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**CAN WE
TALK POST-
PRESER-
VATION?
A LETTER
TO PAIK
NAM JUNE**



Dear Nam June,¹

On the occasion of your ninetieth birth anniversary, I am writing to you from the past, yet addressing you in the future. As I prepare to present this script at [the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea \(MMCA\) in Gwacheon](#), I cannot help but reflect on the paradoxical nature of our communication. Even though you are no longer with us, your legacy continues to inspire and challenge us. As you once said, “the future is now.”

I was recently told by someone that media like the ones you worked with—cathode-ray-tube monitors, video tapes or laser discs and their players, as well as lasers—are considered “passé” in museums. At first, Nam June, I was at a loss for words, but then I wanted to argue vehemently: “I strongly disagree!” What does it mean for these media to be “passé”? Are they outdated, obsolete, or outmoded? Being outmoded is not necessarily a negative value, but rather evidence of a rich history of changing technology, knowledge, attitude and fashion. These media were implemented in works as effects of creative practice reflecting the spirit of their time. And from your media, dear Paik, we can see how the practices of collecting, archiving, conserving, and preserving have shifted from an object-orientation of traditional conservation to a more open ethics and practice of care, which, more recently, have included not only the work and its effects but also, above all, the people who created it and have maintained it over time, along with their tacit and explicit knowledge.

Your use of media has taught me so much about the world, Nam June. From the dynamic and evocative power of video to the monumental beauty of your cathode-ray-tube video walls, to the stoic tranquility of electronic lines and the participatory dynamics of activation, I have gained invaluable insights into the possibilities and limitations of electronic media. Your works and concepts lie at the very foundation of contemporary concerns with electronic media, both within and outside of collecting institutions. Those of us fortunate enough to have immediate access to your works have gained valuable insights into the behavior of other electronic media. We have come to understand their susceptibility to alteration, wear and

1. This essay emerged as a script for a lecture presentation [at the symposium My Paik Nam June held at the MMCA Gwacheon on November 18, 2022](#).

tear, and technological obsolescence. Through this experience, we have witnessed the considerable challenge of preserving authenticity and originality within museums that adhere to the Western paradigm of unique and precious objects intended to convey the author’s intentions.

Nam June, although I never met you, you graciously guided me through the world of your media, which I desperately wished to comprehend. Your spirit, inspiration, and stamina seemed always present in my relationships with your friends and collaborators, whom I interviewed and came to know in their ateliers, labs, workshops, and homes on three continents. In these encounters, I felt as though I was encountering you, the artist, and I am grateful for the role you have played in my life.

This letter is structured around selected quotes from your statements, which provide a useful framework for thinking about several important insights which I have gained in my twelve-year study of your works. To support my points, I will reference your multimedia artwork *Canopus*, which was created in 1989 and is currently housed at the ZKM Center for Art Media in Karlsruhe, Germany.

FIRST QUOTATION

As for the eternity of my work, you don’t need to worry at all ... It will last longer than Vermeer or Rembrandt. You simply repair or replace the picture tube when it gets old, which is cheaper than [a restorer].²

In a letter to Edy de Wilde, the former director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, dated September 25, 1977, you expressed your support for the replacement and repair of a picture tube and proposed the idea of waiving restoration. I find your suggestion intriguing as it highlights the challenges faced by curators and conservators in preserving and maintaining contemporary art collections. These challenges are indeed essential factors to consider in the overall preservation and maintenance of contemporary art.

Allow me to share an example that sheds light on the topic at hand—*Canopus*, a multimedia artwork that played a significant role

2. Paik Nam June to Edy de Wilde, the former director of the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, September 25, 1977. Archive of the Stedelijk Museum.

in my early career as the chief conservator at ZKM. One morning in December 2008, my phone rang unexpectedly, and a colleague from the technical department informed me of distressing news: *Canopus* had fallen from the wall and suffered severe damage [Fig. 1]. This installation was created in 1990 and named after the brightest star in the southern constellation of Carina and Argo Navis. It comprised six eight-inch Sony monitors symmetrically arranged around a chromed Oldsmobile hubcap from the 1970s inscribed with Korean calligraphy and bearing your signature [Fig. 2].

