

Hannah Peck  
Introduction to Moving Image Archiving and Preservation  
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Howard Besser and Juana Suárez

### **Video as Art Medium: Context and Preservation**

It is difficult to imagine life without television today. The introduction and widespread distribution of television and recording system had tremendous impact in our society and the daily lives of people around the world. According to John S. Margolies' article, "TV – The Next Medium" written for the September/October issue of *Art in America* in 1969, "American homes have more television sets than bathtubs, refrigerators or telephones; 95 percent of American homes have television sets and portable video-tape equipment for home use is available to the general public right now." Individuals were shaped by the structure and content of television and especially in the United States of America, television became "part of a regular life style, a fabric of individual perception, reflection of the city, country, and the world" (Margolies, "TV – The Next Medium"). People sought comfort in watching the television and every member in the family gathered in front of the 16-inch or 24-inch black box at the end of every day like a ritual. It was undoubtedly the most popular form of mass media before and after 1960 and it was the ultimate source of information and entertainment as signal reception improved over time and television programs were regularly broadcasted across the nation. In this way, television instantly became the leading popular culture and integral part of the cultural industry.

Among people influenced by the television culture, many artists of the era adopted this development of technology to critique the dominant television culture itself, employ the mechanical aspect of the medium, and to comment on the social, political circumstances of the time. This brought forth the emergence of video art as artists in the field of music, filmmaking, conceptual art, performance art such as Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, Wolf Vostell, Allan Kaprow, Dara Birnbaum, Shigeko Kubota, and Martha Rosler actively explored and manipulated the technology to express their ideas in radical form.

This project aims to survey the way in which different artists responded to the accelerated development of television technology, and instantly adopted the medium to challenge the existent customs of traditional art. Artists often “saw video as viewer participation, a spiritual and meditative experience, a mirror, an electronic palette, a kinetic sculpture, or a cultural machine to be deconstructed”(Oppenheimer, ). It will specifically explore the ideas and works of Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman and Dara Birnbaum to examine the contrary paths taken by different artists working with identical medium in the same era. In exploration of the aforementioned artists and their works of art, this project will also look into several issues found in the preservation and restoration of video art, time-based media or new media art and look into the cases of Nam June Paik and Dara Birnbaum as reference points.

### **Nam June Paik**

It is impossible to discuss video art without Nam June Paik as he brought television into the realm of art from early on and treated it as multisensory medium.

According to Paik, television screen was a canvas where he can paint “as precisely as Leonardo, as freely as Picasso, as colorfully as Renoire, as profoundly as Mondrian, as violently as Pollock and as lyrically as Jasper Johns” (Paik, “Videa ‘n’ Videology”, 1974, as cited in Park et al., 2011, p.11). Paik was trained as a classical pianist, therefore his interest in music composition and performance came together with his counter-cultural and Avant-Garde thinking and eventually steered him to become a central figure of the Fluxus movement and he exercised radical art-making strategies with irreverent humor, deconstructed and demystified the language, content and technology of television (Park et al 15). Paik led the anti-aesthetic movements and constantly challenged the elitist and authoritarian nature of the arts and television production at the time. He was all for disrupting the existent customs or the institutionalized system of visual culture.

He adopted television as an art medium to change the unilateral relationship between television broadcasts and the receptive viewer, with intention to transform people’s notion of this passive behavior of watching whatever was delivered to them by broadcast companies. As it could be inferred from his quote, “Big TV studio always scares me. Many layers of “Machine Time” parallel running, engulf my identity (Paik, “Videa ‘n’ Videology”, 1974, as cited in Park et al., 2011, p.11)”, he considered broadcast television programs to be daunting machines that swallow viewer’s identities.

Among the 1000 works of video sculptures, installations, performances, and TV productions Nam June Paik left behind, *Video Commune: The Beatles From Beginning to End* (1970) and *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984) well presents his idea of transforming the one-way relationship between television production and the public.

