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Post-Preservation: Paik's Virtual Archive, Potentially

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Hanna B. Hölling

What is an archive? A short introduction¹

In common parlance, the archive is a large repository of paperwork no longer in bureaucratic circulation.² Archives can be seen as active nexuses of unique documents that bear marks, objects, images, and inscriptions and enable researchers to recall and revisit individual and shared memories and histories.³

Archives confront the impossibility of storing everything. As Eric Kluitenberg argues, traditional archives are usually organized by dominant powers, able to decide what is preserved and what is excluded.⁴ In his *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Michel Foucault maintains that understanding the archive requires looking into the system of powers that determines what is archived and why, asking who created the rules governing the archive and assessing the archive's political and material conditions. Thus, understanding the archive is key to understanding the system that rules it. Foucault further criticized the archive as a static entity, containing things that were no longer part of a living culture.⁵

The archive often occupies a physical space where documents are gathered and organized; a space whose dimensions and systems of access often stagger the imagination; a space that becomes comprehensible only when destroyed (as happened when the municipal archive of the city of Cologne was partly damaged in 2011). The nineteenth-century objectification of linear time and historical process prompted a shift in the purpose of archives from legal depositories to institutions for historical research that were rooted in public administration.⁶



Screen capture of
NJP Art Center
symposium lecture
(2021.11.17-27)

The word “archive” has roots in the Greek words “archeion”—meaning a government house, a house of archons or magistrates—and “archē,” or magistracy, rule, or government, and those roots were the point of departure for Jacques Derrida’s concept of the archive in his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996).⁷ Derrida saw the archive as a physical, destructible locus of records that would disclose its meaning only in the future. His view of the “archive” also suggests a link with archaeology and its search for foundations or a founding principle.

Yet the archive is not only a physical space containing documentary materials; it is also memory, residue, and interpretation. Since Foucault (and his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), modern theories have extended the definition of the archive as a collection of records and the space that houses them to include a quasi-transcendental, metaphysical space.⁸ Thus, the archive today can entail both a conceptual and a material approach to the formation of cultural memory. In the book *Archivologie* which is occupied with the theories of the archive (and which was published in German in 2003), the media theorists and art historians Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel speak of “two bodies of [the] archive”—an institution and a conception, a working space and a method.⁹

Efforts to name the role of an archive as a research practice have recently produced such terms as *archivology* and *archival sciences*. According to the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (and his essay “Archive and Aspiration” (2003)), the archive is a site of memory, occupying a place between the physicality of the stored material—the archival body—and the spirit that animates it, “pastness itself.”¹⁰ Yet, if the archive were synonymous with memory, would it require a physical space?

In his anthropological view, Appadurai conceives of an archive as a “deliberate” social project, a work of imagination.¹¹ If the archive is our cultural memory,¹² exclusion from it must involve forgetting. Archiving could be linked with exclusion and forgetting as much as with memory, if we follow Friedrich Nietzsche’s directive: that we must forget in order to imagine. Forgetfulness was essential to Nietzsche’s philosophical project as an upholder of psychic order.¹³ Archivization is possible and conditioned upon the same forces that expose the archive to destruction: Forgetfulness lies at the heart of the monument; “the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself.”¹⁴ To destroy the archive would be the same as forgetting.

The archive, conceived either as a theoretical or a physical space, is a dynamic realm of exchange and actualization; in the words of Foucault, the archive regulates and generates statements, thus highlighting the distinction between an archive and a library: the archive produces knowledge; the library stores it.

However, we need to remind ourselves of the archive’s intervention in imperial knowledge production as a technology that makes that intervention possible alongside museums and the discipline of history. The preeminent political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay posits that unlearning the archives means abolishing the veneer of neutrality that obliterated objects and documents of their origins, original liveness and embeddedness in cultures that

produced them.¹⁵ In this sense, archiving extends the spectacle of looting and imposing violence on those individuals who became the colonized peoples, as well as on their objects and practices that not necessarily were meant to be kept—classified, systematized, and preserved according to Western principles, and displaced from their original cultural embedding. These perspectives cannot be sidestepped, especially in thinking about museum storages and museums as archives.

