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CONCLUSION

The Many *Archai* of Conservation

Today, more than ever, to conserve an artwork signifies first and foremost to understand what it is. Traditional approaches to conservation, presentation, documentation and storage have ceased to serve artworks that are, rather than simple objects, heterogeneous assemblages of things processing and being processed by time. The question that lay at the conception of this thesis pertaining to what the object of conservation is and what we are conserving became one of a more general nature that considered the identity of artworks. Departing from conservation and its particular problems related to multimedia installations, I inevitably had to enter into broader considerations concerning art, culture and, in particular, time. This reconfirms my conviction that conservation knowledge and practice is part of a broader study of material culture that considers the ways in which humans engage with objects in general.

The thesis is divided into three sections that have enabled a progressive degree of analysis and engagement with my argument. In Part I. *Concept and Materialisation*, it commenced with the investigation into the relationship between the concept and materialisation of multimedia installations at the basic level of their recovery, handling, re-installation and exhibition. Based on the examples of multimedia installations discussed here, I sought the logic that governs the ways of their materialisation and found that it resembled that of early conceptual art. The nearness of Paik's media art to early conceptual art proved true not only from a chronological perspective, but also in the presence of an instruction, delegated labour, the rendering of the weight ascribed to the technical competence of an artist's relative and limitation in quality control. I have striven to prove that Paik's media art was produced collaboratively, moving away from the model of the individual artist-genius working in the isolation of his studio towards the amalgamation of a traditional working space within a well-organised factory. This had implications for the works' reinstallation and conservation, which just as much became a collaborative effort of a number of conservators, curators and Paik's former collaborators. The division between the concept and materialisation seemed to already point to the increasingly interpretative, if not yet creative, role of conservation in re-installations of multimedia artworks, prompting the later discussion of the archive. Yet the presence of an instruction from which Paik's artworks might have been re-executed brought me to the association with the modes of realisation of musical performances. This musical

link was reconfirmed by Paik's musicological bias derived from his studies of music and self-identification as a performing rather than visual artist. To scrutinise Paik's installations, I made use of the theory of the *Open Work* and the dialectic of allographic and autographicity. I explained how Paik's works might have allographic and autographic qualities, how they can be performed but also are performative, and how they shifted their behaviour from the performance to the object, and back. In the discussion of the applicability of the theory of musical performance I noticed that, in particular cases, Paik's work entails autographic elements that behave similarly to the objects of traditional, visual art and that it is precisely the acknowledgement of such a combination of autographic and allographic qualities that challenges their conservation. By looking at different forms of Paik's instrumentalisation, I began to conceive of media artworks in the broader context of their materiality as a set of temporal and spatial phenomena not reducible to a fixed or predetermined material. This allowed me to gradually move away from the traditional notions of an 'original' or 'initial' condition, towards the acknowledgment of changeability, somewhat already implied in the open nature of the artworks discussed in this thesis.

Changeability as a phenomenon occurring in time became the central theme of Part II. *Time and Changeability*. Departing from the assumption that changeability is temporal, I strived to scrutinise how the artworks responded to change and related to time. As I have shown, changeability affected the artworks' conceptual layer just as much as their physicality. In museum displays, they became deactivated and moved from participatory objects to relics; the analogue components became digitised and, last but not least, their changeability involved a further development to new manifestations. Following the assumption that changeability is a manifestation of time, I proceeded to look more closely into the different aspects of time of the object and in conservation. Yet it was not sufficient to look into the one-sided relationship reflected in an object's alteration. I observed that in multimedia installations time not only processed the media, but the media, in fact, processed time. This dual movement was crucial for the redefinition of conservation as a set of processes that ought to be involved with the understanding of time in the artwork. I looked into the ways in which conservation has sought to understand time and drew the conclusion that its understanding applied not only for the conservation of multimedia installations, but also more broadly. Tenets such as reversibility and retreatability illustrate an inappropriate comprehension of time. My time critique revisited a number of conservation paradigms and its wish to recover an 'original' or 'authentic' condition or validate one instance of a work over another. I saw the inappropriate conception of time in conservation as related to its misinterpretation for a linear time measurement. This was reinforced by my observation of conservation's deeply-rooted engagement with giving priority to the measurability of space, reflected in its meticulous mapping of spatial relations and the creation of maps and drawings of installations. As an alternative to this, I proposed to adapt the concept of time as duration and continuity, following the Bergsonian philosophy

of time. As I have shown, according to Bergson's *durée*, in the conservation of changeable artworks, the present became the survival of the past, while the latter was actualised in the present. Subsequently, this led me to the conclusion that the trajectory of a changeable artwork mirrors the continuum of its change in duration; conservation is a process of the adaptation of an artwork to the present, rather than the illusion of its return to a past on a timeline.

