

**Author** Jung Sera  
**Source** *NJP Reader #11 VIDEO DIGITAL COMMONS*  
**Publisher** Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

# *Critical Archive: The Future of the Video Archive Platform*

## Colophon

**Editor** Lee Soo Young  
**Co-Editor** Yun Ja Hyong  
**Translation** Kim Min Kyung  
**Design** Kim Hye Rin  
**Published on** February 28, 2022

# ***Critical Archive: The Future of the Video Archive Platform***

Jung Sera is the founding director of The Stream ([www.thestream.kr](http://www.thestream.kr)), a digital archive platform of Korean video arts. Her research and curations are concerned with public archives of video and media arts and the expansion of art criticism. As a guest curator of Film & Video, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), she planned the exhibition *Video Symphony: An Overture of Connection, Disjunction and Conjunction* as part of the event *Dear Cinema: Difference and Repetition* (2019). She also curated several exhibitions for the mapping of contemporary Korean video arts; *Video Portrait* (2017), *Video Landscape* (2018), *Video/Spectrum/Dance* (2019), and *Video Acts* (2020). She lectured at Hongik University, Pusan National University, Konkuk University, and Seoul Institute of the Arts. She has worked as a committee member of the Video Art and Experimental Film Archive, the Asia Culture Center (ACC), the advisory committee member of UNESCO Media Arts Creative City Gwangju, and as an editorial member of AliceOn, a media art culture channel.

Jung Sera

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## What to Archive?

Tommaso Campanella, an Italian philosopher and the author of a prominent utopian novel in the early modern age, defined the relations among media technology, spaces around the world, and social order propagated within those places. In his novel, *The City of the Sun (Civitas Solis)* published in 1623, a crewman from Genova talks about citizens of the City of the Sun, a highly advanced place: “They endlessly admire printing, gunpowder and the compass. These are symbols and tools that put the whole world into a sheepfold for integration.”<sup>1</sup> The modern cultural technology Campanella referred to is the icon and means to unite the entire world. Let us investigate the present day in aspects of cultural technology. The cultural technology as the symbol and instrument to bring the world together went through the television era, serving as ‘the power to overcome the limitations of space’ in the 1950s, and has encountered the computer and smartphone network, giving birth to ‘the synchronized space’ everywhere around the world. Storage, production, and the current state of being are integrated with each other in the synchronized space at the very moment they are selectively activated. As many are networked in the digital flow, we are living in completely different surroundings from the past. Conditions for media, information, and communication have been standardized around the world through operating systems and servers. These circumstances enable the creation of new references and cultures.

Then, let us turn to the circle of art. After the Internet became popular in the 1990s, we first access web portals when searching for materials. In the 2000s, many printed materials, images, and sound materials from the past also became searchable on the Internet. Let’s say someone photographed or filmed an

artwork at an exhibition and posted the picture or video on his/her social media. This is the process of translating physical information into digital one, enabling us to search for and see information on the web in the form of images and videos. Considering we can access information about art even in our daily life, how can we bring special forms of physical information about art to be presented in front of us? The appropriate answer would be that all of these are made possible through digitization.

Let us think about non-material art, that is, video art, now. Video art directly presents time that was expressed only implicitly before and has turned itself into synthetic art in the realm of visual art. It holds even audiovisual, theatric, and even cinematic features as its major properties. And these have helped video art to actively cope with the change in modern art which is represented as synesthesia. Video art has also become remote from a playful or critical activity to understand and interpret it because it requires a considerable amount of time to appreciate artworks in a museum. Therefore, we can see the need for an archive at the stage of the integrated recognition of video art. In particular, video art or moving images are the optimal art to respond to digital online, that is, the Internet, considering the possibility of distribution and diffusion and the fluid form.

Can video art content take root in the perpetuity of the archive? Where can video art and the archive begin to work together in the digital era? When video art (or all moving images including video art) serves as the archive, what function can we assign on it for reference? Can we discover new value from video art in the context of art (or research)? These are the questions we need to ask. The archive for video art inevitably takes a distinctive form from others, depending on how to actually archive unfixed images and why. Let me take what happened in Korea as an example before its

transition to the digital archive. New video artists in their 20s and 30s, who especially produced single-channel videos in the 1980s, mostly stored their video artworks on 8mm or 16mm film reels, VHS tapes, or 3.5-inch floppy disks. Even though they kept such storage media carefully, they could not use those media any longer in the end because of the short supply of essential machinery or due to defaults or resolution matters even with enough supplies. In addition, the management and preservation of data require a technological environment with constant humidity and constant temperature. If these conditions are not met, the material will be damaged, leading to a significant loss of value. But online digital archives can offset all these problems.



Then, how can the digital archive repair such damage and create new values? Information, digitalized from the beginning, has the intention to overcome physical deterioration. For example, films, videotapes, photographs, recordings, and texts are digitalized in order to allow more access and preserve their media itself. Unlike analog archives, digital archives do not need to suffer physical damage. However, artworks are not free from going through damage in their fundamental values even in the form of digital information.

For example, digitizing three-dimensional information is converted into a two-dimensional image or text file, and we can only view the information through an online environment. In addition, the unstable nature of digital data and the stability of the network must be considered. The Stream Archive ([www.thestream.kr](http://www.thestream.kr)), which I run, is an online digital archive that mainly provides streaming services. Partly through a cloud service, The Stream Archive keeps images and video works. If works are kept in only one path, network problems or information loss may occur. In preparation for this, we are operating multiple ‘meta-archives’ together.

At this point, let’s think about the changed method of collecting works and the paradigm of archiving. Globally, the museum’s collecting paradigm has undergone many changes since the 2000s: materials collected by the museum; collecting and preserving methods as digital technology has developed; the goal and manner of collecting and preserving as demands from the society and spectators have become different. Especially, UNESCO included ‘Digital Heritage’ in the concept of heritage as of 2003, and defines ‘Digital Heritage’ as digital-born and digitized materials.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting this concept of digital heritage, the International Council on Museums (ICOM) revised its definition of a museum in 2007. ICOM defined a museum as a non-profit, enduring institution that is open to the public and contributes to social development by collecting, preserving, researching, communicating, and exhibiting heritage, both tangible and intangible.<sup>3</sup> Also, at an international forum held to celebrate the centenary of a Korean museum, *The Development Strategy and Future of Museums in the 21st Century* (2019), in order to explore the future and alternatives of the museum in the face of digital culture, major agendas related to the collection of works have been presented. It emphasized the need for a new collection and preservation model that suits the environment

where artworks are digitalized, digital data are preserved and managed, and immaterial art is collected and conserved. Also, the forum presented issues regarding designated personnel within organizations.<sup>4</sup>

The museum intends to fit in the digital era by hastily recording and reprocessing contents. But visitors as internet users obtain their role by themselves as consumers-cum-recorders of culture and art and take action by uploading photographs and videos on their individual online archives. They archive art contents after they visit the museum, or, to be exact, the moment they enter the place. All of us are already recorders and broadcasters. