Paul Garrin: Preserving Paik

Unique experience and first-hand knowledge gained by working as a primary collaborator with Nam June Paik between the years of 1981 – 1997.

Paul Garrin and Nam June Paik creating video in studio jam session at Post Perfect, New York, 1992.

Conservation and restoration of NJP's video works has been a critical concern from my first day working with Nam June beginning in March, 1981.

During the preparation of Nam June's seminal 1982 retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York the notion of obsolescence and renewal became ingrained in our practice. I learned first hand that Nam June, often out of necessity, sometimes through serendipity, created an aesthetic and conceptual path that both preserves the spirit and concept of the work while embracing the process of technological obsolescence and renewal. The cycle of obsolescence and renewal is a recurring theme in Paik's works.

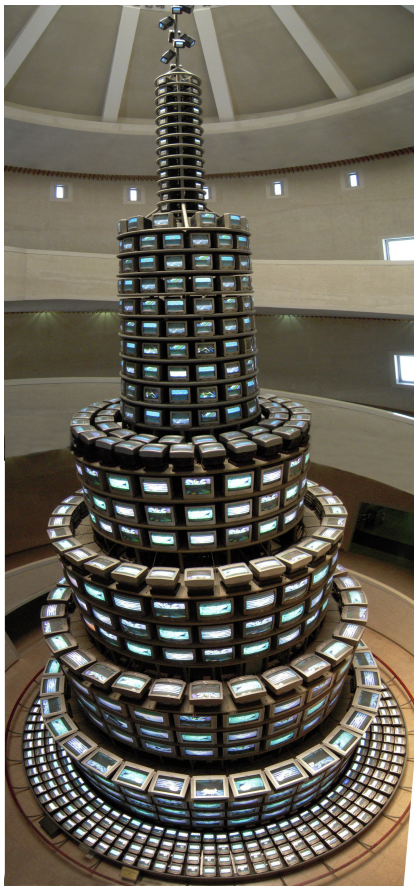
For example, works like candle TV, where the entire insides of an antique television set were removed and replaced by a candle: the candle itself became the the element which required constant renewal. Every day a new candle is lit.

Other installations such as an early work entitled “Random Access” needed to be re-created entirely for the show. Strips of magnetic recording tape (with audio recordings of electronic sounds Paik had prepared) were glued to the wall in a

free-form pattern. A reel-to-reel tape recorder was modified by re-wiring the playback head with a set of long wires, extending the playhead from the machine. This enabled exhibition-goers to interact with the work by dragging the tape head over the strips of tape which reproduced the sounds over a set of amplified speakers. Each time "Random Access' was exhibited, it had to be renewed with new strips of audio tape (now itself an obsolete medium) glued to the wall.

Over and over again Paik uses and re-uses old TV sets that are filled with new TV sets. If a work contains a particular type of TV cabinet that gives the work a distinctive character, the cabinet must remain unchanged because of its sculptural and aesthetic qualities. In instances where antique TVs defined the sculptural character of the work (i.e. TV Robots, TV Arches, and others) new color TVs replaced the obsolete electronics and screen of the original.

Works created in the 1980s and 1990s which used contemporary TV sets of the time are now coming to the end of life and need replacement. In many works the physical quality of the cabinet define the sculptural character of the work. Changing the cabinet by installing new TVs will inevitably change the character of the work.



For example, when "The More the Better" had its monitors renewed, the replacement sets had a different physical dimension than the original. This affected the entire structure and overall look of the work. The solution, although it may have been more painstaking and costly, would have been to preserve the original cabinets and insert a contemporary screen into the existing cabinet. Today, The More the Better faces an even greater question of longevity given the obsolescence of the cathode ray tube, and the increasing demand to reduce the amount of electricity it takes to sustain the work. In order to preserve The More the Better for future generations, it must receive energy efficient flat-screens installed inside the existing (now antique) cabinets. This would preserve the aesthetics of the "wedding cake" tower of TV sets that Nam June envisioned, while situating the work in a world where energy efficiency and reducing operating costs is critical. In fact, I'm certain that if Nam June were here today, he would be thrilled with the prospect of powering The More the Better using solar and wind energy. The rooftop of the museum covered in solar panels (connected to a large battery bank) would be a revolutionary step for the preservation of monumental video art in the 21st Century, and a bold statement by the people of S. Korea that they are as serious about clean, renewable energy as they are about the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage.