Furthermore, my engagement with time resulted in thinking about the time of the media involved in Paik's work, such as film, video and television. I discovered that, rather than having a one-sided relationship (time processing the media), the time of the media is intrinsically about manipulating and processing time. I delved into the temporality of these media arguing that conservation, in a sense, missed the moment of their introduction and thus remained unaware of the ways in which their temporality diverged from conventional characteristics. A consequence of the temporal understanding of media was also their placement in a cultural-temporal context, which led me to emphasise their historical condition with relation to their remediated present. Following this new time awareness, rather than 'arresting time,' conservation became defined as a temporal intervention in media. So departing from this, I tested whether media may generally be defined by the pace and degree of their changeability in relation to time. I proposed that media processing time, 'fast media,' challenge conservation with the pace of their changeability and indeed force us to rethink how traditional media – 'slow media' – respond to time.

The acknowledgment of the intrinsic temporality of media with roots in Bergson's philosophy brought me to the apprehension of multimedia installations as heterotemporal entities that process and respond to time according to the various elements of which they consist. I investigated the heterotemporal character of objects and applied the heterotemporal conception to various levels of an artwork and its relation to the 'outside.' I analysed it from the perspective of the multi-element structure of the work, from the angle of the various stages of its trajectory, but also as a relation of the artwork to the time of the museum. I proposed that by means of a conservation narrative based on the *Narrative Theory* by Paul Ricoeur, conservation might take the role of the adaptation of different temporalities in crucial moments of the artwork's life, such as its recovery and installation. These narratives would contribute to and draw upon archival knowledge.

In the third part of the thesis III. *Archive and Identity*, I strived to prove that the answer to the question about the persistence of identity of changeable artworks in time lies in the archive. Here, again, I set off by analysing the way in which the archival realm functions at a basic level during conservation and reinstallations of artworks in a museum, supplementing these views with the picture of the archive from the ethnographic perspective of a researcher. Opposing the ideal centrality of the archive, in my writing the archive occurred dispersed; the information was divided by the departmental structure of a museum, other external bodies and institutions as well as by people contributing their knowledge about the artwork from the

outside. These factors have a major impact on its accessibility, resulting in the fragmentary character of the information and the impossibility of recovering the totality of information. Most importantly, however, the archive became not only a physical repository of documents, photographs, files and leftovers, but also an intangible, non-physical realm of tacit knowledge and memory in an ever-enduring state of organisation and expansion. It is from this entirety of the archival domain that the artworks are actualised. By implementing practical knowledge and making judgements, conservation takes part both actively and creatively in the process of actualisation and interpretation of the archive. The dialectic of virtual and actual allowed me to conceive of the process of the actualisation of artworks as emerging by creation in the present, emancipating conservation and divorcing it from its role to 'safeguard the past' and as distant from creative activities. In the productive acknowledgment of the creative aspects of actualisation, conservation maintains the work's identity on the basis of the archive by actualising archival knowledge and rendering it present to the context of the times in which it operates. Yet in my thesis, the archive-artwork relationship is not only mono-directional. Artworks have been actualised on the basis of the archive, but their current actualisations contribute to archival knowledge and spawn future reinstallations. The archive presented here was never passive, never *abgelegt* (the consignment of material in a physical space) but an entity from which artworks could be drawn and to which they could contribute, a place of actualisation and activity.

Conservation archives become places of return and reinterpretation based on narratives and equally on the judgemental capacities of those involved. Our understanding of the archive involves guesswork that is always provisional. Selective claims about the present and the image of the past that we build upon an archive occasion the process of the reinstallation of works and shape their identity through the involvement of new factors – actors and technologies. Conservation based on the proposed notion of an archive modifies its meaning from a practice of managing the physical qualities of works to the realm of discourse and interpretation.

The novelty of my approach is to acknowledge changeability as intrinsic to the identity of multimedia works of art. I strived to prove this in the many examples of installations presented in my thesis, including *Canopus*, *TV Garden*, *Arche Noah*, *Zen for Film*, *Zen for TV*, *Random Access*, *Something Pacific* and *Untitled (Piano)*, to name but a few. I proposed a new way of thinking about the persistence of change, change that originates and contributes to the archival domain. I suggested that in our post-modern – or post-internet – times, conservation has to take other virtues of the objects into consideration than the purely material and move towards the affirmation of continuity through change. In the words of Lowenthal: 'Material preservation is thus at bottom an illusion. ... What matters in preservation may be continuity

of form, of substance, of texture, of colour...¹³⁴ Indeed, the objects, either recovered, reinstalled or actualised are never the same, and the search for authenticity (as Taruskin taught us in the context of musicology)¹³⁵ has to be replaced by the maintenance and defining limits of identity. One further novelty of this thesis is that conservation may only be conceived of as temporal intervention, an intervention that inevitably adds something new and that regains its creative value, as well as its limits, based on its involvement with the archive. As archons of the archive – a magistracy in the Derridean sense of archival origins – the conservator’s role reaches far beyond the preoccupation with the physicality of artworks and reaches the realm of not only a *creating* but perhaps also, in a sense, a *controlling* power.

