

# Notation and Eternity in *Symphonie No. 5* and *Liberation Sonata for Fish*

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“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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

The materiality of this curious object strikes me as I begin to slowly unpack the work [Fig. 125]. The inscription, written in a mix of capital and lower-case letters, seems improvised. I inspect the envelope: it is stained, dis-

playing traces of something akin to watery brush-strokes, 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

1 In two different versions of the work, Paik uses this phrase bilingually, in German and English. The hand- and typewritten version from the Sohm Archive features the English sentence quoted above, together with the German equivalent: “Die [sic] Ewigkeit-kult ist die längste Krankheit der Menschheit.” 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 *Symphonie No. 5* includes references to nine of Beethoven’s symphonies followed by instructions on different types of sexual intercourse.

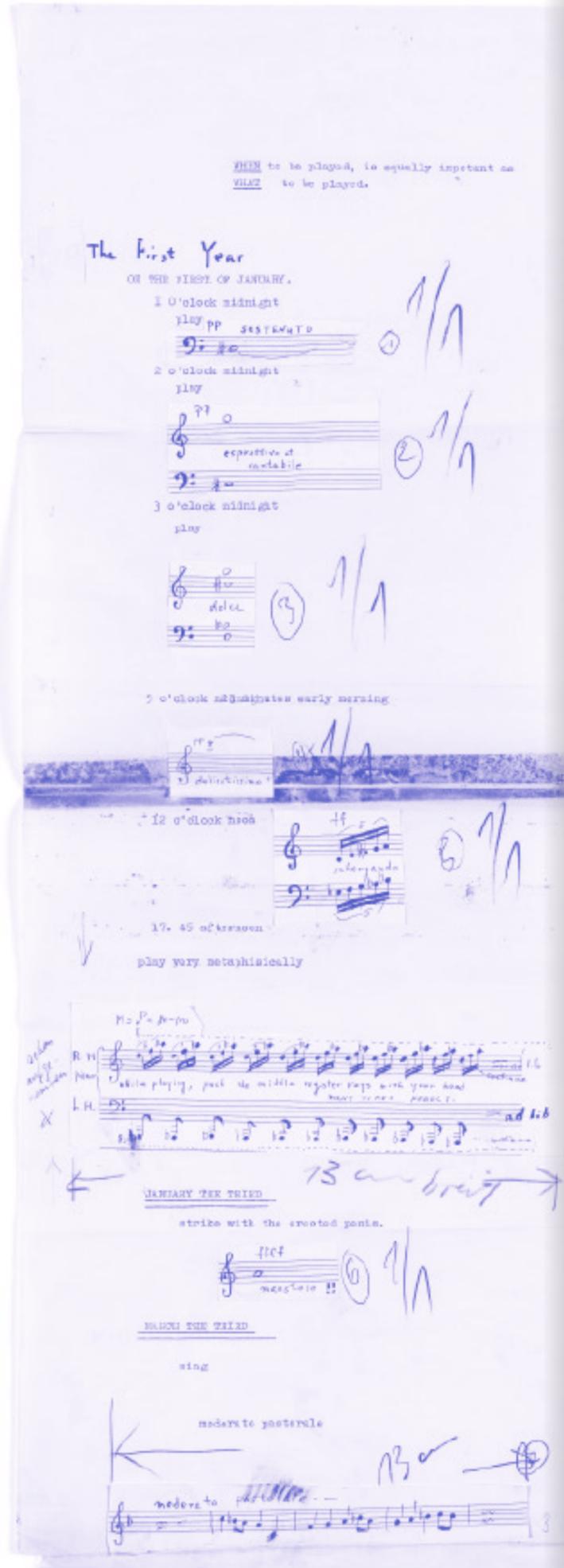
3 The Nam June Paik Archive, Smithsonian American Art Museum, NJP.2.EPH.12.



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edge of the polluted river liberating my dead fish I might see more of Ralph Ortiz's dead rats."<sup>4</sup> The work exists in at least two variants—one prompting the user to return the fish to the water, the other to the sea—which have been distributed across collections worldwide in an unknown number of editions [Figs. 125/126].<sup>5</sup> Created in the aftermath of Paik's active engagement in Fluxus, Paik's *Liberation Sonata for Fish* recalls the Fluxus aesthetics of instruction and event score (notably instigated by George Brecht and practiced by the members of Fluxus's international circles), which combined a textual description of varying length and abstraction with the form of a paper object, often enclosed in an envelope or a box (some examples of this are *Water Yam*, 1963, and the scores included in the collective anthology, 1964).

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 objectual 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.



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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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, Mauricio Kagel, and György Ligeti.<sup>8</sup> 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

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pursued an intermedial approach amalgamating performance, new music, avant-garde film, and Fluxus's expression of the everyday. These intermedial interests allow us to situate Paik's notational works such as *Symphonie No. 5* and *Liberation Sonata for Fish* as moments of reorientation and transition between music and multimedia in his work. Not entirely a means to an end (as in an instruction serving the sole purpose of realizing a performance) and not only an end in themselves (as objects of aesthetic and formal appreciation), these two works, each in their own way, highlight the nexus of relationships of active actors and actants who perform over a long duration. But let us rewind to the beginning. In Paik's *Symphonie 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:<sup>9</sup> "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. *Symphonie Nr. 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 99997999th year, and into eternity, thereby not only offering a pun on the notion of the eternal symphony but also interweaving traditional musical notation with language-based scores in the best tradition of intermedia. Meaning is gleaned from the corporeal engagement with the pages of the score, and its "wandering"

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4 Jill Johnston, *The Village Voice*, 1969, excerpt available at <http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2014/01/nam-june-paik-liberation-sonata-for-fish.html> (accessed December 13, 2022). Johnston refers to the central figure in US postwar art, Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

5 The exchange of "sea" for "water" might have been a result of Paik's rethinking of the work for Charlotte Moorman's festival, which took place near the East River. One of these variants includes 9½" x 4" envelopes with glassine windows and one 6½" x 3½" without windows. Some of these editions are missing the fish. Personal email exchange with Scott Krafft of the Northwestern University Libraries.

6 On this topic, see the chapter "Musical Roots of Performed and Performative Media" in my book *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 42–61. See also Hanna B. Hölling, "Paik, Musically: Fluxus, Stockhausen, Cage," online catalogue, research project, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea, accessed December 13, 2022, <http://namjunepaik.site/en/paik-musically-fluxus-stockhausen-cage/>.

7 Serialism is a technique of composition based on the twelve-tone scale. On Paik's musical background and how he bridged Eastern and Western cultures via his musical interests, see Yongwoo Lee, "Informazione e comunicazione," in *Nam June Paik: Lo sciamano del video* (Milan: Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, 1994), 70.

8 Paik credits Stockhausen with opening his eyes to the potential of electronic media: "After twelve Performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's Originale, I started a new life from November 1961. By starting a new life I mean that I stocked my whole library except those [books] on TV technique into storage and locked it up. I read and practiced only electronics. In other words, I went back to the Spartan life of pre-college days ... only physics and electronics." Manuela Ammer, "In Engineering There Is Always the Other—The Other: Nam June Paik's Television Environment in *Exposition of Music: Electronic Television*, Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal 1963," in *Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music, Electronic Television, Revisited*, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Cologne: Walther König Verlag, 2009), 65.

9 Paik's interest in symphonies is manifest in his other compositions, such as *Young Penis Symphonie* (1962) [Fig. 38] or *Sinfonie for 20 Rooms* (1961) [Fig. 135–138], the latter of which, though never realized during Paik's life, involved a simultaneous performance for a multitude of senses.

10 The collaged original of the 21-page notation of *Symphonie No. 5* is housed in the Sohm Archive, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Germany. The Nam June Paik Archive at the Smithsonian holds a xerocopy of this work, which has been published in *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, ed. John G. Hanhardt, Gregory Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 41–62. The "German version" from the Museum Ostwall at the Dortmund U is identical with the Silverman archive version accessible on the MoMA website as the first page of the 18-page script. The German version features a dedication to C. Caspari, and information about translation, "Übersetzung: Tomas Schmit."

11 I draw on the ideas of Clarisse Bardot, "Recall: An Environment for Notation / Annotation / Denotation," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 20, no. 6 (2015): 82–86.

12 See Hanna B. Hölling, "Unpacking the Score: Fluxus and the Material Legacy of Intermediality," in "Fluxus Perspectives," *On Curating* 51 (2021), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-51-reader/unpacking-the-score-notes-on-the-material-legacy-of-intermediality.html>.

13 On stratigraphy in performance-based works, see Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2015), 81, 86.

14 Together with the documentation, props, leftovers, and relics of a concluded, or yet-to-be-performed, event, the score forms an ever-expanding stratigraphy of the work's material residues. For an account of a score as productively unstable, see Alison D'Amato, "Mutable and Durable: The Performance Score after 1960," in *Object—Event—Performance: Art, Materiality, and Continuity since the 1960s*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 137–56.

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between versions and formats. An earlier, longer version of the *Symphonie No. 5* (21 pages) [Figs. 124/127/128] is collaged with images and annotated with handwritten titles, instructions, section headings, and mathematical equations; the later version—*Symphonie Nr. 5* (18 pages) [Fig. 129]—is neatly presented as a printed page.<sup>10</sup>

The division between notation, annotation, and denotation comes to mind: if 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.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the move away from the handwritten to the printed word also removes the “unique” autographic moment. Parallels can be drawn to Yoko Ono’s deployment of the hand of her then-husband, composer Toshi Ichiyanagi, to script the *Instructions for Paintings* (1962) for her exhibition at Sōgetsu Art Center in May 1962, with the aim of removing the “emotional” and thereby the authorial element in these works.<sup>12</sup> In *Liberation Sonata for Fish*, Paik clearly walks the line by preserving the autographic gesture of his handwriting on the envelope, on the one hand, and by reproducing it in printed form on the other.

