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# *Aiming for the Trees: Random Access Information and Paik's Video Study*

## Colophon

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# ***Aiming for the Trees: Random Access Information and Paik's Video Study***

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Alexandra Juhasz

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On the occasion of the 13<sup>th</sup> international symposium, The Gift of Nam June Paik, I have been graciously invited to give an address about the possibilities and limits of the soon to be opened Paik's Video Study. Neither of us is there, I am afraid, that is, in Yongin, that is neither Nam June Paik nor me. He is being commemorated on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (and the 15<sup>th</sup> of his death), and I recorded my speech using the tiny camera on my MacBook Pro on November 2, 2021, while sitting at a desk in *my* study in Florence, Massachusetts, in the United States.

But making the best of the technological affordances available to each and every one of us—that is Nam June Paik in his time; me, in ours; those of you live and together without me in a symposium in Yongin; and those who I can only imagine, from anywhere in the world, once this video of my speech is made accessible on the NJP Art Center's website—we will all temporally and across space, anticipate the opening of Paik's Video Study, which will quite soon, make 350 or so of his tapes easily available to anyone in the world with an internet portal and a high-speed connection, as will also be true in the future for this talk.

Because this 13<sup>th</sup> symposium celebrates—even as it can only anticipate—the opening of his Study, my remarks must remain mostly speculative, about the promise of a promise, the possibilities of a pledge, the delicious anticipation of a gift; and I must share a small niggling worry even so, that something might go wrong, the Study might not work exactly as promised: based as so much of this in *technology*. Or the video version of this talk (a piece of video art mirroring Nam June Paik's) might not capture his spirit. But, we have both theorized and delighted within all there is to learn from the glitch, what I celebrate as “bad video.”<sup>1</sup>

So, with great hopes that my words will emerge successfully via *good video* to an audience a few weeks in the future and half-way

around the world, I will briefly hold forth on the promises of a random access digital video archive even as I have yet to visit your study.

But as you said much earlier (may I speak to *you* now, imaginatively, of course, Nam June Paik?), the artist's job is to think about the future.



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Screen capture of  
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symposium lecture  
(2021.11.17-27)

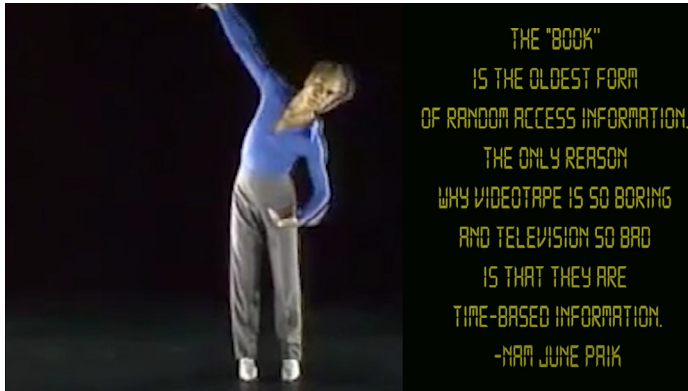
Speaking to you from one version of that future, anticipating your Study, another instantiation of technological promise, I am so sorry to inform you that while random access information is expanding and widely available, it is still very limited: this is what I will explain in today's remarks in 2021, just as I have learned from yours in 1980 and 1968.

In words that you delivered in 1980, in a speech much in line with mine here, "Random Access Information"—although I, unlike you, am not delivering mine in person (mostly because I'm sorry to share with you even more bad news, we are living in the middle of a global pandemic)—you imagined that random access information could eventually break the hold of time (and hence place), so as to make media, and I assume life, less boring and bad.

I quote you here:

The “book” is the oldest form of random access information.  
The only reason why videotape is so boring and television  
so bad is that they are time-based information.

Oh, Mr. Paik. I wish it was that easy.