In 1969, Nam June Paik was able to build the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer with the help from his lifelong friend and technician, Shuya Abe. In parallel to the aforementioned ideas, Paik wanted to create a video synthesizer that anyone could create colors, images, and video effects, which could be manipulated and modified in real time. Using this 'sloppy' machine that mirrored the artist himself, Paik was able to air *Video Commune: The Beatles From Beginning to End* in 1970, when he was an artist-in-residence at WGBH-Boston. It was the first video synthesizer to be used in live broadcast television. This program aired for four hours, with the input sources of Japanese television commercials, excerpts from Beatles music videos, Charlotte Moorman performances and etc., and for this program, he also invited audience to the WGBH studios and let them take control and play with the device while it was transmitted live.

Again in 1984, Nam June Paik produced a seminal project that interrupted the public television broadcast and displayed his faith towards mass media. He produced the first international satellite installation called, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984 and this program was broadcast live worldwide throughout the United States, France, Germany, Korea and Japan from the WNET master control room. The program connected WNET TV in New York and Centre Pompidou in Paris through the satellite and it began with the performance of Joseph Beuys at Centre Pompidou along with the performance of John Cage in New York. Aside from these two artists, about 100 artists including Merce Cunningham, Charlotte Moorman, Laurie Anderson, Allen Ginsberg, and more appeared on this program with different performances. Nam June Paik designed this show as a message to George Orwell that his dystopian vision and prophecy of 'mass media governing men in 1984' was partially correct. This was Paik's way of depicting

the positive side of mass media while foretelling the advent of worldwide network. 25 million people around the world watched this program, and this also positioned Nam June Paik as a global genius.

## **Bruce Nauman**

While Nam June Paik employed video and television to deconstruct the social norm and elitist system of visual culture, Bruce Nauman “investigated who we are, physically and mentally, using the human body and the space it inhabit” (MoMA Learning). Unlike Paik who immediately had the idea that anyone could be an artist should they wish, Nauman began his career in serious consideration of the role of an artist by constantly asking himself, “why are you an artist and what do you do, and finally that’s what the work came out of—that question, why is anyone an artist and what do artists do.”<sup>1</sup> Since the 1960s, he mainly employed video as means of recording and displaying his performances, using his own body as a sculpture to subvert the conventional definition of art. As an artist working with wide range of media including, sculpture, photography, neon, video, performance and printmaking, Nauman never really adhered to any artistic boundaries, but experimented with everything he found.

In most of his videos such as *Art Make-Up: No. 1 White, No. 2 Pink, No. 3 Green, No. 4 Black*, Nauman’s “body became an important tool and reference point, whether performing in videos, or being cast to form part of a sculpture” (MoMA Learning). The *Art Make-Up: No. 1 White, No. 2 Pink, No. 3 Green, No. 4 Black* is an early video work of Nauman, where he delves into the significance of art, artists and art making. This work

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nauman, quoted in Oral history interview with Bruce Nauman, 1980 May 27-30, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-bruce-nauman-12538>.

was initially recorded on film and later Nauman transferred it onto video, but the relentless clicking sound of film rolling through the camera is kept to remind the audience, “What appears on the screen is staged and constructed by the artist. Nauman addresses this fact—that a work of art is imagined, or made up, by an artist” (MoMA Learning).

### **Dara Birnbaum**

Within the video art scene of the 1970s, female artists initiated the feminist art movement, utilizing the video technology to question the representation and status of women in mass media culture. Among these artists, Dara Birnbaum began making video works since the mid 1970s and from early on, she mainly challenged the gender stereotypes found in television culture and also critiqued the growing power of television within the American household. She used common formats like quiz show, soap opera, and images appropriated from broadcast television to deconstruct and analyze the biased language and culture present in the media.

Birnbaum’s early work, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79), was an explicit feminist critique of Wonder Woman, a character who morphed into a feminist icon since its birth in 1941, but “still weighed down by the gendered (and often sexist) politics of the body” (Edwards, “Revisiting Video Artist Dara Birnbaum's Feminist Wonder Woman Remix”). This video 5minute 50 second long video is full of disoriented repetition of reflective surfaces (which signifies glass ceiling), explosions, funk sounds and the main character, secretary Diana Prince changing into the superhero Wonder Woman. Birnbaum constantly repeats this moment of transformation to let the

audience realize that this transformation really leads nowhere, analogous to the notion that no matter how powerful a female figure may appear on screen, in reality she is just a little more an object of male fantasy. Through this work, Birnbaum proposes, “gender is an ideology best served with the spectacle of mass reproduction. Distilled into repetitive, visually assaulting segments, the artificiality of the “empowerment” message is laid bare” (Edwards, “Revisiting Video Artist Dara Birnbaum's Feminist Wonder Woman Remix”).