The Virtual and The Actual

Written material is a privileged kind of archival information, but must an archive be purely material? Archives are more than physical repositories. They exist on other, intangible, impalpable, and nonphysical levels of being (“nonphysical” means not having a material existence that one can independently consult). This existence is not, as some claim, metaphorical and abstract. Instead, I suggest following Gilles Deleuze, it is virtual and real. The virtual, implicit sphere of an archive is neither fully expressed nor demonstrated. It is certainly not classified. This sphere is constituted by a system of knowledge that involves tacit knowledge (that is, the unexplicated knowledge of individuals), memory, skills, and various competencies; it concerns information that is not formulated in any written instruction. The nonphysical archive is linked to its tangible counterpart by the potential of the nonphysical sphere to enter the tangible/physical sphere in the process of explication and formulation. In Deleuzian terms, we can speak of actualization—of a passage from the virtual to the actual.

We might find such a differentiation between archival spheres also in Diana Taylor’s study of performance. Taylor posits that the archival document must be supplemented with embodied

cultural practices (such as ritual, dance, and cooking) that are not commonly or formally considered “knowledge.”¹⁷ For Taylor, the *repertoire* enacts embodied memory and all sorts of ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Both necessary for the endurance of art forms, my concept of the nonphysical archive and Taylor’s repertoire of embodied cultural practices highlight the insufficiency of the physical archive alone.

Having sketched the picture of the archival spheres, I argue that artworks and the archive are mutually co-constituted, in that it is on the basis of the archive, physical and virtual, that the identity of artworks is created and sustained. In fact, artworks are drawn from and actualized on the basis of such a physical-virtual archive. But the actualization of artworks is not one-directional. Rather, the archive is recursive, oriented toward both the past and the future if we wish to use the traditional temporal segmentation of time. The archive is a dynamic source that harbors and sustains the artworks’ identity. On the one hand, the archive provides a basis on which new versions, variants, and instantiations of artworks come into being; on the other, these new manifestations of artworks enter and enrich the archive, serving as a future archival “material” for the artworks’ subsequent materializations. Our engagement with the archive, therefore, becomes an active and creative “presencing” of artworks, contingent on various cultures, attitudes, and affordances of those interacting with the archive. This means that such archive is inclusive and reflective of the cultural embeddedness of subjects, objects, and discourses with which it interacts.

In my long-year study of Paik’s media installations and video sculpture, I observed that every realization of a multimedia installation is contingent on what the physical-virtual archive “holds.” Analysing the many complex works in my book *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Change and Materiality in Media Art* (2017),—TV Garden

(1974), *Arche Noah* (1989) or *Zen for TV* (1963) being amongst the most prominent examples—I contended that they differ from traditional works such as painting or sculpture that endure in a virtually unchanged form through time. Rather, these works exist in their installed form only intermittently; they *materialize*, I argued, on the occasion of various exhibition or test reinstallations.



Nam June Paik,
TV Garden, 1974

To actualize these works—hybrid, hetero-temporal assemblages of materials and apparatuses—is to activate them from the archive,

from the inscriptions involved in various documents, letters or instructions, from fragments, objects and apparatuses that are physically there and at hand, ready to be used. This activation would be impossible without the archive's virtual sphere, the skill, memory and tacit knowledge of those individuals who *possess the knowledge* about these works—whether secondary or first-hand, learned directly from the artist (or the object)—knowledge that comes both a priori and a posteriori in putting disparate pieces together, playing back a sequence of multichannel videos, manipulating the picture tube, and forming spatial arrangements.

The concept of the physical and virtual archive and its reciprocal relation with the artwork allows to depart from the views of traditional conservation in which artworks were conceived as unique objects, often in a singular medium, created by artist-genius, and linked with it intentionality (Traditional conservation assumes that an artist creates a work intentionally; the intention involved in the creative act is regarded as sacrosanct and therefore, it must be followed by conservation professionals during all the processes of altering and manipulating the work). Through the virtual archive, we may begin to see an artwork as a product of multiple intentions, multiple hands and minds (*i. e.* artist's assistants, producers, technicians, curators, and conservators). In other words, the archive relativizes the weight of the artist's intention, making space for the involvement of others—conservators, curators, and technicians—in the creative actualization of the artwork. The archive becomes a realm of social investment.

Paik's Video Archive

In what follows, I will approach the heterogeneity of the archive from a different perspective. Namely, leaving the physical and the virtual/actual aside for a moment, I would like to look at the archive's spatial geography, that is, approach the archive through its spatial topologies, relationships, and patterns. As Paik's scholar, I have been exposed to Paik's global archive's complex, uncensored geographies—despite the authoritarian power of institutions and individuals charged with the afterlife of his media—distributed amongst various stakeholders, mentors, and collaborators, and institutions across the world. To account for such a global archive would not be possible within the limits of this essay.

