Seeking the authentic moment: De- and re-materialisations in Paik's video and multimedia installations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problem of the maintenance of identity of multimedia works of art despite their physical change. It puts forward the term of changeability as an intrinsic feature describing their character. Observing the artworks' changing manifestations, this paper poses questions whether and to which degree the concepts derived from musicology and a traditional understanding of the physical object applies to them; further, it investigates the links between the early conceptual art and media art of the 1960s and '70s in terms of the presumptions of dematerialisation and, consequently, the idea of the instruction and delegated labour. The concept of open work serves the open character of multimedia artworks in terms of their repeated realisation and interpretation. Finally, it seeks to explore the interrelation of artworks' manifestations and the archive, which, with its retroactive character has implications for both the understanding of the identity of works of art and the understanding of conservation role in its maintenance.

Keywords: allographicity, autographicity, archive, authenticity, changeability, concept, conceptual art, conservation, identity, installation, instruction, multimedia, open artwork, reinstallation

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Persistence of identity of objects experiencing change

In the account of Plutarch, Vita Thesei (Essler 1995), the person of Theseus, mythological demigod and hero, surfaces as the leader of the youth of classical Athens, 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 30 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.

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 and still retain its identity, and how much change would transform it to something else? The account of the ship of Theseus provides a basis for thinking about 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 completely rebuilt his ship, some of us may argue that the ship is not the same. Would it then stay the same if Theseus left one or two planks from the old ship? How many parts had to remain the same to consider his ship as being still the same, and where do we draw the line?

This thought experiment might be pushed even further. If the ship of Theseus was rebuilt during a sea journey and another ship was reconstructed by a follower of his based on the elements that Theseus threw over board and both ships, at the end of the journey, were to turn back to the harbour, which ship would then be the ship of Theseus, the new one sailed by Theseus, or the reconstructed one sailed by his follower? The question that was raised here is the question of the persistence of the identity of objects through time despite their physical change, which relates—and is essential to—a large number of multimedia installations in our collections.

The argument

In the following, it will be argued that in order to conserve media art and multimedia installations, one has to profoundly understand their nature and behaviour. Unlike traditional art, the understanding and conserving of which is often bound to notions of material authenticity and material origins linked with a distant past, media works of art and installations are intrinsically changeable entities, following the cycles of their de- and re-materialisations. So rather than static objects, which they may, but do not necessarily have to include, multimedia installations are being performed. Accordingly, this paper offers an insight into to ways in which multimedia artworks may maintain their identity through time and how their identity may persist through changes.

In the example of two works by the Korean artist Nam June Paik entitled *Arche Noah* (1989, Eng. 'Noah's Ark,') and *TV Garden* (1974) this paper demonstrates that the duality of media installations (as physical objects and performances) and their openness to interpretation derived from the possibility of their various materialisations pose problems to the deeply rooted mode of conventional thinking about 'conservation objects' and their 'authentic condition'. It will be argued that as media installations they follow similar rules that have been established for early conceptual art, and their conservation is often associated with the balance between preserving their (multiple) material testimony, and staying true to their inherent nature as artworks based on concept and changeability in time. Focus will be put also on the way in which this changeability becomes immersed in the archive, enriching and remodelling the knowledge of the work in a reciprocal exchange between the archive itself and temporal occurrences of the object.

This paper has been conceptualised from a twofold perspective. It is based on the long-term experience of a museum conservator working with multimedia artworks and, additionally, it has been written from a position of a researcher doing archival inquiries. It might be said that in what follows the approach to these artworks is both: practical—empirical and observational—ethnographic.

The manifold life of *Arche Noah*

Arche Noah is composed of a wooden vessel, a large-scale element constructed from the outside true to the principles of boatbuilding and determining the entire appearance of the installation (see Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). The vessel (about 3.5m long and 1.5m wide) is positioned on a base that confers on it an elevated, extraordinary setting. The hull is made of slightly overlapping slats, which were initially stained dark brown and, at a later stage, decorated with painted

symbols of an ark. Owing to the fact that the stern has an open unfinished structure, the installation is thought to be not free-standing but rather situated at the gallery wall.