With the advent of technology, 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of video art, a unique hybrid of various art forms, which led the new direction and means of art making towards “interdisciplinary, boundary-crossing collaborations that connect artists to new ideas and practices, while integrating media technologies and systems into the art world” (Oppenheimer, “Video Installation: Characteristics of an Expanding Medium”). Whether Paik strived to shatter the institutionalized system in different fields or Nauman persisted to explore the essence human behavior and physical movement or Birnbaum made critiques on gender bias found in mass media, every artist in this era intended to subvert the traditions and conventions of the arts and visual culture.

### **Preservation, Conservation and Restoration Issues**

The preservation and conservation of moving images and aforementioned new media art is an extraordinarily complex field for number of reasons, but the ultimate one is that they do not fall under the standard norms of traditional art conservation practice for paintings or sculptures. It is much more complicated than reviving the color and texture of paint or maintaining a sculpture in its original form and shape. Video art and new media art in general faces “media degradation, format obsolescence, hardware

obsolescence, and a lack of centralized documentation” (Messier 193). As much as hardware and software obsolescence are critical factors to be considered, lack of centralized documentation is also another critical element. “A centralized, accessible, and authoritative repository of technical specifications, measurements, materials, installation photographs, installation history, and correspondence pertaining to the piece” would be priceless information for the preservation and installation of the respective works in the future.

There are great number of moving image material, time-based media and new media art in the collection of libraries, archives and museums around the world, and the number just keeps growing in this era. They are undoubtedly one of the most invaluable cultural heritages that should be preserved and presented in proper conditions; hence curators, historians, technologists, artists, archivists, conservationists and professionals from various fields are working together to bring forth the most comprehensive methodology.

### **Case 1. *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission* (1989-90)**

This is a case study written by Paul Messier to examine and document the preservation issues for Dara Birnbaum’s *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission*, based on the interviews with the artist and discussions held at TechArchaeology Symposium<sup>2</sup>. This study aims to document the artist’s “specific requirements for the composition and parameters for acceptable change when components fail. Without such guidance, any required change could result in perceived or actual degradation of the artistic intent” (Messier 206). Paul Messier and Dara Birnbaum examined the selected works exhibited at SFMOMA (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) with other

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<sup>2</sup> TechArchaeology Symposium was held in 2001, concentrating on installation art preservation.



“artists, curators, conservators, video-technology experts, and media art installers...to sort out the inherent preservation challenges of technology-based art” (195).

First, they traced back to the original working method and intent of the artist. *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission* is a five-channel installation about student-led protests in 1989 Beijing, China and Birnbaum recorded four video segments when they were broadcast on television and these clips capture “a singer performing the song “Wound of History,” news coverage of the demonstrations, news coverage of the Chinese government–ordered shutdown of broadcasting by CNN and CBS, and video showing the persistence of communication through alternative modes like the fax machine” (194). She recorded them onto 3/4 in. U-Matic videotape and later transferred them to Betacam SP for modification. Unfortunately, the master copy was lost, but Birnbaum, “retains the 3/4 in. U-matic cassettes from the original off-air recordings, and, most important, she retains the Betacam SP “disc master” used by 3M” (194). This work was originally installed with 4 disc players, 4 LCD flat screen video monitors, 2.7 in. diagonal screen with 4 mounts and power transformers, 1 CRT color monitor, 25 in. diagonal screen size with wall mount, 1 sequential switcher, and 8 loud speakers. The installation presented five different “stations” with 5 video monitors and four stations with small LCD monitors (Figure 1).



