinto* shrine in Ise, Japan will allow us to further reflect on the identity of *Zen for Film* and *TV Garden*. That the *Shinto* shrine is disassembled and rebuilt anew every twenty years testifies that its identity does not necessarily depend on the sameness of its material components (Fig. 8.0).⁸ Rather than preserving the material aspect of the architecture, the 1,300-year-old periodic reconstruction tradition – the *Shikinen Sengu* – preserves an ancient building tradition.⁹ That is not to say that the understanding of such an approach is solely related to the cultural context and culture-specific, although in

7 For a discussion of Duchamp, see Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

8 Similarly, George Brock-Nannestad reminds the apocryphal story that concerns the hammer used to build the biblical Noah’s Ark. The hammer maintained its identity – equated by him with authenticity – despite the fact that its parts have been replaced. George Brock-Nannestad “The Rationale Behind Operational Conservation Theory,” in *Conservation Without Limits: IIC Nordic Group XV Congress 23 – 26 August 2000, Helsinki, Finland*, ed. Riitta Koskivirta (Helsinki: IIC Nordic Group, 2000), 29. This reminds us of the recent appropriation of the story of “My Grandfather Axe” by Damien Hirst. Hirst, “Could You All Please Relax?”

9 All materials used for the new temple are manufactured anew and many of the instruments have changed and been replaced by their modern and more time-efficient equivalents; yet since the seventh century, the *Ise Shrine* has resisted major architectural change through the continuation of rebuilding procedures, and the repeated transfer of professional skills of generations of re-builders in the form of mainly oral but also a number of written accounts. Cassana Adams, “Japan’s Ise Shrine and Its Thirteen-Hundred-Year-Old Reconstruction Tradition,” *Journal of Architectural Education* Vol. 52, No. 1 (September 1998): 49-60.

the case of Paik we can certainly locate his oeuvre on the threshold of Eastern and Western traditions.¹⁰

The concurrent opposition and convergence of the presented theories to the apprehension of identity of objects in time both as spatio-temporal and material continuation is clearly exemplified in the case of artworks being simultaneously objects and entities endowed with certain values and aesthetic rather than common sense functionality. Similarly to the *Ise Shrine*, and with respect to spatio-temporal continuity, the multiple manifestations of Paik's *Zen for Film* projections may retain the artwork's identity despite the restitution of its physical components such as the film leader and, occasionally, even the film projector. This spatio-temporal continuity leaning on intuitive reasoning is often opposed by those who believe in material authenticity based on palpable evidence at best traced back to its origins. When it comes to *Arche Noah*, the specific valency assigned to the physicality of *Arche Noah*'s singular elements such as the painted vessel, the animals and the photographs relate to the material evidence they carry and accords with the Mereological Theory of Identity. Clearly, this continuation through material evidence is linked to the autographic trace accomplished by the artist and its role of sentencing the work to a certain singularity.¹¹ Yet the understanding of *Arche Noah*'s continuity is somewhat twofold. On the other hand, unconcerned about this fact, *Arche Noah* might shed the bearing of its plants and audiovisual apparatus in favour of new arrangements without annulling its identity. Despite the changes made to its organic and technological ensembles, *Arche Noah*'s identity continues to persist. In fact, what we can learn

10 For a discussion on the identification of Japanese conservation culture between Eastern rebuilding techniques and Western material authenticities, see Nobuko Inaba, "Authenticity and Heritage Concepts: Tangible and Intangible – Discussions in Japan," in *Conserving the Authentic. Essays in Honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, eds. Nicholas Stanley Price and Joseph King (Rome: ICCROM International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2009), 153-162.