If we assume that (Paik’s) scores not only promise a return of the otherwise fleeting event but also offer its physical stabilization, then these scores’ temporal vector points in two directions.<sup>13</sup> But the very score itself, as a sort of apparently solid concretization of matter, performs the instability of its own material constitution, thereby undergoing physical degradation, change, and

decay manifested both in the disintegrating fish in the *Liberation Sonata for Fish* and in the yellowish, aged paper of the hand-annotated version of *Symphonie No. 5*.<sup>14</sup> Manipulation, too, plays a role in the equation, illustrated by the score’s transition from its handwritten adornments of the five-line staves (in the Sohm collection) [Figs. 127/128] to a printed, later version of *Symphonie Nr. 5* (to be found, for instance, in the Museum Ostwall and in the Silverman archive) [Fig. 129]. An intriguing example of the score’s changeability and recursiveness might be seen in Ken Friedman’s adaptation of this work for a postcard in the series “Selection from International Sources” (summer 1973) [Figs. 130/131]. The first page of *Symphonie Nr. 5* has been scaled down to a postcard, which Friedman decorated with folds of printed paper affixed to its recto and verso with transparent tape. Here, the radicalization of music takes place on two levels: firstly, Paik imposes a notational eternity on the otherwise classical musical form; secondly, he objectifies the scores by adorning them with, and thus turning them into, three dimensional objects. As receivers of this message, we are asked to activate senses beyond vision.

No doubt, the “playability” of these notations poses questions, as Paik, on another occasion, draws parallels to Norbert Wiener’s idea: “The information in which a message was sent plays the same role as the information in which a message is not sent.”<sup>15</sup> Paik concludes: “It sounds almost Cagean—Cage might say, ‘a notation with which music is playable plays the same role as the

notation with which music is not playable.’ I titled several of my pieces as ‘playable music,’ since most of my musical compositions are not playable.”<sup>16</sup> 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 progress and prompt effects.<sup>17</sup>

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 pastorale”) 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 evidently 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 both conservation and the museum. Importantly, it opens a horizon of futurity unbound by material fixation and stasis.

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

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15 Nam June Paik, “Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan: Communication Revolution (1998),” Archives of Commemorative Lectures, Kyoto Prize (1998), accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.kyotoprize.org/en/speech/?award-field=arts-en>.

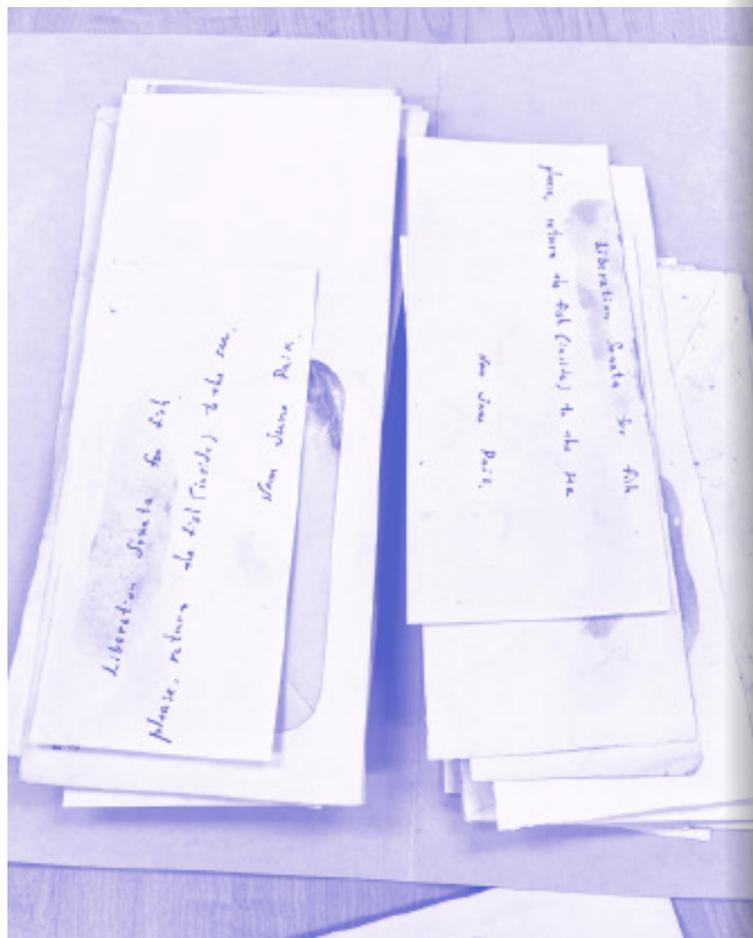
16 Paik, “Norbert Wiener and Marshall McLuhan.”

17 A parallel might be drawn to Cage’s *Organ2/ASLSP* (1987), a work which was to be concluded, as conceived, in 2640.

18 Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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, the same cannot be said of its earlier version containing inscriptions, whose xeroopies emulate the message, yet fail to imitate its early hand-annotated, collaged structure. The performance of degradation and decay in *Liberation Sonata for Fish*, however, though issued in a number of editions [Figs. 125/126/132],<sup>19</sup> 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, unstoppable, 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.



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To The "Symphony For 20 Rooms" (c.1963)  
Nam June Paik

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 – Ying 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 abundancy, 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.