**Fig.1.** *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission* (1989-90) on view at Marian Goodman Gallery, Image Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery

Then the provenance and documentation was observed for this piece. Two editions and one artist's proof<sup>3</sup> exist where edition number 1 is owned by the Stedelijk Museum in Ghent, Belgium and edition number 2 is owned by private collectors, Pamela and Richard Kramlich. The private collectors obtained edition number 2 through the Rhona Hoffman Gallery and "Thea Westreich Art Advisory Services assists the Kramlichs in managing their collection and maintains a file of correspondence and technical specifications pertinent to the installation of the piece" (Messier 194). Then there's a complicated story where Birnbaum actually created the second "artist's proof" piece for the exhibition, *Seeing Time: Selections from the Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection of Media Art* (October 15, 1999–January 9, 2000) at SFMOMA. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition was used to replicate a new one for this exhibit. This 2<sup>nd</sup> artist's proof brings up

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<sup>3</sup> Artist's proof is generally used for printmaking process, but it is an impression of the finished work, inclusive of important technical, aesthetic elements of an artist's work. It does not count as limited editions.

an interesting notion about “authenticity and authorship”. Usually “the concept of limited editions is generally applied to works of art that can be replicated” and it is also used “to protect both the integrity of the artist and the interests of the collector from the indefinite production of potentially substandard work”. Artist's proofs are not counted as editions, but they include important factors that finalize the technical and aesthetic decisions by the artist. The work exhibited at the SFMOMA required Birnbaum to authorize the replication of the original piece, as “some key technical components were no longer available due to obsolescence”. This was not an artist's proof in the conventional sense since the replication of the work took place almost 10 years after the edition was closed” (195).

#### *Assessment*

After careful observation of the provenance, general layout and technical components of the *Tiananmen Square: Break-In Transmission*, professionals assessed that the current condition is fairly stable, but “its long-term preservation is threatened on several fronts”. The major threats are format obsolescence (Manufactures no longer produce Laser disc, Betacam SP, and the 3/4 in. U-matic formats),

Hardware obsolescence (While there is a large installed base of playback equipment for the formats listed above, the ongoing production of the equipment is unclear or has stopped altogether), and although LCD will continue to develop for high-performance displays, obtaining small, high-quality analog LCD monitors has proven difficult, as the market seems to be moving away from this niche (Messier 205).

The speakers are not as threatened as other equipment mentioned above, but the original triangular model (AV-570) is not manufactured anymore and the Sony CRT monitors are also no longer manufactured as of 2011. The last major issue is media degradation as the “original off-air recordings and the edited masters are vulnerable” with maximum life expectancy of 30 years, only when it is stored in strictly controlled environment.

### *Short-Term & Long-Term Recommendations*

As a result, they came up with short-term and long-term recommendations for this work. They recommended re-mastering the original masters on magnetic tape to an updated, more stable medium and suggested that these “original masters and re-masters should be stored in secure location under conditions that meet the ISO standards for the extended-term storage requirements for magnetic tape (23oC at 20% RH, 17oC at 30% RH, and 11oC at 50% RH)” (206). They also mentioned how the different electronic equipment actually retains sculptural qualities for this piece, so it was crucial for Dara Birnbaum to document her recommendations for suitable replacements in the future. In addition to the technical recommendations, the author emphasized the importance and need of “centralized, authoritative list or catalog of all documentation pertaining to the installation” and that “an easily updatable list of these repositories and a detailed inventory of their holdings would significantly streamline future preservation-related work” (Messier 206). In conclusion, Messier also remarked the essential collaborative efforts of conservators, curators, technical experts, and the artist to develop the accurate documentation of this work, identifying critical physical and electronic components, original installation layout and most importantly, the intention of the artist. This study

ended on the note that continuous documentation will serve as an extensive template for future use and reference for the preservation of other artists' works as well.

### **Case 2. *The More the Better* (1988)**

The issues mentioned in “Preservation, Conservation and Restoration Issues” section are easily found in the almost all the conservation and preservation cases of Nam June Paik's works and unlike Dara Birnbaum's case, it is much more difficult to deal with the works of deceased artists. In particular, the National Museum of Modern Art in Seoul, Korea (MMCA) are in endless dilemma and debate for the preservation and conservation of *The More the Better* (Figure 2), a 22.8 meter tall, permanent installation created in 1988 by Nam June Paik in commemoration of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. This video installation is built with 1003 TV monitors, which symbolizes October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the legendary National Foundation Day of Gojoseon Korea in 2333 BC. This work greets and instantly captures the attention of the visitors as soon as they enter the museum and it is one of the most treasured permanent collections within the museum.