11 At this point, it should be remarked that in the essay *Restaurierung des Zerfalls* (1997) Groys mentions the ship metaphor in relation to the question of the identity of objects, yet without a more profound analysis of its implications. What is very interesting here, however, is Groys' argumentation against his earlier suggestion: according to him an artwork cannot be judged by its functionality and capability to perform a certain function, as does a ship that sails on waters and moves forward. An artwork, posits Groys, has lost its original functionality and become 'a corpus without a soul' by the way in which it is torn from its original context and entrusted to the custody of the museum. This is interesting insofar as Groys' thinking about the functionality of the artwork goes back to its origins as a 'usable' object or sacral artefact and denies its functionality as an aesthetic object created – in a large number of contemporary installations – precisely for aesthetic apprehension and the museum context. Artworks are, following Groys, from the very beginning 'flawed,' everything that is collected in museums is thus an effect of an earlier de-functionalisation, deformation and expropriation (see section 8.2). Departing from this assumption Groys assumes that restoration is an attempt to return to an original condition of a work, which he denotes as impossible, proposing to conceive of restoration as an 'Art Supplement.' The latter is derived from Derrida's example of writing (Ger.: 'Schrift') that has the role to prevent forgetting in relation to speech and thought, yet at the same time being somewhat insufficient to express everything that is meant and having a surplus value by enabling the creation of meaning. According to Groys, restoration fails in its attempt to recover 'the original' but also defines itself anew in relation to the 'actual New' on which it is acting (the signs of the old and the signs of the new are interdependently related). Boris Groys, "Restaurierung des Zerfalls," in *Logik der Sammlung* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997), 197-204.

from these examples is that the dualistic (autographic and allographic) nature of multimedia installations characterised by changeability may continue through time in the form of objects that carry material evidence and the trace of the artist and, at the same time, follow the spatio-temporal logic retaining their identity despite the material change. This is also in the case of *Canopus*, which shares with *Arche Noah* the same dualism, namely that of the exchangeability of display technology and non-exchangeability, as it turned out, of the hubcap. Therefore, it might be argued that the autographic moment moves the multimedia installations into the realm of things that persist in time following the Mereological Theory of Identity and where identity is retained through the material evidence of their constituents. What follows from this, is that the replacement of the hubcap would entirely shift the understanding of the continuity of the artwork from the Mereological Theory of Identity to the spatio-temporal realm based on intuitive reasoning, somewhat undermining the ruling conventions (Paik's trace deemed more important than the *Wirkung* of the ensemble). I will continue this discussion in section 9.2.

Sameness and diversity are necessarily bound with the temporal realm in which they occur. Whereas the *Ise Shrine* exists at subsequent times and we may thus speak about its diachronic appearance while comparing two of its manifestations, *TV Garden* challenges us with yet another paradox related to the problem of identity. It materialises synchronically at Tate Liverpool on the occasion of Paik's British retrospective in 2010 while still on display at the K21, Ständehaus, in Düsseldorf. This may be irrelevant, one could argue, since we already know that *TV Garden* exists at three different collections worldwide (New York, Düsseldorf and Seoul). But can it then also exist more than one time in one collection? Can its double be identical to its point of reference? Sameness and diversity can occur either synchronically or diachronically. This formulation implies that *at a particular time* there can be sameness in one respect but diversity in another, or sameness in one respect but diversity in another *over time*.¹² *TV Garden* would be thus necessarily different when occurring at the same time as a reference (*TV Garden* in K21) and as a loan (at Tate Liverpool) from the same collection, but it would be the same as one installation conceived by Paik and distributed across three collections worldwide. To refer to Lacan's nominalist theory of identity concerned with the signifier and the signified, we could assume that everything that occupies the position of *TV Garden* is *TV Garden* – a signifier – legitimised by an oral or written instruction authorising the work.¹³

12 John Bowin, "Aristotle on Identity and Persistence," University of Santa Cruz, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://people.ucsc.edu/~jbowin/persistence.pdf>; see also Christopher Brown, *Aquinas and the Ship of Theseus: Solving Puzzles About Material Objects* (London: Continuum, 2005).

13 Here, the signifier has no other function than its own quality of being a signifier – a nomination fulfilling its function of naming. For a discussion on the role of the signifier in the age of the readymade and the issue of designating something as an artwork see Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*.

On the grounds of this brief explanation of the possible variants for understanding artworks' identity, their diversity and sameness occurring in time, and with the knowledge of the instigators of change and its relation to time taken from the previous chapters, we may now move on to the last crucial point in this discussion. If the identity of artworks persists through changes, where does the key to such persistence lay? Where is the locus of artworks' potential to change and on which basis do artworks manage to maintain their identity through time? Furthermore, what can ultimately condition this change in a reciprocal relation of contribution and creation and where is the ground for the identification of what the artwork is?