On the following pages, however, I will offer a glimpse at Paik's video archive housed at the Nam June Paik Arts Center, which comprises a remarkable collection of Paik's analog video. This archive was made the focus of the conference "Video Digital Commons" organized by the Nam June Paik Art Center in November 2021. The event, which also directly prompted my writing, was aimed to debate the status quo of this video collection and the decision to digitize its portion to make it available online as "Paik's Video Study." Paik had expressed once that the art's potential for survival lies in "systems that could economically be transported." He was interested in a creation of artwork with no gravity, but with a potential for survival.¹⁸ One gets easily lured by Paik's open-mindedness and visions of the future in which the gravity of the hardware will be replaced by a more economical means of data storage and transmission. But we also need to keep in mind that the movement between the analog and the digital prompts questions as the physical status quo of these materials. What gets digitized and how? Does the digitized video record a historical condition of

a videotape, or should this tape rather be “restored” to its earlier shape and form? How to select a singular video work from an array of its many variants, versions, and editions that seem to co-exist in this archive and the Paik’s global archive simultaneously? Here, curatorial and conservation decisions will significantly impact what these works become in the future.

But what interests me in the context of this essay’s topic is the idea of the video archive *per se*. When we think about a video archive, what are we thinking? What kind of video constitutes this archive? What does it mean to archive video and present it to the audiences in an open, democratic form?

Nam June Paik’s video archive—and any video archive for that matter—confounds the idea that an archive is homogenous, centrally organized, and accessible through a single access point. Firstly, the video works exist in the archive in many formats, versions, variations, and editions, pointing to these works’ multiple rather than singular origins. Secondly, the presence of these video works at the Nam June Paik Art Center does not preclude them from being present in other collections, archives, and institutions elsewhere. We know for a fact that Paik’s working method was characterized by multiplication, creative reuse, and adaption of the already present footage in his subsequent works. Paik’s open-ended creative process allowed for modifications and interventions long after his artworks began their lives as part of a museum collection. On these grounds, any institutional archive must be considered as a part of a larger archival body, a whole that is utopian and yet necessary to be taken into account because it points to the multiple *sites* in which Paik’s video is present. These archival sites are places where archival artifacts—tapes and films, whatever their status—are purposefully accumulated to form collections. But the meaning of an archival site is not exhausted by a collection of films and tapes resting shelved in

an archival vault. The often-overlooked archival sites are the video components in Paik's multimedia installations housed by museums mainly in Europe, North America, Japan, and South Korea. These installations might serve as an aesthetically functional archive of Paik's videos, existing in a set of intrinsic relationships and dependent upon their media-specific conditions of care. In these archives—in the large or even hyperdimensional, multimonitor installations—the fragments of the once separately created one-channel videos, cut-outs, edits, and video documentation of Paik's and his fellow artists' performances continue to populate screens.

There is an intriguing genealogy of Paik's video that has developed across his video sculptures (e.g., the robot series), large scale video walls (e.g., *Megatron/Matrix* (1995) or *The More, the Better* (Dadaikseon, 1988), multimedia installations (*TV Garden* (1974) or *Arche Noah* (1989)) and the global video works such as *Video Commune* (1970)¹⁹ and *Global Grove* (1973) or recordings from his global satellite projects, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986), and *Wrap Around the World* (1988). Especially the latter four remained unlimited to their formal boundaries (the former a videotape, the later three global satellites events transmitted in real-time across the globe) and might be encountered, in bits and pieces, in Paik's large video walls. Media theorist Gregory Zinman accounts for the extended performance of Paik's satellite works as they transmute from global broadcast to monumentalized works in his multichannel video walls and to an atomized form as museum installations and online viewing rooms.²⁰ Observing Paik's video in its constantly transmuting and vagrant form, we ought to ask along with Zinman's convincing argument, whether we should see these works as entirely autonomous, or whether they are subordinate to the satellite broadcast that gave rise to them. How does image mobility—not only through different kinds of display but also

transfers from one medium or platform to another—affect meaning?

