The Eternity-cult is the longest disease of mankind," writes Korean American artist Nam June Paik (1932–2006) in the opening to his Symphonie No. 5 (ca. 1965). Although Symphonie No. 5 clearly references Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, the perennial cornerstone of Western classical music, it opens, paradoxically, with a disavowal of eternity, and thereby of the human concept of physical and mental endurance. I return to Paik’s words again and again while I am finding my way through the Nam June Paik Archive at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. I skim through the materials, some individually arranged in light-yellow folders, some aggregated in groupings enclosed in archival envelopes. Amongst the handwritten, typewritten, and printer-generated notes and notations, a translucent plastic sleeve draws my attention. It contains an envelope with an inscription that reads: please, return the fish (INSIDE) to the water. Nam June PAIK.

The materiality of this curious object strikes me as I begin to slowly unpack the work. The inscription, written in a mix of capital and lower-case letters, seems improvised. I inspect the envelope: it is stained, displaying traces of something akin to watery brushstrokes, the remains of an environment that might have once served a living fish. I turn the envelope and find a darkish-brown stain at its bottom. I am repulsed by the horrid realization that it might be the body of a fish which did not make it to the water. What I have just described is Paik’s Liberation Sonata for Fish (1969), a prime example of the score-based work that Paik created after he moved from Germany to New York. The work’s absurdity lies in the proposition of freeing a dead fish by releasing it into its natural element—an act that acquires a dramatic overtone in an age marked by the mass extinction of species. Is what I am seeing evidence of an unfulfilled liberation? Who is doing the liberating and who is in need of liberation? Or is archival preservation a tacit metaphor for the “liberation” of the fish, which became a disintegrated specimen enclosed in the archival folds of a highly controlled habitat, both environmentally and institutionally?

Liberation Sonata for Fish was distributed free of charge to the attendees at Charlotte Moorman’s 7th Annual New York Avant Garde Festival on Two Islands, New York, in 1969. The columnist and critic for The Village Voice Jill Johnston commented on the piece in 1969: "We have something here, an envelope from Nam June Paik with a tiny dead fish in it and a message..., terrific, I’ll do that [liberate the fish] and while I’m at the

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1 In two different versions of the work, Paik uses the phrase bilingually, in German and English. The hand- and typewritten versions from the Sohm Archive feature the English equivalent superior strikes, together with the German equivalent: the Ewigkeit-kult ist die längste Krankheit der Menscheit. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection at the Museum of Modern Art holds a copy of the German version of the work, Symphonie Nr. 5, which does not have the capitalization found in the Symphonie No. 5, its Sohm variant. Regardless of the version, "Symphonie" features the German equivalent of the English word "symphony." In what follows, unless referring to a specific version, I will use the title Symphonie No. 5.

2 In the section “The 10th Year,” Paik’s score for Symphony No. 5 includes references to nine of Beethoven’s symphonies followed by instructions on different types of sexual intercourse.

3 The Nam June Paik Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum, NJP.2.EPH.12.
Paik’s deployment of scores reflects the rootedness of his creative practice in music. Although written into history as a pioneer of video and early electronic art, Paik had a remarkable musical education, which spawned his interest in the experimental and avant-garde music of the twentieth century. This trait is significant in the understanding of Paik’s early compositions but also in how he approached the creation of his multimedia and video installations later in his career, which, rather than being singular and authentic in the Western sense, were variable, mutable, and open. As an early adept of classical music during his studies in Tokyo, Munich, and Freiburg in the 1950s, Paik was one of the first East Asians to appreciate Arnold Schoenberg, who was among the most influential composers of the twentieth century based on his invention of the twelve-tone scale and his contribution to the emergence of serialism. The artist sought inspiration for his musical experiments in German academic and artistic circles, which he found particularly inviting as a center of contemporary music. As a twenty-something, Paik spent the late 1950s in Freiburg with the composer Wolfgang Fortner, who advised him to work in the electronic studio of the West German radio station WDR in Cologne, an important center for contemporary music that attracted such composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pauline Oliveros, and György Ligeti. As a follower of John Cage and a participant in Fluxus both in Europe and in the United States, and similarly to other artists of the 1950s and 1960s, Paik pursued an intermedial approach amalgamating performance, new music, avant-garde film, and Fluxus’s expression of the everyday.

Not only is the Paik’s notation works such as Symphony No. 5 and Liberation Sonata for Fish moments of reorientation and transition between music and multimedia in his work. These intermedial interests allow us to situate Paik’s notational works such as Symphony No. 5 and Liberation Sonata for Fish as moments of reorientation and transition between music and multimedia in his work. Not only is the Paik’s exploration of multimedia and video installations later in his career, which, rather than being singular and authentic in the Western sense, were variable, mutable, and open, as an early adept of classical music during his studies in Tokyo, Munich, and Freiburg in the 1950s, Paik was one of the first East Asians to appreciate Arnold Schoenberg, who was among the most influential composers of the twentieth century based on his invention of the twelve-tone scale and his contribution to the emergence of serialism. The artist sought inspiration for his musical experiments in German academic and artistic circles, which he found particularly inviting as a center of contemporary music. As a twenty-something, Paik spent the late 1950s in Freiburg with the composer Wolfgang Fortner, who advised him to work in the electronic studio of the West German radio station WDR in Cologne, an important center for contemporary music that attracted such composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pauline Oliveros, and György Ligeti. As a follower of John Cage and a participant in Fluxus both in Europe and in the United States, and similarly to other artists of the 1950s and 1960s, Paik pursued an intermedial approach amalgamating performance, new music, avant-garde film, and Fluxus’s expression of the everyday.

Let us rewind to the beginning. In Paik’s Symphony No. 5, which is one in a series of works exemplifying Paik’s interests in this form, his criticism of eternity is followed by a statement: “WHEN to be played is equally important as WHAT to be played” (emphasis original). This statement directs our attention to the temporal aspects of the work. Symphony No. 5 proposes that varying tones and constellations of tones be played on specific days in a year (January 1, at midnight, for example) during the first, second, third, through to the 9997999799th year, and into eternity, thereby not only offering a pun on the notion of the eternal symmetry but also interweaving traditional musical notation with language-based scores in the best traditions of intermedia. Meaning is gleaned from the corporeal engagement with the pages of the score, and its “wandering”

In this essay, I set out to dissect the idea of eternity as present in the formal and conceptual layers of Symphonie No. 5 and Liberation Sonata for Fish and shed light not only on the multifarious possibilities for their abundant afterlives as interpretational realizations of Paik’s objective and textual instructions but also on the materiality of their form, seen as a complex assemblage of changing and unfolding matter. These scores’ material condition puts forward an ontology of openness and indeterminacy on the one hand and, on the other, a material-bound aesthetic of decay that might suggest finitude or closure.

edge of the polluted river liberating my dead fish I might see more of Ralph Ori’s dead rats.” The work exists in at least two variants—one prompting the user to return the fish to the water, the other to the sea—serving the sole purpose of realizing a performance and not only an end in itself (as objects of aesthetic and formal appreciation), these two works, each in their own way, highlight the nexus of relationships of active actors and acts that perform over a long duration. Let us rewind to the beginning. In Paik’s Symphony No. 5, which is one in a series of works exemplifying Paik’s interests in this form, his criticism of eternity is followed by a statement: “WHEN to be played is equally important as WHAT to be played” (emphasis original). This statement directs our attention to the temporal aspects of the work. Symphony No. 5 proposes that varying tones and constellations of tones be played on specific days in a year (January 1, at midnight, for example) during the first, second, third, through to the 9997999799th year, and into eternity, thereby not only offering a pun on the notion of the eternal symmetry but also interweaving traditional musical notation with language-based scores in the best traditions of intermedia. Meaning is gleaned from the corporeal engagement with the pages of the score, and its “wandering”
between versions and formats. An earlier, longer version of the Symphonie No. 5 (21 pages) \([\text{Fig. 129}]\) is collaged with images and annotated with handwritten titles, instructions, section headings, and mathematical equations; the later version—Symphonie Nr. 5 (58 pages) \([\text{Fig. 130}]\)—is neatly presented as a printed page.\(^1\)

The division between notation, annotation, and denotation comes to light in the Symphonie. Each notation provides a score that can be interpreted, annotation helps to comment on and refine the information, while denotation in turn moves away from close reading, helping to identify the nature of the work.\(^2\) Importantly, the move away from close reading, helping to identify the nature of the work, moves away from close reading, helping to identify the nature of the work.\(^3\) And, the "playability" of these notations poses that loss and decay, rather than threatening "to hollow out the memory and meaning" of an object, might have a productive relation to the past.\(^4\) Instead of mourning the crumbling corpus of the dead fish, out of these remains we might read other narratives and understand change not as loss but rather as a release to other states, more open and indeterminate in their own, post-intermedia way (or intra-media way, to which Paik shall return shortly). The Liberation Sonata for Fish offers, therefore, not only a liberation from the anxiety caused by the absence of the stable "object" but also a provocation to the conventional understanding of the roles of conservation and the museum. Uniqueness surfaces in these considerations in the form of a work’s non-replicable trajectory, marked by traces of use. To reiterate, what is of interest here is a countering of the common understanding of a score as notated with which music is not playable." I titled several of my pieces as "playable music," since most of my musical compositions are not playable.\(^5\) Needless to say, to play a work which lasts millions of years requires an extreme form of delegation of the interpretational labor involved and an intergenerational collaboration that is scarcely imaginable in a culture geared to immediate results and prompt effects.\(^6\)

Like any score or script-based work in the Western cultural tradition, both the Liberation Sonata for Fish and Symphonie No. 5 deny that there can ever be a singular interpretation. But Symphonie No. 5 distances itself from this possibility even further. It merges the standard notation on five staves, including notations for tempo ("moderato pastorele") and expression ("espressivo et cantabile"), durations of absence of sounds, and the indication of the means to be used ("strike with the erected penis," which—nota bene—inscribes the work within specific gender politics enabling a male subject to perform the work) with language scores ("hop with one leg," "only think to play"), thus enabling a myriad of possibilities for reading the score. Stretched over a million years, the script details how life should be spent over a long duration—paradoxically so, given the disavowal of eternity in the opening of the script. There is a dark side to the infinite openness of this work: committing to this piece means that we will never see it concluded, either in its long duration or in the multiple possibilities of its score’s enactment. Perhaps this is ultimately how we should read Paik’s disavowal of eternity.

Eternity features differently in the Liberation Sonata for Fish, though the paradox here resounds on a distinct register. While the notion of eternity certainly reverberates on the work’s interpretational level—even if one could perform the "freeing up" of the fish from the envelope and the placing of it in water only one time physically but countless times imaginatively—the already aged, patinated, and heavily stained envelopes of the Liberation Sonata for Fish seem to deny any premise of a long duration. But we should not overlook the positive value in and of decay. Caitlin DeSilvey proposes that loss and decay, rather than threatening "to hollow out the memory and meaning" of an object, might have a productive relation to the past. Instead of mourning the crumbling corpus of the dead fish, out of these remains we might read other narratives and understand change not as loss but rather as a release to other states, more open and indeterminate in their own, post-intermedia way (or intra-media way, to which I shall return shortly). The Liberation Sonata for Fish offers, therefore, not only a liberation from the anxiety caused by the absence of the stable "object" but also a provocation to the conventional understanding of the roles of conservation and the museum. Importantly, it opens a horizon of futurity unbound by material fixation and atesis. Uniqueness surfaces in these considerations in the form of a work’s non-replicable trajectory, marked by traces of use. To reiterate, what is of interest here is a countering of the common understanding of a score as...
simply serving the performance’s realization (which might also, no doubt, have a unique character). Although the later, printed version of Symphonie No. 5 seems to lend itself to multiplication, yet fail to imitate its early hand-annotated, eucologic structure. The performance of degradation and decay in Liberation Sonata for Fish, however, though issued in a number of editions (as of 1965), seems to endow each individual instance of this work with a unique pattern of change—stains, traces of individual life lived and lost, material decomposition, and interaction between the paper and the organic material. Lastly, if a score is a necessary condition for these intermedia works to exist, then their material precarity and changeability play a role in what I call these works’ intramediality. In Latin "intra" signifies "occurring within." In my understanding of the word, intramediality denotes a turn inward into the permanent, unloppable, and never-at-rest movement of matter and an invitation to look into and through these works’ materiality. Only in this way might we notice that the deep materiality of Liberation Sonata for Fish and Symphonie No. 5 is an indicator of an incipient, rather than preordained, work—one that is simultaneously precarious in its material, actual manifestations and sustained in its endless potential.

One evening in the summer of 1960 I visited Karlheinz Stockhausen with the intention of explaining to him that fixed form has to be maintained because it is based on the form of sex, one-direction-crescendo (can you imagine a many-direction crescendo? We have but one heart), climax, catharsis—human nature — Yin Yang — Nature of Nature — proton and electron. As if he had expected me to say something like this (and I never got around to really say it to him), he began to explain that we must get rid of fixed musical form because it is like sex. It has no freedom. It is as old as the theory of tragedy of Aristotle, of Faust, etc. Then Stockhausen explained the possibility of a free and calm love. In his yet unfinished piece “Paare” (pairs) there is neither a fixed beginning nor ending. The audience may come into the concert hall and leave freely. And come back. All the while the music continues, for 5-6 hours or more until the last listener has left. This idea impressed me but did not convince me because at that time I had been seeking for “the last consummate second.” In vain I had been working for half a year in order to “fix” on tape this last consummation of 30 seconds. Next spring, on my way to take a cure at Titisee, while looking out of the window of the moving train, I realized for the first time the old Zen-Cage thesis:

“It is beautiful, not because it changes beautifully but simply—because it changes.”

If nature is more beautiful than art is, it is not so because of its intensity or complexity but because of its variability, abundant abundance, endless quantity. The word “quality” has two different meanings although in everyday usage the meanings are rather mixed-up.

1. “good, better, best” – it permits the possibility of comparison.
2. Character, individuality, “Eigenschaft”, – it excludes the possibility of comparison.

We can put an end to (aufheben) quality (in its first meaning) by means of the formidable quantity, endless variability, abundance of the mediocres. Then only the second meaning of quality (character, individuality, etc) remains. One can arrive at a consciousness of quality (second meaning) through some religious experience or by another extreme situation. Then each single moment becomes independent. One forgets as quickly as children do. Stockhausen’s new term “Moment” seems to me to be of strong importance in this connection.

But how can one arrive at variability without losing intensity? Unifying variability and intensity has been one of the most important problems. Is intensity (tension, high voltage) essential to life? Perhaps one has to substitute this physical dimension rather by a spiritual or ideological dimension, f.i. ambiguity, depth, etc., if there is such a dimension.