Some works however face a more challenging future. Paik was aware of this long ago; I learned this from him first-hand 35 years ago during the dawn of my tenure as his collaborator: that the clock was ticking for many works that depended on specific qualities of the TV monitors they were based on. Moon is the Oldest TV, Magnet TV (both color and black/white), Point of Light, Participation TV, and TV Clock all depend on modification of the functioning of the cathode ray tube by directly manipulating the electron guns that scan and illuminate the inside of the tube, creating the image.

Moon is the Oldest TV is the first of those works, which as early as 1984, was becoming extinct. The very special characteristics of the B/W monitors used in that work were rare. Most of the sets used for the TV Moons were commercial B/W NTSC television studio monitors (i.e. Conrac, Philips, GE) manufactured in the US in the 1950s and early 60s. The effect of placing magnets inside those particular monitors is what created the phases of the moon. Pulling the "yoke" back from its normal position created an organically circular shape like a full moon. Placing magnets of different strengths around the neck of the CRT caused the circle to eclipse into 12 phases of the moon.

One by one the monitor's electronics began to fail. At one point we no longer had 12 sets that could make a complete cycle of full moon to new moon. For the 1984 retrospective at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, Nam June had asked me to take the one fully functional Conrac monitor in his Mercer Street studio and shoot video tapes for each of the 12 phases of the moon. The summer 1984 show in Tokyo was the first time that Moon is the Oldest TV was shown as a "simulation" on new SONY monitors playing back from 12 Umatic video tapes. The set of master tapes created for Moon is the Oldest TV are vital to the preservation of this work now that the rare and specialzed "TV MOON READY" monitors are for all practical purposes considered extinct. The last time that I recall Moon is the Oldest TV being exhibited with actual CRT monitors/magnets was Paiks phenomenal show in Zuerich in 1991 (Curated by Tony Stoos) where there were B/W European standard TVs able to produce perfect moons. I had the honor of installing that work in the presence of Nam June. (The TV Moon was one of the first works that I specialized in and became expert at in the early days working with Nam June). Creating that piece is dangerous and potentially deadly – it required placing magnets inside the TV while it was on, avoiding contact with the high-voltage transmission line so as not to get electrocuted, while at the same time being exposed to high levels of X-RAY radiation characteristic of the industrial class monitors of that generation.

Not all works however can be so elegantly simulated and still hold up aesthetically and conceptually. Color Magnet TV uses a 1960's 25 inch color TV and a large industrial horseshoe magnet mounted in front of the screen that creates a distinct signature magnetic field pattern scattering the RED/GREEN/BLUE scans. The phenomenon created by the interaction of the strong magnetic field with the electron beam of the cathode ray tube is the true beauty and wonder of that

piece. When that picture tube dies, most likely so does that work. The uniqueness of the result of putting THAT magnet in front of THAT screen may be extremely difficult to recreate even if a working similar TV of similar vintage is found, due to variations in the analog circuitry. The concept is there but the result may not approach the sublime beauty resulting from the serendipity of combining the two objects Paik used in the original work.

The preservation and restoration of the video content is a vital element that must be done properly to assure that the video quality and integrity lasts for generations to come.

Video installations as exhibited in the 1980s such as TV Garden, Vyramid, TV Cello, initially relied on video tape playback. Using Umatic or Betamax tapes was expensive and unreliable. Tapes had to be constantly replaced – at the 1982 Whitney exhibition we had boxes of new copies that replaced worn out tapes weekly. Video decks broke down and needed repair. The future of video art as a museum-ready and collectible medium in those days was dim. By the mid 1980s the cost of producing a 12 inch analog laser disc became affordable with the advent of write-once recordable plastic laser discs. This revolutionized the reliability and collectability of video art. Virtually every Paik work from 1985 on was released on analog laserdisk. Despite the perception that the laserdisk video quality was high, in fact the quality is very poor. Although the laserdiscs made works virtually maintenance free, over time discs began to fail, the players suffered mechanical breakdowns, and end-of-life of their electronic components.

Some collectors and institutions, with no other options, made copies of the laserdiscs to other media such as DVD as a means to prolong the life of the works. In worst cases the video content has been entirely lost, leaving works unsuitable for exhibition, as well as making them un-sellable. Copying a laserdisc to any medium is a poor choice and an inferior method of preserving the video content of Nam June Paik's works. Proper restoration from master sources using contemporary electronics, methods, and media are essential to producing the highest quality video possible that will extend the life and value of the works for years to come.