The incident occurred at an external gallery featuring the exhibition of your works from the ZKM collection. The night guard was startled by a loud crash at 5:10 in the morning and found *Canopus* lying face down on the floor amidst scattered glass. The aluminum



[Fig. 2] Paik Nam June, *Canopus*, from the series *Planetarium*, 1990, single-channel video sculpture: 6 monitors, 1 laserdisc, 1 laserdisc player, ca. 86 cm in diameter, collection: ZKM | Center for Art and Media. Photo by Steffen Harms. © Nam June Paik; Photo © ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien.

[Fig. 3] Paik Nam June, *Canopus*, 1989. Detail of the damaged hubcap.



[Fig. 1] Paik Nam June, *Canopus*, 1989. Documentation of the damage, December 8, 2008.

frame holding the monitors was exposed, and loose electric cables hung from the wall. Almost all the elements of the installation were damaged upon examination by my colleagues from the conservation department and me. All six cathode-ray-tube (CRT) monitors had imploded, with their plastic cases shattered, and the hubcap was severely dented and deformed [Fig. 3].

Although the damage was unfortunate, it sparked one of the most compelling institutional discussions I have ever been a part of.

It led to an examination of the ways we think about the preservation and maintenance of contemporary art, as well as discussions about artistic intention and the relationship between the original artwork and its subsequent iterations. Allow me to outline a few key points that were raised during that discussion.

As evidenced by the images taken in the course of the conservation examination, repairing or replacing the monitors in your *Canopus* became necessary. Repairing a picture tube, as you proposed, involves having the means and knowledge to recover its electronic inner workings. However, this knowledge is becoming increasingly scarce, as the expert technicians who can fix a defective cathode-ray-tube monitor are aging and the new generation rarely recognizes the importance of preserving this technical knowledge, unless prompted by archival or museum work. At the ZKM Center for Art Media, we hired a specialized technician whose knowledge allowed him to determine whether a picture tube was worth repairing or if it needed to be replaced. The preservation of technical know-how is just as important, if not more important, than the preservation of physical objects. However, the work of repairing a picture tube is not taught in most conservation programs, so museums often rely on external experts to conduct conservation measures on multimedia installations.³ The second issue with repairing picture tubes is that replacement parts are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Although the secondhand market still provides dated equipment, it may run out of replacement parts soon. As a result, implementing your proposal is not as straightforward as it may have initially seemed.

Your proposed replacement of the picture tube is an interesting topic that delves into the philosophy of conservation. For some, the act of replacing a picture tube might simply involve sourcing a similar or identical device from the secondhand market and performing the replacement. Many museums have adopted the strategy of stockpiling technologies from the 1960s–90s. However, with the production of high-end CRTs ceasing around 2010, the feasibility of the replacement strategy is limited, despite the emergence of new approaches to reengineering these media.

So allow me to convey the outcome of the decision made

3. Other museums employ such specialists. For instance, CT Electronics in New York is known for offering their expertise to U.S. museums.

regarding your *Canopus*: It was determined that the piece would be presented with replaced picture tubes, enclosed in refurbished frames, and the video program would be played back from the original flash media player which was undamaged. The damaged, inscribed hubcap would be retained, as it was deemed inappropriate to emulate or replicate it.

My dear Paik, what intrigues me more about the replacement of your *Canopus* is the shift from technical functionality to contemporary conservation ethics and aesthetics. What does it mean to replace a defective component of a multimedia installation with a similar or identical device? As electronic media like video and computer-based works entered the realm of conservation objects, the field developed a nuanced vocabulary to distinguish between emulation, migration, and reinterpretation. Emulation attempts to replicate the original, while migration preserves a work by transferring it to a new platform. Reinterpretation involves recreating a work from scratch to preserve its effects rather than the original material. Here lies the crux of the matter, don't you agree? The idea that reinterpretation is further removed from the initial appearance and feel of the installation implies a deeply held belief in the existence of an authentic original to which we must return. However, wasn't this something you opposed from the start? Didn't you argue for variability and changeability, stating that repetition is dull and that variability, as a direct consequence of intensity, is essential to your work?

Paik, I believe there is more to consider regarding the notion of time in relation to the conservation of artworks. As you once said, "I think I understand time better than the video artists who came from painting-sculpture,"⁴ and you also referred to your Wuppertal exhibition as "neither painting nor sculpture, but a 'time-art'."⁵ I share your understanding that time feels faster in new technologies, but it

4. "I think I understand time better than the video artists who came from painting-sculpture ... Music is the manipulation of time ... As painters understand abstract space, I understand abstract time." Paik Nam June and Paul Schimmel, "Abstract Time," *Arts Magazine*, December 1974, 52–53.