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Screen capture of  
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Although the future you anticipated is very much here given that we do have something much closer to random access information than did you, thanks to *digital video*, machine learning, coding, and algorithms (although the work of many of my colleagues suggests that men, and I’ll hasten to add white men, still leak into the randomizing tools that they build for the rest of us<sup>2</sup>), we aren’t yet making the most of it. For, as all of you can clearly see, that is you in Korea and you even later online (even as, or perhaps because I am *not* there with you because of a pandemic that limits my mobility even as we had maximized technology so that those of us privileged to do so once quite recently traveled the globe quickly and frequently, but by so doing, also created the very conditions by which a virus moved at similar speeds around that very globe, thereby as quickly limiting our mobility, and thus maximizing something new: that our motions, emotions, interactions, visits, learning, celebrating, mourning, now takes place inside of computers and rendered as

digital video on screens), yes we meet, but this place where we do, me on video, you in a room elsewhere, is still mostly defined by time-based information.

So, as you wrote, Nam June Paik:

**Our time consciousness, how we experience the passing of time, is exactly like a tape. It is not new or unnatural that time consciousness imitates tape reels because tape has the same structure as trees. So, tape imitates trees, and we imitate tape reels.**

And so, imitating your 1980's work of speculation about the future of videotape, information, and random access, marking the passing of time like tape, I reflect you back with a rewind (although that term itself is dated given the affordances of digital video) to tell you that in your talk in the 1980s, you spoke about many things, some right, some not yet having come to pass, but all prescient and still necessary to understand video, access, and even existence. You and I think about video similarly. For example, in 2017, I expounded on my belief that video is God.<sup>3</sup> But much earlier, in 1980, you said this with only a slight (if critical) difference:

**With videotape we imitate God only half-way, in that we record everything. We can rewind videotape, but we cannot rewind our lives.**

With this, I agree: this half-life of video then and now. We imitate God half-way by imitating tape reels that can, it turns out, only partially imitate trees. Because even today, with random access tools quite close to hand, we cannot rewind our own or any other life, just the tapes. You said, in 1980:

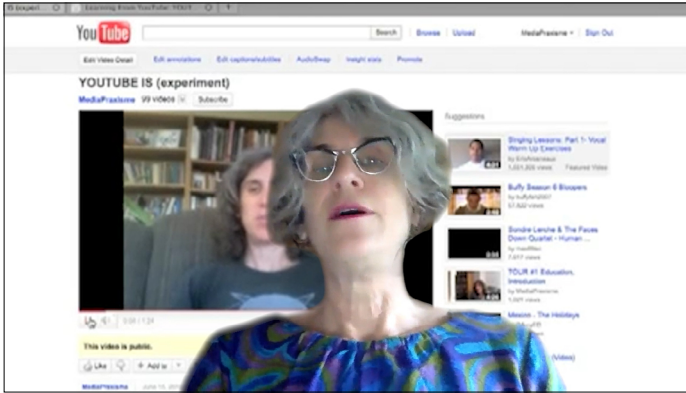
**If I had known when I was 25 how I would feel like a poor artist in New York City at 47. I would have planned my life differently. There is no way to know in advance, because life has no “fast-forward” or “rewind” buttons. So, you go step by step, and if you make a mistake, you try to correct it with another mistake.”**

Don't I know it! In my 2005 videotape, *Video Remains*, I try to make sense of the tragic loss of my best friend to AIDS twelve years after his passing in 1993 at the young age of 29. So many mistakes are unable to remake even with so much videotape available. In that piece, I understand that the magic of editing—as is true in this video of me today—allows us only for a re-visit or half-visit, a comingling of a then, and this once-now. But video allows for no true return; only God can do that.

Even today, as random access information becomes more available, I can only pretend to but cannot really speak with you about this, or my friend's death or your own. I cannot know whether you agree or quibble with my ideas, as I do with yours. I can't share with you my friend, or even my tape of my friend. I can't explain to you what has happened with video (and the world) since your death in 2006. I can imitate this. Like tape; on tape. Yes, as you said:

**What video imitates is the time component and the actual process of aging.**

Given our shared concerns about time and the aging of video, I am eager to introduce you to a place you could not have known, one where time has been very much changed by video access, a place where everyone goes to make, find, store, and retrieve video: YouTube.



