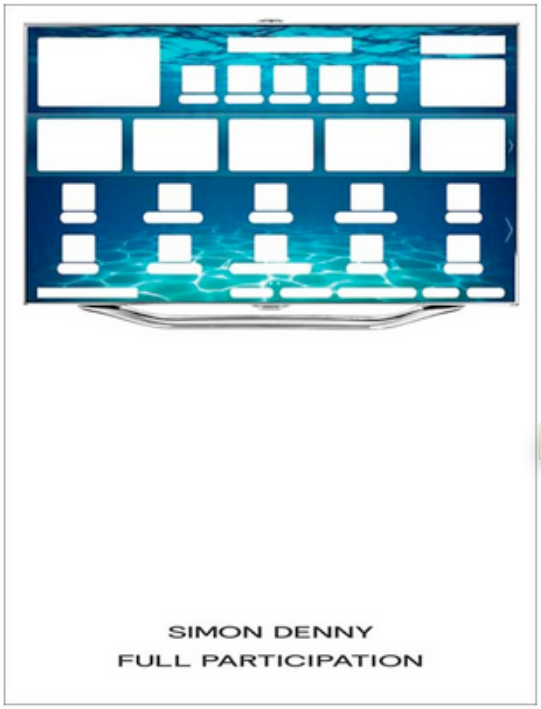

Simon Denny: Full Participation

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Monitor(’s) matter

Hanna Hölling

Pilot

On my last transatlantic flight from Europe to the US I was, like the rest of the cabin, staring half-consciously at the monitors presenting a colorful set of images right above our heads. Yet instead of watching the movies, my attention was directed to the box itself, the gray casing bordering the image—to the mere objecthood of the screen, as it were. Their elegant cubic forms looked different than the light, flat screens that popped out from the ceiling of my earlier connecting flight in Europe. The cubes were somewhat more present, drawing attention, dominant; not only were they a means of display, but each one seemed like a kind of sculpture in itself. I was thinking that soon they would inevitably disappear, giving way to newer technology, and that probably up there no one would pay attention to that change. In many museum institutions, however, the situation may become severe considering the significance of old TV screens, not only as medium transmitting an image in an installation or a video work, but also as a visually significant part of an aesthetic whole.

Episode One: TV Garden

Nam June Paik’s *TV Garden* came to being in 1974 as, alternately*, TV Sea* or *Garden,* with twenty cathode-ray tube monitors presenting thirty minutes of a breathtaking rush of synthesized images—the earlier video *Global Grove* (1973). Later it was enhanced with an assembly of plants to become a large-scale installation and one of his most well-known works that has been shown around the world. The equipment hardly ever traveled with the idea, which was executed by assistants and later formulated in instructions. It happened that Paik lent the installation over the phone, confirming its dematerialization. Consequently, almost everything has been allowed, given that the proportion of monitors to plants stays the same. *TV Garden* comprises up to two hundred monitors and four hundred plants. The installation occupies different spatial settings also due to the fact that it simultaneously belongs to three institutional collections.

Taking into account the technological obsolescence and impending exhaustion of the stocked resources of CRT monitors (the leading companies stopped production in the last decade), we will inevitably have to face the question of their replaceability and rethink the significance of their sculptural presence. Paik was keen on using new technologies; experts agree that if he were alive today, he would surely iterate and update the display apparatus (so for example, in the eighties and nineties, many of his installations received newer and more reliable laser disc players as a replacement for video players). Once the artist is no longer around, however, changing the sculptural landscape of *TV Garden* would contradict the doctrine of conservation that prohibits the conservator from entering the creative realm reserved only for the artist. Additionally, this variation contradicts the idea of the preservation of the initial “look and feel” of the piece and raises a not-quite-unimportant question about the ways in which the reception of a technology is bound to the conditions of a certain historical moment.

Episode Two: The Zens (for Film and TV)

Zen for Film is a fascinating example of a Fluxus film created by Paik 1962–64 and shown at the influential Fluxus festival at George Maciunas’s loft on the New York’s Canal Street in 1963. It is a prototypical Fluxus film, comprising about one thousand feet of clear 16mm leader projected unprocessed on a screen. Bound to the display apparatus of a film projector and stripped to its barest essentials, it is an anti-film that, following John Cage’s idea of non-sound music, reveals nothing else than its own material qualities, the noises of a loop running endlessly though a projector. It is also a much-debated installation with respect to its physical manipulation due to a

decision to exhibit it in a digitized form at the Tate Liverpool in March 2011: the radical change from the analog film projection to a digital file beamed onto the wall in a frozen condition of unbearably hygienic whiteness creating the controversy. The aspect of decay, the progressive accumulation of scratches, dust and lint particles, and other traces of its usage—the result of endless hours of display intrinsic to the initial concept of *Zen for Film*—was entirely neglected with its digitization. In addition to removing these material traces and chance events, the clattering mechanics of the analog film projector—a rich sound experience—was replaced by the almost inaudible whirr of the video projector, further denying the cinematic character of the work. From other examples of this kind, such as Bruce Nauman’s *Art Make-Up* (1967), we learn that the artist may even go so far as to add the sound of the 16mm film projector to the DVD.