The base is decorated with black-and-white large-scale panoramic photographs. They enclose the base of the boat depicting Mount Ararat, the place where *Arche Noah* is believed to have been stranded. Initially, the photographs were exposed to spectators; later, when the plants were introduced, they were partially hidden behind them.

On average, 28 TV sets of two different types of Panasonic colour ray tube (CRT) monitors are placed at the base of the boat and also on the deck, forming a two-level tower. The TV sets situated face-up at the bottom of the installation surround the base of the vessel. At a later stage, there were different exotic plants arranged around the base partially mantling the TV sets. An additional tower-like arrangement of TV sets is placed on the deck. An integral part of the installation was composed of colourfully painted papier-mâché animals depicting two flamingos, two iguanas, a dog, a giraffe, a pig and a snake. Originally, the deck was topped with a coloured banner that can be seen only in the first photograph of the installation. As the later documentation photographs show, despite the Weisses Haus show in Hamburg in 1989, this ensemble has never been installed again.

Arche Noah has been created as a three-channel video work. On the technical side, the image aspect of the installation was operated by means of a laser disc as was the case with many of Paik's objects at that time. Due to the latest migration of the hardware to newer technology, the playback runs on three flash card players. Six modified video routers are built in. The visual information is repeated at regular time intervals. The images appear in pairs transversely. The video's pictorial content, as in almost all Paik's installations, reveals the rather playful character of random video assemblages composed of various fragments of moving images. The visual attraction lies in their varying graphical forms and compositional artfulness. As many of Paik's video works, the installation lacks any audible element.

Arche Noah was created in 1989. At that time Paik was interested in the interaction between technology, nature and the human. In the book *Video Art: An Anthology* (1976) Paik comments: 'Video art imitates nature, not in its appearance or mass, but in its intimate "time-structure"' (Paik 1976). *Arche Noah* relates to archaic and biblical themes, including the principle of four elements as the basis of the world. From another perspective, the installation may also emphasise the role of technology in the salvation of humanity facing the moment of the apocalypse. As Peter Weibel, chairman

Figure 1. Nam June Paik, *Arche Noah* (1989). Installation view at Weisses Haus, Hamburg, 1989. Photograph: Helge Mundt ZKM Centrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie.
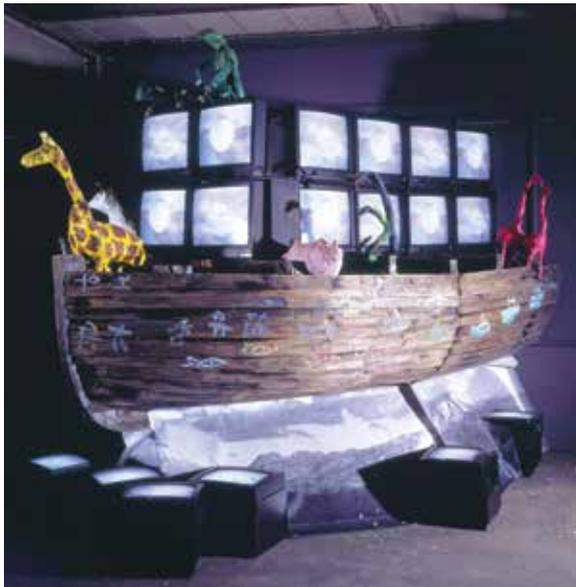

Figure 2. Nam June Paik, *Arche Noah* (1989). Installation view on the occasion of Multimediale 2, Opel Factory, Karlsruhe, 1991. Photograph: Thomas Goldschmidt. ZKM Centrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie.

of ZKM, noted in the catalogue Nam June Paik. Artworks from the ZKM Collection (2008), *Arche Noah* depicts 'the first storage of information, the first hard-drive of human being—a kind of the first database ever' (Weibel 2008). Yet the idea of salvation may gain another, reciprocal meaning: technology-based media, due to their progressive obsolescence and the enormous

difficulty of their conservation and preservation are predisposed to extinguish rapidly.

The first exhibition of *Arche Noah* took place at the White House Gallery show in Hamburg, Germany, in 1989 (see Figure 1). The White House photograph shows the installation with the arrangement of monitors around the wooden vessel, colourful papier-mâché animals and sharp-coloured banners decorating the boat in a humorous way. The basement monitors played a live video feed of a canal that actually runs next to the gallery, bounding the arrangement to the gallery space (ergo rendering it site-specific).

Heinrich Klotz, the founding director of ZKM, acquired the installation shortly thereafter; in 1991 it was presented at Multimediale 2 at the Opel Factory in Karlsruhe (see Figure 2). The image shows *Arche Noah* in a confined gallery space. Besides that the banners seemed to have vanished; another change appeared on the vessel. If we magnify the image it uncovers painted inscriptions and numerous paint drippings on the floor and on the TV sets. It therefore seems likely that the paint originated in Karlsruhe and that the act of painting took place on location just moments before its exhibition. It is also perhaps the only record of the direct involvement of the artist with the installation. It is unclear whether the video showing the river had been maintained. The paintings depict small-scale pictograms of ships and fish; we may also see Paik's signature.

In June 1992 on the occasion of the exhibition Electronic Art, *Arche Noah* was lent to the Spanish Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona. Unfortunately, recordings of the venue are lacking. Jochen Saueracker, Paik's assistant in Germany, recounts that at this stage Paik decided to rethink the spatial setting and modify the mode of interaction between the exhibition space and the artwork. As a result, several potted plants were placed nearby the base. The resemblance of this gesture to the electronic garden of the earlier *TV Garden*, which I will discuss shortly, is striking.

Sixteen years after that in the course of preparation for an upcoming exhibition at EnBW Karlsruhe a test re-installation was undertaken. In the photographs taken in course of the re-installation, and later published in the exhibition catalogue, both the animals and plants are lacking (see Figure 3).

On the occasion of the exhibition Nam June Paik. Artworks from the ZKM Collection (23 October 2008–18 January 2009), *Arche Noah* was displayed for the first time since 1992 after its long storage interval. As the image reveals, more than 40 different kinds of plants decorate the base of the vessel (see Figure 4). Due to a curatorial decision legitimised by an unsatisfactory condition of the animals and the lack of financial resources to conduct the conservation prior

to the show, the papier-mâché animals were missing. It is the most recent stage of *Arche Noah*'s biography, despite the modification of the inner construction that had to be rebuilt in order to facilitate transportation and avoid damages caused by repeated repairs to the boat's panels.

On the verge of a physical object and enduring performance

A question arises when looking into the changeability of the artwork over time manifesting in its various materialisations: so what is, actually, *Arche Noah*? This question is particularly relevant when it comes to the moment of conservation in the traditional sense. Furthermore, it might be asked which of the many versions should be taken into account for its conservation—a single one or, rather, all of them and which of its materialisations could be said to be more original or authentic? The answer is not straightforward and applies to a number of multimedia artefacts in public and private collections. According to the example of the ship of Theseus, and based on intuitive reasoning, on the one hand it could be claimed that *Arche Noah* maintains its identity through time despite its partial, material change. This would accord with the theory of spatio-temporal continuity of objects through time that presumes that objects may persist maintaining their identity by tracing a continuous path through space-time. On the other, however, one may confront the belief in material authenticity based on palpable evidence at best traced back to its origins. This, in turn, follows the mereological theory which equates a compound object A with B only when all elements of A are elements of B seen from two different—diachronic—time perspectives. In dealing with different forms of changeability, a question may be posed: whether and how far does the conservation of media and contemporary art differ from the conservation of traditional art such as painting or sculpture, insofar as conservation has tended to lean on a Romantic model of originality and assuming the unequivocalness of artistic intention?

Arche Noah reveals itself as a combination of physical objects on the one hand and, on the other, as an enduring and changing performance of its parts in time. It might thus be maintained that *Arche Noah*'s sculptural and pictorial elements exist within the realm of what the philosopher of art Denis Dutton calls nominal authenticity and which refers to

the empirical facts related to the origins of an artwork Dutton (2003). Yet when leaving this term applied mainly in traditional visual arts, a solution to our problem might be delivered by the theories of musical performance. In his essay Authenticity in Art (2003), Dutton discusses the presentation of art on the example

Figure 3. Nam June Paik, *Arche Noah* (1989), collection of the ZKM Karlsruhe. Installation view during the test re-installation at the ZKM in 2008. Photograph: Steffen Harms. ZKM Centrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie.

Figure 4. Nam June Paik, *Arche Noah* (1989). Collection of the ZKM Karlsruhe. Installation view on the occasion of the exhibition Nam June Paik: Werke aus der Sammlung des ZKM, EnBW Karlsruhe, 23 October 2008–18 January 2009. Photograph: ZKM Centrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, archive of the conservation department.

Figure 5. Nam June Paik, *TV Garden,* 1974 (2000 version). Video installation with color television sets and live plants, dimensions vary with installation. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. 2001.6 © Nam June Paik. Photo: Ellen Labenski, New York [1].

Figure 6. Nam June Paik, *TV Garden* (1974/2008). Installation view at Nam June Paik. Art Center in Korea. © Nam June Paik Estate. Courtesy of Nam June Paik Art Center Collection.

Figure 7. Nam June Paik performing the 'autographic moment.' Archive of Mark Patsfall, Cincinnati.

of Western notated music (Dutton 2003). In this context, it is also worthwhile to consider this musical association in the light of the philosophical thought of Nelson Goodman. According to his idea of a two-stage process—which Pip Laurenson, time-based media conservator at the Tate, also picks up in her seminal essay on authenticity in time-based art (Laurenson 2006)—the creation of music diverges from other forms of visual, plastic arts such as painting and sculpture. The classical musical work is specified by a score, which entails a set of instructions 'realized aurally by performers, normally for the pleasure of audiences' (Dutton 2003). Performances may differ markedly due to the nature of score—it leaves a space for its translation from the written encoded language to the sound of its realization. According to the degree of accuracy with which the performer follows the script, the philosopher of music Stephen Davies identifies different types of interpretation of musical score. The very idea of performance is thus permissive towards the interpretative freedom 'consistent with conventions that govern what counts as properly following the score' (Davis 1997; Davis 2001).

TV Garden: scores, instruction and multiple materialisations

According to the logic of musical performance, it could be maintained that Paik's installations follow a certain kind of a written or verbal score and result in an endless potential of variable performances. In the trajectory of the already mentioned *TV Garden*, for instance, its television sets and plants are choreographed freely, at times extending its dimensions to keep up with the architectural challenge of Frank Lloyd Wright's interior of the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2000), see Figure 5, or being shrunk and stacked to fit a smaller gallery space in the Kunsthalle in Bremen (1999). The dimensions of *TV Garden* may vary between 30 to 120 TV sets and 80 to 600 plants. The screens are mostly oriented to the viewer, according to his or her position, being placed on the floor or on pedestals to create a certain spatial

experience (K21 Düsseldorf 2002). The monitors have different shapes, but essentially a cubic form of a CTR, with an exception of the example exhibited at the Nam June Paik Art Centre in Seoul, see Figure 6. The plants are rather dominant, delivered from a local supplier and representing what is geographically available as 'office plants'. Yet looking more closely at all the realizations of *TV Garden*, the plant arrangement seems to always contain something else—a gesture, position, dimension or colour—interrupting its presupposed sameness. The viewer is located on a platform (in Kassel, Düsseldorf, Seoul), or may observe the installation from the usual floor level (in New York and Liverpool). The space is mostly dark, but it happens that it is illuminated by exhibition lights. The variability of *TV Garden* appears, as in the case of a musical performance, to be infinite.