The answer lies, I propose, in the *archive*.

In this third and last part of the thesis I will argue that the identity of artworks persisting in time as both material evidence and spatio-temporal continuity is *contained*, *sustained* and *prescribed* by the archive. It is on the basis of the archive that decisions are being made. Entangled and immersed in a system of various ecologies, the archive ensures the continuity of changeable (post-conceptual) artworks and constructs what I propose to name a *temporal materiality*.¹⁴ It also solves the problem of the duality of concept and materialisation (Part I of this thesis) by rendering the concept material and temporal to the extent that both the concept – now freed from its transcendental status – and material are located on the same level as the materiality of the work. The engagement with the archive raises questions of when an archive is itself a/the work, and when the work is external, being informed by it. Last but not least, such an extended concept of the archive permits the weight of intentionality to be relativised and enables the maintenance of the artwork's identity through the acceptance of change.

In the following two chapters, I will explain the processes that lie at the basis of these assumptions. In order to do so, in chapter 8 I will investigate the archive on both its material and non-material level and conceptualise it as an entity of both spatial and temporal qualities. This provides the grounds – the substance and the concept – to identify what an artwork is and how it is being constituted. I will show that with respect to the identity of multimedia installations the archive may harbour their past, be a resource for the creation of the present but also bear potentiality for their future. The upcoming sections will open with a discussion related to the form of the archive most familiar to the conservator and museum professional – the museum archive – the example of which I will use to illustrate how the system of knowledge-

14 The French philosopher Felix Guattari speaks of social, mental and environmental ecologies that relate to the specific structures of engagement of humans and their environment. Félix Guattari, "The Three Ecologies," *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (Continuum: London and New York, 2005).

construction and the gathering of traces function in the museum domain. Touching upon the archive as an institutional repository, from the many perspectives of fragmented and specialised knowledge, I will strive to prove that the number of institutional and specialised paper and object archives might contribute to the archival knowledge about the artwork, yet by no means exhaust it. Furthermore, the archive addressed in my writing, both inside and outside the museum, will be dispersed, scattered and fragmented rather than centralised and total. In this chapter's conclusion, I will return to the notion of the conservation narrative and discuss the ways in which it may form and contribute to the archive.

In chapter 9, by explaining the notion of Aristotelian *phronesis*, I will investigate how conservation decisions are guided by practical knowledge. I will revisit the notion of creative conservation and apply it to conservation's interpretational engagement with the archive. In what follows, I will explain the retroactive character of the archive, in which the artwork's subsequent manifestations may become actualised on its basis but also, simultaneously, contribute to the subsequent actualisation performed on the basis of the archive. Responding to the dynamism of changeable artworks, the archive will become a dynamic entity, not only of material, but also of *time*, reacting to and acting on the nature of artworks and retro and proactively shaping their identity. Lastly, I will investigate the mutual relationship between the archive and the artwork and examine the possibility of the archive becoming an artwork itself. Conversely, I will also examine the possibility for artworks to create archives of their own selves exemplified in the discussion on the installation *Untitled (Piano, 1993)*. The artworks will become individuals – interiorities and terminals through which objects and subjects pass through and shape them; they also become compounds of the larger *archive*, reflecting structures, systems and ecologies that permeate it.

In the following, the archival engagements will be based on my knowledge of the functionalities of museum structures and the archive from the position of a conservator. The experience of the non-physical sphere of the archive will be drawn from the participation in the practice of the reinstallation of Paik's works and the first-hand observation of how they become actualised on its basis and how the tacit knowledge of persons in its possession may become mystified. I will later involve findings from my personal encounters with the archive from the position of a researcher – with particular emphasis on the research experiences in Tokyo – to show that archives may exist solely in the non-physical sphere of transient memories and recollection. The image of the variety of archival encounters can only become complete by supplementing it with my own assemblage of the archive for the purposes of this thesis.