Analysing the identity of works from such a broad array of perspectives, my project opens up a number of aspects that could be pursued in further research. One of these is the aspect of the spectator’s engagement and his/her role in the open works of the 1960s and 1970s in relation to their changeable character. The impact of artists’ estates on shaping the identity of artworks in the time of the absence of these artists offers an additional field of inquiry. Furthermore, the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with its multitude of artistic production such as objects, paintings, sculptures, events and performances offers a fascinating opportunity for investigation into the status of objects, their production, distribution and manipulation in a broader cultural perspective.

Despite its focus on Paik’s multimedia, the findings of this research – conditioned by the term of specificity of artists and their artworks – may also apply to other (multimedia) installations that are characterised by continuous rematerialisations, changeability, heterogeneity and temporal materiality. I am convinced that this kind of search for the identity of works of art may become intrinsic to any branch of conservation studies concerned with other art forms – performance, internet and web art, conceptual art, land art, to name but a few – and that the archive may offer a point of departure and arrival for a wide range of artworks. Furthermore, I believe that through better understanding of multimedia installations and the aspects of time involved we may also learn how to approach other, traditional art forms. As I have suggested, all media respond to time in a variety of ways and inherit different forms, degrees and paces of changeability. Re:PAIK, meaning regarding Paik, signifies not only addressing issues related to Paik’s oeuvre and the complexities of its maintenance and exhibition, but rethinking conservation’s approach in general and going beyond the debates that still seem to keep us locked in the handcuffs of traditional paradigms and nineteenth century ideals, manifest in the story of *Canopus*, among others. It is also a means to acknowledge that we, as

134 David Lowenthal, “Art and Authenticity,” in *Themes of Unity in Diversity*, ed. Irving Lavin (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1988), 637-41.

135 Taruskin, *Text and Act*. See section 3.4.

conservation professionals, indeed re-create and re-interpret in order to transfer the meaning of works of art.

Re:PAIK in conservation means *regarding* the archive with its virtual and material evidence, cultural, social and political baggage ready to be enfolded in the ever-changing context of the times. As much as there can be many arches of the archive, so can the Ark – *die Arche* – carry its own history of material trace, ephemeral media and the evidence of people reacting to and acting upon it.¹³⁶ The Ark / Arche is a vessel of archival knowledge carried to the future and ready to be interpreted. To foster the argument of an artwork as an archive, we may now return to Weibel's insertion in the catalogue *Nam June Paik: Werke aus der Sammlung des ZKM* from the beginning of this thesis. Following Weibel, *Arche Noah* stands for 'the first storage of information, the first hard-drive of human being – kind of the first database ever.'¹³⁷ Just as in traditional artworks, the storage of information that Weibel sees in *Arche Noah* assumes that works may indeed be repositories of events, facts and materials.

When media suffer the obsolescence that is the result of the very progress that gave rise to them, the question of whether the medium is more important than the message is more actual than ever. So our task, based on knowledge derived from the archival domain, is to scrutinise the artworks with which we are engaged, and weigh the system of dependencies between the medium and the message in and through the present cultural context. Our task is also about leaving future interpretations open, not in terms of the questionable notion of reversibility, but in the openness of the archive to future interpretations of the work. The 'reversibility,' or what now can be replaced with the term *archival reinterpretation* has its reason and foundation in the archive; the archive will henceforth remain a condition of possibility for change of multimedia artworks in another present, or yet different future.

'... As for the eternity of my work, you don't need to worry at all.. ... It will last longer than Vermeer or Rembrandt. You simply repair or replace the picture tube when it gets old, which is cheaper than restaurator.' Nam June Paik.¹³⁸

136 Webster's Dictionary explains the meaning of the word 'ark' from Latin *arca* which signifies 'chest,' 'box,' 'coffer' and *arcee* meaning 'to keep,' that is designating it as something affording protection, shelter. *Webster's Revisited Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. "ark," accessed October 10, 2012, <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?resource=Webster%27s&word=ark&use1913=on&use1828=on>.

137 Weibel, "Nam June Paik *Arche Noah*."

138 Original spelling. Nam June Paik, letter to Edy de Wilde, the former director of Stedelijk Museum, September 25, 1977. Archive of the Stedelijk Museum.