**Fig. 8.** *The More the Better*, 1988, Nam June Paik, Image Courtesy of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, [mmca.go.kr/search/njp](http://mmca.go.kr/search/njp)

Unfortunately, the Samsung TV monitors used in this work had the maximum longevity of 10 years, which would've probably decreased more due to its long operation during daily museum hours. As a result, the museum went through series of repair activities in 1988 and 2003 with the TV monitors collected and purchased from all over the world. However, Samsung Electronics stopped producing these monitors in 2009, threatening the existence of *The More the Better*. The massive size of the work also made it severely difficult for periodical cleaning and restoring of the installation. Afterwards in 2008, another restoration was conducted with the assembly of scaffolding around the tower of monitors, but over the course of time, more than 300 monitors started to break down. Once again, this created heated discussion among art professionals and art historians, whether to leave them as they are, to repair or to exchange them into LCD monitors. Following the severe condition of the work, MMCA held an extensive conference on 'How to preserve *The More the Better*' with the technicians and professionals who worked with Paik in his lifetime. The main issue was whether to dismantle the broken monitors or to exchange them with LCD, but this issue really centered on questioning the essence of art and artworks. What is the most appropriate way to maintain the DNA and integrity of the original work and still perform adequate restoration? What would be preserved from the original DNA of the work, once they are replaced with new medium? Below are several suggestions from the professionals who maintained close relationship with Nam June Paik or conducted extensive research on his works.

## *Recommendations*

1. First and foremost, the intention and idea of Paik himself was revisited. Paik once wrote to a collector of his work, “I permit partial modification, only to the extent that the integrity of my work is not damaged. Monitors continue to break down and I do not have more components so if you can find any Samsung or LG monitors in Korea, use those and if you cannot find anything, just exchange the shell with something new. Then I will consider this as the enhancement of its function.” Although he left some of these notes, it was unclear whether he wanted this to be applied to every work.
2. Jung Sung Lee (One of Nam June Paik’s technicians who Nam June Paik entirely entrusted the installation and repair of *The More the Better*), who worked in close proximity until the death of the artist, agreed with the idea of replacing the current monitors with LCD. He argued that the only practical solution is to exchange the monitors, and he believed it wouldn’t damage the integrity of the work, as the entire appearance would remain the same. He considered this solution as an effect of killing two birds with one stone, preserving the original state and improvement of the quality. He also mentioned that Nam June Paik knew very well from the beginning that the monitors would be replaced (with the maximum of 10 years life span) at some point and so the repair activities just had to be done with extreme delicacy and caution, not to destroy the software of the work, where the spirit and experimental mind of the artist is embedded in.

3. Christina Van Asch (Senior Curator of New Media Art at Centre Pompidou in France) spoke about *Video Fish* (1975) in their permanent collection. She was relieved that they still had number of highly efficient monitors, but if they were to replace it someday Pompidou will place the LCD screen behind the fishbowl to present identical effect with monitor. She stressed the importance of maintaining the essence and concept of the original work. “It is an inevitable situation to substitute with LCD as those monitors are not in production anymore and additional securing of monitors would come to an end soon. In this case, *The More the Better* will definitely lose its originality. I believe Samsung, the manufacturer of these monitors, has the key to the solution. What if they reproduce the original monitors to preserve the originality of Nam June Paik’s work? This would be costly with extra manpower, but there’s nothing Samsung cannot do if they really put their mind to it. If this were possible, it would be an invaluable promotion for them as a “global corporation” in Korea and abroad, showing respect and admiration to the internationally treasured artist of Korea.
4. Paul Garrin (Video artist who collaborated with Paik in the 1980s and 1990s), suggested replacing monitors with “high energy-efficient flat screen in order to inherit this work to the future generation.” He said Paik would’ve been so excited that he could place energy with the solar system and wind power to his work. He also added that Paik instantly adopted emerging technology in his lifetime, so we might as well restore his work with the latest technology, method and medium.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Based on the audio file on the Symposium of Preserving Nam June Paik’s works, held on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016 with Mark Pasfall, Jung Sung Lee, Paul Garrin and other professionals at MMCA, Korea.



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