5. "One must stress that this is neither painting nor sculpture, but a 'time-art.'" My English translation from Paik's German original: "Jedenfalls muss man betonen, dass es weder Malerei, noch Skulptur, sondern ein 'Zeit-Kunst' ist." Paik Nam June to Rudolf Jähning, December 22, 1962, Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection; Paik Nam June, *Nam June Paik: Niederschriften eines Kulturnomaden. Aphorismen, Briefe, Texte*, ed. Edith Decker (Cologne: DuMont, 1992), 54.

is crucial to recognize that conservation implicitly operates within a linear notion of time. This linear notion of time refers to the sequential, chronological time that measures events and is associated with clocks, machines, scientific apparatus, historic chronologies, industry, and labor.

Conservators tend to think about events that occur in the life of artworks as taking place on a timeline, and they value them based on their chronological precedence. This valuation is evident in their desire to access the point of creation, the artist's intention, and the sources of the original object. The conservation paradigms of reversibility, the belief in an original or preferred condition of an artwork, and the notion of restoration all rest on the implied notion of measurable and linear time. However, recent scholarship suggests that museums have long been preoccupied with the sameness of objects, which is only partially true, since conservation actions have always oriented themselves towards an original that existed in the artwork's past.

Indeed, Paik, the paradox of identity and change is a fascinating topic that raises important questions about the nature of objects and their continuity through time. It challenges us to rethink our assumptions about sameness and difference, and to consider the role of time and transformation in shaping the identities of objects. The ship of Theseus is just one example of this paradox, but it has profound implications for conservation and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Greek philosopher Plutarch, in his *Vita Thesei*, 22–23, introduces Theseus, the mythological demigod and hero, and a leader in classical Athens.⁶ The ship on which Theseus battled became a memorial and was kept intact for some hundreds of years. But because the ship has been restored multiple times—the old planks having been taken away as they decayed and replaced by new and stronger timber—the ship, according to Plutarch, “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.”⁷ Plutarch poses a paradox about the identity of objects experiencing change that is still intensely

6. Plutarch, “Vita Thesei, 23,” trans. Wilhelm K. Essler, in “Was ist und zu welchem Ende betreibt man Metaphysik?” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 281–315. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke resurrected the paradox of the ship of Theseus in philosophy.

7. Ibid.

debated in contemporary ontology. How do we determine when an object has changed enough to warrant a different identity? How do we reconcile the need to preserve the original material with the inevitability of decay and change? These are complex questions that require careful consideration, and they underscore the importance of ongoing dialogue and collaboration between artists, conservators, and scholars.

Let us return once more to *Canopus*, Nam June. As a result of the incident, the monitors were replaced with six similar devices that play back from a flash media player (the latter had been installed before the incident, resulting in a migration of the video data to a new format). From the perspective of nominal authenticity, which concerns the empirical facts regarding the artwork's origins, this version of *Canopus* is not identical to its pre-incident form. However, according to the performative paradigm and its associated expressive authenticity, which emphasizes interpretation and faithfulness to the artist's intent, the post-2008 *Canopus* is still identical to its pre-incident manifestation. Notably, any attempt to replace the damaged hubcap with a reconstructed inscription was rejected as a falsification of the artwork. This is because museums and conservation professionals adhere to the traditional notion of nominal, material authenticity when it comes to the sculptural and autographic aspects of multimedia works. In contrast, they prioritize expressive authenticity when dealing with electronic media playback and display devices. Consequently, a work's changeability is exhibited not only on its operational and material level but also on the level of its conceptualization. It is fascinating to consider the intricacies of your artworks and your words, Nam June.

To truly care for a work of art that is a “changing same,” as Amiri Baraka and Rebecca Schneider have put it,⁸ we must let go of our attachment to the idea of linear time progression and see the work as a network of relationships, a swarm of manifestations where there is no precedence given to earlier or later versions. In my opinion, conserving a work like yours involves engaging with the

8. See Nathaniel Mackey, “The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka,” *Boundary 2*, 6, no. 2 (1978): 355–386; Rebecca Schneider and Hanna Hölling, “When Our Art is in Our Hands,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2023), 50–69.

archive not just as a physical space holding instructions, documents, and condition reports, but also as a virtual domain that contains all manifestations of the work. It is this archive that enables the activation of a work, and, reciprocally, every subsequent activation contributes to it.

Dear Paik, I trust you'll concur that when a picture tube wears out, it cannot be easily restored or replaced, nor is it more cost-effective than employing a restorer. Even if this were a practical option (which is an ambitious and challenging goal to accomplish), we cannot substitute one medium with another without thoroughly considering the implications of such a substitution.

To truly understand the work and its significance, we must move beyond the artwork's physicality and consider questions such as: *What exactly is the work? How and when is it?* Conservation must be viewed as an intellectual pursuit that not only addresses what the work is, but also generates knowledge that allows us to better appreciate and care for it. Rather than simply reacting to the current state of the work, conservation should act and be seen as an epistemic practice that draws attention to the object, intervenes in it, and generates new insights about it. In this way, conservation goes beyond mere technical preservation and becomes a means of bringing objects to conscious attention, ultimately generating knowledge and expanding our understanding of them.

SECOND QUOTATION,

Video installation will become like Opera ... in which only the score will be ueberliefert [handed down] to the next generation and the video curators in the next and subsequent generations will re-interpretate [sic] and install them every time new in their anpassendes [adaptive] Place and the accents of the new incarnation will have the strong personal traits of the conductor, like Karajan's Neunte [Ninth] or Toscanini's Dritte [Third].⁹

Thank you for your words, Nam June. Your creative foundation in

9. Paik Nam June, "Artificial Intelligence vs Artificial Metabolism," in *Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video*, eds. Wulf Herzogenrath and Sabine Maria Schmidt (Bremen, Germany: Kunsthalle Bremen, 1999), 252–53. All spellings and capitalizations are per the original. The translations of German words are my own.

classical and experimental music, as well as your teachings from Schoenberg, Fortner, Stockhausen, and Cage, has led us to view your works through a musical lens. The centrality of musical logic and structure in your various sonatas, symphonies, and performances is evident through instrumentation, notation, and score. By following the path of music, we may break free from the fixation on objects and their value as commodities, a tendency which has been historically linked to Western models of collecting and "owning" art that was often obtained through colonial violence against non-Western cultures. To conceive of your multimedia installations, such as *Canopus*—but also your other installations such as *TV Garden* (1974) and *Noah's Ark* (1989, [Fig. 4])—through the prism of music allows for their execution based on instructions or scores, enabling them to materialize in multiple locations, even simultaneously. Scores can be classified into two categories: a priori and a posteriori, contingent on whether they precede the materialization of a work or not. They can also be referred to as primary and secondary, indicating the distinction between the original authorial formulation and the subsequent conservation and/or curatorial reformulation, or expansion of the score.¹⁰ Importantly, scores play a crucial role in the non-material, inter-generational transmission of culture and knowledge.

Nam June, could we consider the devices used to reinstantiate your installations as instruments, whether they are historical or new? As a composer and interpreter, you understand that historically accurate performances may or may not involve historical instruments. Playing Bach on a harpsichord may be historically accurate and distinctive, but not necessarily superior to playing Bach on a piano. Glenn Gould, a Canadian pianist, believed that the modern concert grand piano revealed the interweaving of musical voices in Bach's compositions more clearly. Historical accuracy does not guarantee that a performer or a performance will realize the full aesthetic potential of a score. If we adopt a performative approach, neither

10. I describe scores "a posteriori" when their formulation (written or verbal) is based on experience and observation of the realization of the work before it becomes scripted. "A priori" scores are written before the work realization. For these notions, as well as the specification of a score as "primary" or "secondary," see Hanna B. Hölling, "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," *On Curating: Fluxus Special Issue*, no. 51 (2021), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-51-reader/unpacking-the-score-notes-on-the-material-legacy-of-intermediality.html>.

Canopus nor your other works would need to remain attached to their original physical carriers to ensure their survival.

Nam June, when we think about the impact of performers on the realization of your work, it is not just the instrumentation that matters. The interpretive skills and agency of the performers likewise play a significant role in the outcome, such as in the case of an opera which you mentioned above. The set of instructions given in the score, the instrumentation specified, and the interpretive skills of the performers can greatly affect the performance's final result. This is evident in the different recordings of Glenn Gould's performances of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in 1955 and 1981, which offer two distinct interpretations of the same score. Despite their differences, both versions have become important parts of the history of music. In the same vein, the diverse iterations of your works, embodied in the score and brought to life through the agency of curators and conservators, contribute to the ongoing history of your work.

In your wise words, Nam June, you have spoken of a future where only the score of a work will survive. Although we have not yet reached that point, your scores, along with those created by others, continue to sustain your work, whether they are expressed in written instructions or conveyed through physical objects.¹¹ I am reminded of your *Liberation Sonata for Fish* from 1969, which I studied for a recent publication, and which entails both the written instructions and a physical object, a dead fish.¹² Your scores possess the potential for infinite variations, as you have so eloquently taught us. These iterations are imbued with the personal touch of those who interpret them, including curators and conservators who draw from and contribute to the archive of your work.

Nam June, literary scholar Paul Eggert suggests that we can take the concept of authorial agency even further. He proposes that those who creatively intervene in artworks—and, by extension, your works—such as curators and conservators, should be seen as a competing and complementary authorial or editorial agency,

11. For a discussion on how music gets conserved through scores, see Thomas Gartmann, "Can You Conserve Music?," in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, eds. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2024).

12. "Notation and Eternity in *Symphonie No. 5* and *Liberation Sonata for Fish*," in *I Expose the Music*, ed. Rudolf Frieling (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2023), 109–114.

occupying a place within the work itself. This idea fundamentally changes how we view the concept of a work and how we understand each individual work. The notion of intentionality is no longer solely about a unique authorial gesture enacted sometime in a distant past, but instead encompasses a bundle of mental states, such as perceptions, beliefs, and desires embodied by various actors that all leave their mark on the work. This perspective allows for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of the ongoing history of your works, as each new intervention adds to the rich tapestry of their meanings and interpretations.

THIRD QUOTATION,

In the future the only artwork that will survive will have no gravity at all.¹³

Moreover, as you have aptly pointed out, the interpretive abilities of performers are essential, but we should also explore the potential for endless iterations of a work that are encapsulated in its score and brought to life through the agency of curators and conservators. Perhaps we can even go a step further and view these interventions as competing and complementary sources of authorial agency, contributing to the ongoing history of the work.

This leads me to my final point: if we can treat works independently of their concrete physical incarnations, why not transcend the boundaries of traditional conservation practices? As

13. Paik Nam June, "Random Access Information," *Artforum* 19 (September 1980): 46–49.



[Fig. 4] Paik Nam June, *Noah's Ark*, 1989, Three-channel video installation, ZKM | Karlsruhe, acquired with funds from the state of Baden-Württemberg. © Nam June Paik; Photo © ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe.

you astutely observed in another context, “The culture that’s going to survive in the future is the culture that you can carry around in your head.”¹⁴ This notion resonates with me, not only in terms of a latent “material,” but also in recognizing the importance of possessing the skill to interpret and receive culture that is conveyed in and viewed as a score. In the fields of translation and heritage studies, we observe mindful tactics that ensure a work’s fluidity, one that is free from dependence on a specific medium. This allows for evolution and change, which are essential conditions for its survival.

Post-preservation offers a new and creative approach to preserving the past. By moving away from the limitations of material traces, we can open a horizon of potentiality or a futurity that is not limited to the effects of a physical medium. Certain forms of music and poetry have been transmitted without the ballast of their original tools for ages, demonstrating the power of post-preservation even before the concept of preservation existed.

As we conclude, let us redirect our attention from the obsession in achieving eternal permanence, and instead endeavor to adopt a more flexible approach in preserving your legacy. Nam June, I want to assure you that I am not suggesting we neglect the repair or restoration of your monitors. Rather, I propose to adopt a creative and interpretive approach to the past that is not limited by the strictures of material authenticity. This approach recognizes that even dysfunctional media, which moved away from their initial function, possess an enduring aesthetic quality that frees them from the threat of obsolescence. On the other hand, revitalizing your work in the present by allowing artists to creatively engage with it through enactments or homages may go beyond mere objectification/fetishization of the work and the burden of history. After all, isn’t the obsession with eternal permanence, or what you once called “the eternity-cult,” “... the longest disease of mankind”?¹⁵

Sincerely, Hanna B. Hölling

14. Paik quoted in Arthur Jaffa and Tina Campt, “Love is the Message, the Message is Death: Arthur Jaffa in Conversation with Tina Campt,” *Black Futures*, eds. Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham, trade paperback edition (New York: One World, 2021), 65.

15. This quote appears concurrently with its German equivalent, “Die Ewigkeit-kult ist die längste Krankheit der Menschheit.” Paik Nam June, *Symphonie No. 5*, circa 1965.

YI WON KON

PAIK NAM JUNE AND TV TECH- NOLOGY