Screen capture of  
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You died in 2006. In 2007, about a year into its *life*, I taught a class about and on YouTube. As you say, “We hire teachers and pay them because a teacher, like a Betamax, can go “fast-forward.” I did that in a brick-and-mortar classroom and also online, teaching about the day-to-day possibilities of online video. My students and I were pioneers there, thinking together about YouTube’s limits and possibilities for educating through video. Fast-forward, today in 2021, that place has grown astronomically. However, against its own anticipations for itself, it is not (yet) the universe, even if you account for its millions of hours of video, its uncountable days of video, not to mention the zettabytes of information it has taken from us as we use all its or our video (a single zettabyte contains enough high-definition video to play for 36,000 years<sup>4</sup>). No, YouTube and all its digital video is not the universe, it is not even the world, and it is not God, or even as something as simple, and infinite and complex as a tree, not to mention a tape reel (and by the way, we don’t have those anymore, or Betamax).

YouTube, the largest repository in the world of what *could* be—but is not at all—random access video is only, it turns out, a paltry, tawdry, advertisement-riddled, man-made, corporate-owned substitution for a world it mirrors (badly) as video. It is the



largest pile of video in the world's history, but it is neither an archive, randomly accessible, a study, or even a good place to learn.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, YouTube and its sister platforms *promise* or, better yet, pretend to be all these things (albeit, not with the spirit of your promises and gifts of video—which feel human and hopeful) but rather with a corporate logic built on some structuring potentials of random access, these all sadly underwritten by lies about what is the true voice, ownership, censorship, control, and indeed, never random access of this platform.<sup>6</sup>

Yes, because of its digital affordances as a one-stop-shop to make, store, and share video internationally, YouTube and its universe of digital video is one instantiation, one contemporary technological fix, for a video promise and a video problem you named in 1980. You said:

**Today there is Betamax, a God-defying device because you can see the nine p.m. Public Television drama before the seven p.m. news.**

Which we can in spades. But you continued:

**Combining random access with video is a major problem that needs to be solved. Human beings have not really learned how to structure time-based information in recording and retrieval very well because it is new.**

Today, it is no longer new, and we make algorithms that can allow for something that is almost random access video. And yet here too, we only imitate the tree. For, counter-intuitively, a significant amount of the video that floods this site, and the internet, made by everyday people but also, as much if not more

so by global corporations and pornographers, is organized by tired, familiar, linear formats and for dubious ends: the ubiquitous story form; the omnipresent advert; the sly and not so smart nuggets of propaganda; the pathways to hate and not love. You said:

**Now that people are talking about recording everything digitally on a sheet of magnetic paper, without tape, random access becomes immediately more plausible.**

Yes, it is more plausible, but it has not really come to pass. While YouTube and similar corporate-owned, corporate-built, corporate-shared delivery platforms *pretend* that our access to images, video, words, ideas, and each other is random, it turns out that this has been algorithmically constructed not for the trees, not for the random, not to save people, but to sell you things like rage, or fake news, or some half version of yourself. Yes, as you said:

**The only reason why videotape is so boring and television so bad is that they are time-based information.**

With the knowledge I can add to yours because I'm still alive—although that remains precarious for me, as is true for so many in 2021, because of the multiplying and mutually-influencing threats on all human's existence (albeit distributed unevenly and unfairly), given the ongoing pandemic of COVID, the lived violence of climate change, and the technological malfeasance of a small number of international corporations who profit from and unevenly distribute this resource—I would suggest that the only reason why videotape is so boring and television so bad in 2021 is that corporations and totalitarian regimes have joined forces to use human's newfound access to digital tools of video capture, editing, sharing, and storing

to allow us more access to the corruption wreaked by capital, the greedy, the dominant and deceitful.

