



## Review of Paik's virtual archive: time, change, and materiality in media art

by Hanna B. HöllingOakland, CA: U of California P, 2017, 264 pages ISBN 978-0520-28890-4 (hardcover) Price: \$65

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## Review

### ***Review of Paik's virtual archive: time, change, and materiality in media art***

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Reviewed by Daniel Keyes, UBC

As an Art Historian and Conservator, Hölling offers a deep and lucid meditation on ephemerality that is both theoretical and practical. Her introduction explains the practical challenges facing conservators. She describes her work in 2008 as a chief conservator at the ZKM Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, restoring media artist Nam June Paik's *Canopus* (1988) (1).

This work of media art had fallen from the gallery wall and destroyed not only the 'six-ray-tube' cathode-ray-tube [CRT] monitors but 'severely dented and deformed' a chromed hubcap from a 1970s Oldsmobile that formed the centre of the work and bore Paik's signature and Korean calligraphy (3). Hölling proposed replacing the work with new monitors and the dented hubcap with an authentic Oldsmobile hubcap bought on eBay leaving the question of replicating Paik's calligraphy open (3). Her colleagues regarded this proposal as akin to 'fraud' (4).

This anecdote cuts to the heart of the book's argument about art, authenticity, and mutability. She asks, 'How can change in artworks be better understood in relation to time?' (4). For Hölling traditional conservation arises in Renaissance Europe with a focus on restoring 'unique objects' created by singular 'artist-as-genius' (9). Paik's media art and indeed most media art challenges this quaint notion of art's authenticity by relying on the construction of art as a collaborative multimedia type form that relies on technologies that are prone to obsolescence and digital and material decay. Hölling admits that scientific discourse informs the practice of conservation striving to return artworks to their original state, but she also challenges the notion that generates an Edenic 'original' state. Change is inevitable. In the digital era, change is accelerated not just by technologies leaping over one and other (i.e. does replacing the grainy CRT monitor from 1988 with a 4K ultra high definition monitor change the

artwork?). Digital change is also exacerbated by issues of copyright and planned obsolescence (e.g. Adobe's Flash software plugin that powered the majority of Internet web design in the early 2000s will not be available in 2020, thus stranding the experience of millions of digital objects (Rocheleau 2015; Warren 2017)). Hölling provides a timely rejoinder to academics considering how the age of digital abundance is transforming scholarship (Milligan 2019) while also providing a detailed and lucid discussion of Paik's life (1932–2006) and works that stress the performative elements of media art. As explained by Hölling, Paik's media art operates as a prescient meditation on technology's ephemeral and transforming potential.

*Paik's Virtual Archive* divides into three sections with the first two sections beginning with case studies of particular works by Paik as a way of getting at the theoretical issues underpinning conservation practice in relation to media art. Part one explores the tension in art conservation between material and conceptual elements: does the conservationist seek to restore the materials or the conceptual elements of an installation? Paik's work, which he 'repeated' for installations in galleries around the world, seems particularly suited for grasping art as a conceptual performative practice rather than a singular object. For example, his work *TV Garden* exists 'in three different collections' (139). Hölling asks, 'Can a copy be identical to its model?' (139). She demonstrates how Paik's musical training gives his art a performative quality that defies the conceit of capturing every element of the performance. Paik challenges archivists and conservators to discard the notion of restoration slavishly adhering to artist's detailed instructions for an installation. Instead, conservators should read Paik's handwritten instructions as being like a musical score that conservators interprets and performs.

Part two focuses on time and changeability by drawing on Henri Bergson's assertion that change is the only constant. Hölling demonstrates how traditional western conservation theory assumes careful conservationist can reverse the ravages of time. She proposes that conservators admit they cannot reverse time on an artwork: 'restoration/conservation applies contemporary values to it, in the process manufacturing

historicity and actually producing something new' (99). I suspect for some art conservators like her colleagues in the ZKM centre, Hölling's argument is heresy. Yet I appreciate that she admits the conceit that conservators rely on carefully filling in gaps in records to infer how they can re-constitute the conceptual core of an artwork in a different historical moment. Leveraging Bergson's and Deleuze's theories of time, Hölling theorises the past influences such that 'the present is the survival of the past' (104) where 'conservation becomes a temporal intervention that changes and interprets objects by introducing ruptures, intervals, and intermissions into what is otherwise a continuum' (105). The restoration of an artwork thus becomes a type of performance of multiple pasts. Part three of the book elaborates this notion by asserting 'things retain their identity through time even if they change physically' (138). I suspect digital makers and archivists appreciate this nuanced approach to conservation that admits one simply re-boot their version of Windows 95 to experience a bit of software as it was designed in 1995 and that conservation involves invention and necessary intervention.

Hölling draws from a range of European theorists to offer her post-structural view of the archive as a place of potentials: 'divorcing the archive from its exclusive "pastness," one might conceive of the museum archive as a place where conservators and curators undertake the process of de – and re-activating artwork' (141). She does not mention Jean Baudrillard (1983), whose theories of simulation might challenge this temporal re-activation thesis. Baudrillard argues that attempts like the creation of a simulation of the Lascaux cave with faux pre-historic paintings adjacent to the actual caves with the real pre-historic paintings means 'the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial ... Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view' (1983, 17–18). I sense her rejoinder to Baudrillard's protestation about the simulation displacing the real object would be to suggest art objects are always re-constituted with a sense of the past hardwired into their

present performance. Thus, the duty of the conservator is to balance various pasts with the 'creative intervention' of the multimedia object (159).

As I read this book, I was researching how the National Film Board of Canada plans to capture with a webrecorder the experience of viewing its 42 Adobe Flash-based interactive documentaries [idocs] that it produced between 2008 and 2014. In 2020, Adobe has slated to wink out of existence from the Internet all Flash-based texts. The solution the NFB has developed along with Rhizome, a non-profit digital archive organisation, is to produce a webrecorder that simulates a walk through these idocs. Faced with the prospect of seeing these idocs disappear entirely or inventing a simulation (Baudrillard 1983), I sense most folks would choose the latter option over inaccessible authenticity for the 'original' idocs. Hölling provides a compelling rationale for not dismissing attempts to re-imagine the artist's concept that makes sense for precarious digital works that may gain a new, different life separate from their original coded existence.

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