Zen for TV (1963) was created on the occasion of Paik’s show in Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal in 1963. Turned on its side, the CRT television in *Zen for TV* presents an image concentrated to the bare minimum of a continuous vertical line, an image made possible only by physical manipulation of the traditional tube monitor (in this case, a manipulation allegedly caused by accidental damage). Displaying a recorded image would thus negate the mechanical nature of the manipulation, something that happened to Paik’s later piece *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965). *Zen for TV* would be remade many times, eventually becoming *TV Clock* in the form of a twelve-monitor, and later, a twenty-four monitor installation. Perhaps it was due to a further accident that *Zen for TV* was displayed in a “switched off” condition during Paik’s retrospective at Tate Liverpool (2010). The vertical line became a graphic representation of a once-compressed image, now burned into the phosphoric coating on the inner side of the tube. The inactive installation maintained its contemplative presence both in the static guise of the tube and in the graphic trace on its screen. The absence of the electronic ray becomes here another form of presence, the presence of an evidence of former activity, a promise of overcoming obsolescence through the imprint of a trace.

Episode Three: Magnet TV

Magnet TV (1965) is one of the early examples of participatory installations involving a single TV set and a household element—a horseshoe-shaped magnet. It results from Paik’s engagement with the manipulation of the inner life of the cathode-ray tube monitor and follows a number of earlier experiments. The magnet and a degausser interfere with the flow of the electrons in the tube, the magnetic field forming baffling abstract patterns. Paik’s conception involved the viewer moving the magnet and thus causing an endless variation of forms. When rested still on the casing—and this is what happened to its “musealized” version, deprived of its interactivity for preservation reasons—the magnet hinders the rays from filling the rectangular surface of the screen, creating a rather static form. *Magnet TV* highlights the inherent contradiction that arises in maintaining the aesthetic integrity of a work by preserving it from “being used,” a condition in many ways antithetical to its participatory values. Not unique to *Magnet TV*, this problem applies to an entire class of works to which the audience contributes by taking part in them according to the participatory tradition of Fluxus events (and following the Duchampian dictum that a viewer completes the work of art) once those works enter the museum.

Episode Four: Something Pacific

Something Pacific (1986) is Paik’s first outdoor installation, conceived for the Stuart Collection located at the campus of the University of California, San Diego. Outdoors the installation features a number of ensembles including statues of Buddha and (ruined) TV sets embedded in the landscape, a Watchman topped with a statue of Rodin’s *Thinker*, and a *TV Graveyard*—a pile of electronic rubbish thrown out from one of the windows of the Media Center. Indoors Paik set up a video wall involving some thirty-six monitors displaying, in addition to one of Paik’s videotapes, a live feed of MTV. The viewer could actively manipulate a part of the monitors using a Fairlight synthesizer. The scattered ruins in the grass of the campus—skeletal remains

returned to nature—were conceived to contrast the interactive installation bound to the latest craze in the broadcast television and dependent on the audience’s active participation. This work raises a number of interesting questions. As years passed, the synthesizer had to be repaired, but can we let the grass grow over the video wall? And even if the characteristic silvery Samsung monitors—already a later replacement approved by the artist—could be obtained on the second-hand market and piled up in storage guaranteeing the initial look of the installation for the next decade or two, should the original live feed of MTV be displayed in the form of a recording from the eighties, or should the feed reflect the quite different content of the network today?

Final Episode

Shifting platforms, formats, and technologies and processes of migration, emulation, and reinterpretation stand at the center of artistic practices reflecting on the perishable character of media. David Hall, a British artist known for intervention in television since the 1970s, recently presented an installation of 1,001 TV sets filling—in the tradition of Paik—a large exhibition space, AMBIKA P3 in London. Installed face-up, the traditional CRT monitors were tuned to the last five channels of analog broadcast in the UK, which would be gradually reduced until the final switch-off on April 22, 2012, limiting their “performance” to a certain amount of time. *End Piece* was not conceived to be preserved in any other form than as a record in the archive. Reflecting on the demise of analog broadcast and its typical display technology, it is a truly time-based composition, deliberately becoming a graveyard of its own self, a white noise of closure without return.

Simon Denny’s answer to the transitoriness of analog media takes us a step further. In the exhibition *Remote Control* at the ICA London (March 4–October 10, 2012), he presents us with the outmoded analog transmitter of London’s northeast section of Channel Four, a bulky, steel-grayish fortification of equipment. The still, switched-off status of the cooled-off block, once processing a crowd of information according to the electronic rhythm of its computing devices, introduces a different quality—that of a relic, the leftover of its completed performance. Rescued from its inevitable wreckage to become a spectacle in a hygienic gallery space, the physical, frozen presence of these once-functioning machines moves them to another realm, a space of salvage. Transmitted into an afterlife as art, which is a conservation gesture of sorts, these remnants from the era of broadcast and its mass audience are joined in the exhibition by a wall papered with an issue of *Radical Software* magazine from the 1970s—hinting at what might have been an alternative future. The first issue of this magazine happened to contain a contribution from Paik.

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