Don't get me wrong, Mr. Paik. There are endless wonders to behold online. Testaments to voice, beauty, trees, video, history, the weird, the glitch, the other, the now, the then, but this access has been corrupted to become data to be bought and sold to a higher bidder.

And while I already knew this to be true as early as 2007—who have as of today still survived our global pandemic, and the wages of apartheid, global warming, vicious racism, poverty, and illness, those of us who have access to an internet portal and high-speed connectivity—all of us humans have learned much more about video in an unanticipated way.

For 18 or so months, even as our experiences had already become so very much online, we were forced or perhaps chose to be so more fully, that is almost totally, and this has proven, living as we do in this Pandemic, that as you say, “video is a very crude model of life.”

We learned this together on Zoom. This crude, if magical place brought us together in a twilight. You name a half-God, and we have lived in a half-life. We're there still. Here, on screens, in digital video, through limited corporate pre-made structures, we find each other in a pale imitation of everything: a class, a meeting, a seminar, a funeral, a symposium, a study.



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Yes, you are right, yet from here, this doesn't feel hopeful. It feels grave:

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

This gets us to your even earlier thinking in *Expanded Education for the Paperless Society*, from 1968. Like me, you are optimistic about how video might be part of a remedy to dilemmas of access that have been definitive for humans in our brief history. You imagined a future with a teacher much like me:

**The only way to conquer the situation and make oil obsolete is to move our ideas without moving our bodies at all. I coined the phrase “stationary nomad,” which we are not yet.**

In 1968, you hoped that video would play an important part of an Instant Global University, in that it could allow us to share the insight of Philosophers to anyone who wanted access to that lofty learning: stationary nomads all! *Education* would be made accessible,

unbound by video. We could move our ideas and not our bodies, and this we do.

Yes, it is true, a video would indeed develop to more easily connect humans to lived and even life experience, art, and education, from all over the world. And yet this platform of hope and access has also been quickly taken up to do awful things: like spread viral black death<sup>7</sup> and fake news. A surveillance tool, tied to capitalism and oppressive regimes, all bundled into our “free” access to these marvelous tools of education, communication, transmission, and storage, our instant global university, the internet.

So, now that I have brought you up to speed, I want to conclude, as I was asked, by ruminating on your anticipated study, its possibilities and limits, given today’s closer proximity to random access information and an Instant Global University. As someone who remains optimistic about video—if you can believe it—even as or probably because of how bad things are right now,<sup>8</sup> I want to emphasize how I see hope in how your Study promises to approach the problems and potentials of random access information in this our time of the digital video.

The troubles and promises of digital video archives, at least in this day and age, circulate around:

**Ethics**

**Copyright**

**Ownership**

**Loss**

**Access: who and how**

**Context**

**Translation**

**Aesthetics**

**Money**

## Scale

## Rules of Engagement

## Format

## And what I call, in my own research project, VHS Archive, Preservation with Purpose<sup>9</sup>

As part of my project, VHS Archives,<sup>10</sup> I have been building my own digital video archive of my small collection of VHS tapes (250 as opposed to 2000);<sup>11</sup> I have done this with almost no funding, and only the time, talent, and tools that limited resources can buy; I have tried to make my library available to others even as I am not nationally or even internationally known; and, I have done all this video and then its preservation and sharing, in and for marginal, counter-cultural, radical movements, and first as an act of activism and community-making.

I want to share with you how I celebrate your proseed Study, and end with what might be learned by the most obvious differences of my sister project. Your Study, as is true for you and your extensive video record, understands that video is a poor substitute for life. It is a human-made endeavor to amplify what is good in life: knowledge, art, connection across time and space, and difference. Your Study equalizes specialist and non-specialist use and users; it opens doors to a quantity of humans impossible to have done so when they were restrained by previous barriers about movement in place. Because your archivists care about you, as well as the humans that will come to access your videos online—your brain, and ideas, and aesthetics—they model preservation with a purpose. They explain that the Study has been built “to see your work, and therefore video, in a totally new way.”

Your Study is not a universe, but instead one small room of the holdings of one very important artist from Korea and the

twentieth century, a gesture toward what might be a part of a more ethical and purposeful Instant Global University than most of what we've seen so far on the internet. In your Study, users will not have random access to your video, but neither will their movements through your information be used to sell them things. Instead, their interests in your video will be mapped and made into algorithms that distill new meanings onto your old work.

My graduate class<sup>12</sup> and related research group at the City University of New York, VHS Archives, understand that:

**We prioritize keeping VHS and other fragile materials small and local: to respect the uses and needs of specific communities, the importance of engaging with archives in a group setting, and of dedicating both time and presence to community archival work. The tapes should connect to or produce a project of and for a community who understand, need, and want them.**<sup>13</sup>

This is what I see and celebrate in your Study, which we all now anticipate: one model for a digital video archive where issues of privacy, care, fragility, respect, and safety are modified by your death and its gifts, as well as how you lived your life, in and out of the video.

Today many humans have a video (and digital) record as big, extensive, total, and durational as was yours. What your Study models are that if all our video records are archived for the purpose of capital (as for most of us they are today), we will further be awash in a rising tide of digital detritus (of memory; of ourselves) no different from the one in which we already swim,<sup>14</sup> and no closer to the trees. However, when the purpose is met with access, we have better possibilities in store (and storage).

In this, our time of twin viral pandemics, in the forms of Corona and Zoom, we have learned what both you and I already knew. I am not at the conference in Korea, and neither are you. However, traces of us, as video, can be accessed—randomly or not—to better know our ideas, our hopes, our critiques, and our aesthetics. So, let's not imitate tape reels; let's celebrate life, which means acknowledging death, loss, and purposeful connections abetted but not stuck in tape but rather aiming for the trees.



- 1 | “Bad Video” search results, 1-17, *Learning from YouTube* (MIT Press, 2013)  
<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/search.php?sq=bad+video>
- 2 | See Safiya Noble. *Algorithms of Oppression* (NY: NYU Press, 2018).
- 3 | Smithsonian Institution, *Archives of American Art, Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic*. Interviewed December 2017 by Theodore Kerr:  
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/inside-the-archives/visual-arts-and-the-aids-epidemic-oral-history-project>
- 4 | How Big is the Internet? July 29, 2019:  
<https://starry.com/blog/inside-the-internet/how-big-is-the-internet>
- 5 | Alexandra Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013):  
<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/>
- 6 | Alexandra Juhasz, “The Real Internet is Fake,” 100hardtruths-#fakenews:  
<https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/100hardtruths-fakenews/1-the-real-internet-is-a-fake>
- 7 | Alexandra Juhasz, “How Do I (not) Look, Live Feed Video and Viral Black Death,” *Jstor Daily*, July 20, 2016:  
<https://daily.jstor.org/how-do-i-not-look/>
- 8 | See my current project on Fake News Poetry Workshops: [fakenews-poetry.com](http://fakenews-poetry.com). I leave the indexical to get to the truth by other storied regimes of honesty.
- 9 | Alexandra Juhasz, “Caring.Sharing: ethics and concepts for saving and using VHS Archives,” December 6, 2018:  
<https://aljean.wordpress.com/2018/12/06/caring-sharing-ethics-and-concepts-for-saving-and-using-vhs-archives/>
- 10 | The VHS Archives Working Group:  
<https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/the-works-of-the-vhs-archives-working-group>
- 11 | The Alexandra Juhasz VHS Collection:  
[https://activismvhs.omeka.net/items/browse?collection=3&sort\\_field=added](https://activismvhs.omeka.net/items/browse?collection=3&sort_field=added)
- 12 | Artistic Practices in Contemporary Community:  
<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film7032/index?path=student-projects>
- 13 | “Caring. Sharing”
- 14 | Alexandra Juhasz, “Intellectual Property and Creative Labor in a Rising Tide of Everything,” 21.10.2019:  
<https://etcgalerie.cz/en/neklid-obrazu-iii-potreba-sdileni-2/>