From allographic works to the autographic moment

There is something else appealing in Goodman's theory drawn from The Language of Art (1976), namely the dichotomy of allographicity and autographicity of art (Goodman 1976, p. 112). Goodman draws a line between artworks that are forgeable (autographic), like paintings, and unforgeable (allographic=non autographic) like musical performances. As opposed to paintings, which can be subject to forgery, musical performances may vary in correctness and quality, but each performance is a genuine instance of the work. Autographic arts thus include works which with even the most exact duplication do not count as genuine. Autographicity results, as the philosopher Jerrold Levinson puts it, 'when the sphere of the genuine for a given work is wholly circumscribed by notational correctness and not by physical origin' (Levinson 1980). Additionally, Goodman classifies painting as a one-stage work and music as a two-stage work; one-stage character of a work of art does not determine its autographic or allographic character. Literature, for example, is not autographic though it is one stage, and art print (making) is two-stage and yet autographic.

While applying these theories to the artworks mentioned, there seems to occur a certain peculiarity. While *TV Garden* seems to have exclusively allographic qualities, *Arche Noah* occurs both autographically and allographically at the same time. *Arche Noah*'s allographic ensemble of plants and TV sets is accompanied by the autographic elements of the vessel, namely the animals and paintings. The photograph of Mount Ararat would be of a two-stage nature and be reproducible. All in one, the installation could be considered as an allographic entity involving autographic elements. Following this line of thought and zooming in to the painting action that took place at Multimediale in

1991, it seems that the vessel has not only been simply painted but authorised by way of signing performed by the artist (see Figure 7). This becomes an autographic moment, the moment when the artist fulfils his role as a creator, inscribing his name, among other calligraphy, on the artwork that has been fabricated by the others. It is also a way of drawing attention to the necessity of the moment of a work's determination, its 'final touch': an authentication. The autographic moment is characteristic for many of Paik's installations and was regularly performed to authorise installations executed by his fabricators on the occasion of his visits to his factory in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is also what complicates the conservation question and forces to analyse these works as installations of a dual nature—conventional sculptural bodies determined by a signature, and performances following execution from a script.

The theory of Open Work

The musical provenance and the presence of an instruction (kit) renders Umberto Eco's theory of the Open Work (first draft 1958, publication 1962, English translation 1989) highly relevant to an understanding of the nature of media art (Eco 1989). Chronologically corresponding with the development of the Fluxus movement, Open Work discusses the role of subjective interpretations and allows for completion of a work of art by interpreters. The idea of an open work serves to explain and justify the apparently divergent characteristics of modern and traditional art (Robey 1989). On the example of aleatory music performances of the 1950s, involving Karlheinz Stockhausen's Klavierstuck XI, Eco observes an increasing autonomy left to the performer in the manner he chooses to play a work—the interpretation of a work is left to an improvised creation following the performer's own discretion. As opposed to classical music, the composers of new music 'reject the definitive, concluded message and multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements' (Eco 1989). Those works appeal to the initiative of a performer and hence they are uncompleted, infinite, prescribing specific repetition along defined coordinates. They are open for completion by a performer who concludes the work and, at the same time, experiences them on an aesthetic level. The author of such an 'unfinished' work would have to pass it to the performer in the form of a 'construction kit'.

Perhaps the most relevant implication of the Open Artwork for media art is the tendency to see the execution of artworks as divorced from their ultimate definition and, accordingly, the impossibility of the exhaustion of an artwork by a singular performance. A performance explains the artwork and renders it an 'actuality', but it is also complimentary to any other

proceeding or following performances. The paradox of the completeness of an artwork having been performed is the counterpart to its incompleteness in face of the impossibility of offering simultaneously all artistic solutions for its interpretation. The 'openness' of the artwork relates to the interpretational role of a receiver/viewer in the way in which an artwork may be completed by him or her. It somewhat echoes Duchamp's conviction that the audience, just as the artist, participates in making the work, in finishing the product; it also precedes Roland Barthes' (1967) idea of 'the death of the author' and Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction* (2002). Most importantly, however, it introduces a significant and too often unattended issue for the preservation of these works through focusing on their social aspects.