Beyond the fragmentation and diversity conditioned by the mobility of Paik's moving images, the fragmentation of Paik's video archive also concerns the multiple "archival" sites in which his works sit. This fragmentation is evident in the collections of videotapes and raw video footage present, for instance, in the two private collections of Paik's long-time collaborators, Paul Garrin in New York and Mark Patsfall in Cincinnati, both of whom Paik employed in the early and mid-1980s, respectively. More than solely a technical execution or fabrication, Paik's creative collaborations complicate the status of work as something created by an effort of a single pair of hands. In my book, *Paik's Virtual Archive*, I have referred to them as "extended collaborations."²¹ Considering the global archive of Paik's video further, the video repositories such as the Electronic Arts Intermix with its invaluable (in part freely accessible) collection,²² but also the less "official" digital archives such as Ubu Web,²³ and online repositories such as Youtube and Vimeo offer valuable resources for both the researchers and admirers of Paik's "moving images."

Whether globally or locally, while discussing Paik's video archive, one cannot help but wonder about the diversity and heterogeneity of its holdings that determine its structures, topologies, and relations. The material diversity present in the archival sites described above implies the presence of multiple fragments and instances, remixes, and citations in the collection—editions of Paik's single-channel works that were or were not included in his video sculptures or installations or the recordings of broadcast. But the material heterogeneity of Paik's video archive is also present locally, on a "micro" level of the individual archival site. This variety is characterized by the distinctiveness of Paik's video and film formats used across his creative life and manifests in 1/2

-inch, 1 -inch, and 2-inch tapes, 8mm and Super 8 films, laserdiscs, U-Matic, VHS, Betacam SP, to name but a few. These formats call for specific approaches to their storage, maintenance and care, and not least specialism in the process of their conservation and digitalization.

In sum, Paik's video art illustrates that the mobility of his images goes far beyond the constraints of one singular medium, archive, or concept. Most importantly for my focus here, it demonstrates both how film and video technology challenge the common understanding of an artwork as an individual physical object and how an artist might relinquish uniqueness and singularity in favor of producing many versions of a multitude of objects on a variety of physical carriers.

Digital Archive and Imagining Post-Preservation

Through its promise of democratic accessibility, Paik's Video Study assures an unrestricted approach to Paik's digitized videos (perhaps the user's acquittance with and access to specific technology being the only barrier). If successful, Paik's Video Study users will view a variety of Paik's videos, and films, and documentaries. The interaction with Paik's Video Study will differ from the common-sense interaction with archival materials or from traditional archival search, in which items can be found following set keywords or alphabetic orders. The curators of Paik's Video Study predict a possibility for the users to "go beyond their initial purposes, ultimately discovering and creating new meanings in the networks of the individual videos."²⁴ The user "will be able to draw primary semantic maps using primary keywords (taxonomic values such as persons, incidents, artworks, exhibitions, historical periods)."²⁵ To achieve this, the user's digital trace will be used to generate

algorithms that will form specific networks capable of creating novel contents.

Whether algorithmic and thus machinic or chance-based and therefore relating to (human) nature, the results of such research bring us back to the Deleuzian concept of the virtual-actual evoked earlier. In the vein of the virtual-actual, one could imagine that the activation of Paik's video from the digital archive will allow creating new content based on the historical video and film and their remixes and fragments. The digitally enabled and algorithmically aided actualization will provide unexpected results—an archival serendipity of a different kind, based on human and machinic interaction.

The concept of the fragment is intriguing. To creatively engage with a video—as a material fragment or a fragment of a more extensive archive—carries three implications: ① the fragment might be a piece of a whole that it gestures toward; a singular whole with its own characteristics that is complete. ② It can reference the past as something pristine and/or the present as something ruined.²⁶ ③ It might gesture toward the future in which it positions itself to the promise of a fullness of a future work—a future that is elsewhere.

In this vein, homages, commentaries and continuities might be created on the basis of Paik's historical materials and references (versions and variants of Paik's video work present in the digital archive). The actualization of these works from the archive—done creatively by employing the digital and analog research tools—might bring about new imagination of what video might become and what differs from the conventional modes of traditional conservation. I name this new mode of continuing Paik's video an experimental post-preservation.²⁷

Such engagement with Paik's video archive prompts us to rethink the traditional museological approaches to caring

for works of art. For a considerable time, these approaches have cultivated the concepts of material preservation and truthfulness to the singular material and authentic original emergent in the effect of an intentional act based on Western notions of preservation. As I mentioned earlier, the versatility of Paik's film and video media renders these traditional museological approaches obsolete. A mindful conservation of these works must preserve these works' intrinsic fluidity and thus acknowledge the process of change. Here, post-preservation as a creative engagement with the archive allows a forward-looking, inclusive and creative "presencing" and "processing" of the past in general, and Paik's moving image in particular.