Towards conceptuality and extended collaborations in multimedia installations

The idea of script as an instruction that specifies the concept and the delegated execution by physical labour parallels the logic of early conceptual art of the 1960s. Although the utopian dematerialisation of art object in the sense of conceptual art never really took place—as Boris Groys has put it, 'Every art is material and can be only material' (Groys 2011)—so the attempt to transcend materiality was designed to fail, the handiwork never disappeared, and the apparent indifference to aesthetics proved false (Van Winkel 2005). The implications of such 'dematerialisation', however, transformed the understanding of the material object and permeated attitudes in different artistic approaches, early media art practices manifested in Paik's oeuvre being an example. So additionally to a new vista on the notion of materiality, the object began to be seen in terms of a binarism of a concept and the condition for its materialisation. One further implication for media art was the idea of the delegation of physical labour, according to which Paik maintained a well-organised workshop in Cincinnati, where fabricators, technicians and carpenters executed his works in the manner of 'extended collaborations' moving somewhere between the lines of creative complicity and formal execution. As with early conceptual art, media art was often realised on the basis of instructions, and authenticated by means of a certificate. An instruction for *TV Garden* given by Paik to Brazilian curators was an indicator of how he used, throughout his career, to delegate the re-creation his works in geographically remote locations. Stephen Vitiello, curator and a collaborator of Paik, maintains:

> I really see TV Garden as a conceptual work. And I don't know that he ever wrote it down, but there's basically an implied score, which is: Place 'Global Groove' on multiple monitors in a room; monitors are facing up and there's plants surrounding, and there's sound' (*Preserving the Immaterial* 2001).

The archival turn

In conclusion, it might be argued that the relation of media works to conceptual art and the openness of their structure to different levels of interpretations confirms their changeable nature. So rather than freezing their fleeting identity in a singular state, conservation needs to affirm such artworks' inherent changeability, using documentation as a tool marking their relation with and to time. Because to conserve an artwork signifies to deal with effects that time bequeathed on its material and conceptual layer, conservation involves ways of understanding time and is about time. It may intend to pause the progress of the passage of time and arrest its traces on the artefact's surface or structure, inducing a deliberate stoppage in its trajectory and thus inducing controlled or uncontrolled temporalities. Time seen from the perspective of media installations—fugitive and impermanent materials, reproducibility, multiplicity, changeability and different phenomenologies of space—seems to reject the chronological matrix of conventional conceptions of temporality. Heterochronic—other than sequential—time, would enable durational readings of artworks. Furthermore, time seems to govern not only objects but also their archive. Containing material documents of the work's past manifestations, as well as involving immaterial aspects such as memory and tacit knowledge, the archive harbours the concept of the work on the basis of which its identity is maintained. It takes, as it were, an active role in assuring the continuity of works of art. The formation of the archive is itself recursive—new iterations of artworks produced from the archive enter the archive and transform it. The artwork may constitute the archive, but it may, seen from another perspective, also become an archive in itself, gathering traces and evidence of its own trajectory. Such archival turn – the acknowledgement of the archive as constitutive of work's identity shifts the understanding of conservation. Conservation is henceforth no longer the return to a past 'original state' but the creation of the archive that will anticipate future iterations, based on repetition and difference.

The archive is often considered as final destination of artworks; yet it is also their beginning, a dynamic source from which artworks and their biographies are being (re-)constructed. In making decisions on the basis of the Archive, which is a creative gesture of sorts, conservation forms the spatio-temporal continuity of installations over time or puts emphasis on material evidence and

'authentic moments'. In doing so, conservation becomes the process of ensuring the intrinsic fluidity of artworks over time.

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Endnotes

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