Conceived as an active force against the established ideas of keeping things intact and untouched, post-preservation is the creative actualization of the past; it is an inclusive intertwinement of discursive and physical practices contingent on the archive's potentiality. Rather than a realm of fixation and stasis accessible only to those granted certain rights, the archive I address here is an open condition of possibility for these works' survival. In other words, Paik's virtual archive, potentially.

- 1 This introduction and the sections on the virtual and the actual draws on my book *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
- 2 Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), ix.
- 3 Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive, Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006).
- 4 Eric Kluitenberg, "Towards a Radical Archive," De Balie's Eric Kluitenberg, Institute of Network Cultures Weblog <https://networkcultures.org/blog/2010/09/09/towards-a-radical-archive-de-balies-eric-kluitenberg/> (accessed December 14, 2021).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
- 6 Spieker, *The Big Archive*, xii, p. 1.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 9-10.
- 8 Foucault, *ibid.*
- 9 The archive always has two bodies: it is as much an institution as a conception, meaning a working place and method. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel, *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), p. 10.
- 10 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, eds. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2 / NAI Publishers, 2003), p. 15.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 12 For the archive as a cultural memory, see Aleida Assmann, "Archive im Wandel der Mediengeschichte," in *Archivologie: Theorien des Archives in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, eds. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), pp. 176-200.
- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980 [1874]).
- 14 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 14.
- 15 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (NY: Verso, 2019), p. 42.
- 16 For the concepts of the virtual and real, see Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 96-98.
- 17 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 16-32.
- 18 For "Random Access Information," originally presented as a lecture given by Nam June Paik at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, on March 25, 1980, as part of the "Video Viewpoints" series, curated by Barbara London, see Nam June Paik, "Random Access Information," *Artforum* 19 (September 1980), pp. 46-49.
- 19 Canonized and historized as an early example of global television, Paik created Global Groove together with John J. Godfrey in 1973 at WNET's artists' Television Laboratory. Recent scholarship demonstrates, however, that his earlier program *Video Commune* preceded *Global Groove* in addressing cross-cultural expression, globality, and connectivity. For the latter, see Marina Isgro, "Video Commune: Nam June Paik at WGBH-TV, Boston," *Tate Papers* 32 (Autumn 2019) <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/32/video-commune-nam-june-paik>.
- 20 Gregory Zinman, "Video Art's Past and

Present 'Future Tense: The Case of Nam June Paik's Satellite Works,' in *Object-Event-Performance: Art, Materiality and Continuity since the 1960s*, edited by Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), pp. 85-116.

Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

- 21 See chapter "From Delegated Labor to Extended Collaboration," in Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive*, pp. 35-41.
- 22 The Electronic Arts Intermix(<https://www.eai.org/>) was founded in 1971 and is a non-profit resource that fosters the creation, exhibition, distribution and preservation of media art. EAI preserves and distributes a collection of over 3500 new and historical artistic video works.
- 23 Funded in 1966 by Kenneth Goldsmith, UbuWeb(<http://ubu.com/>) is an online resource including film, video, and sound art and visual, concrete and sound poetry.
- 24 "Gift of Nam June Paik 13," a conference leaflet distributed to the invitees of the event "Video Digital Commons" in November 2021. Archive of the author.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 For an account of a fragment, see Michael Newman, "Models and Fragments: Ian Kiaer's Studio," in *Ian Kiaer* (Aspen, Colorado: Aspen Art Museum, 2012), pp. 16-27.
- 27 The term "experimental post-preservation" might recall Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Fenstad Langdalen and Thordis Arrhenius' term "experimental preservation" that examines experimental engagements with culturally charged objects. While their term has been influential for my thinking in that it goes beyond the scope of what Western conservation has traditionally considered "conservable," post-preservation goes beyond the notion of the preservation practice; it is posed as a move away from physical upkeep, however experimental, towards the notion of continuation as creation. For the notion of experimental preservation, see Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Fenstad Langdalen and Thordis Arrhenius, eds. *Experimental Preservation* (Zurich: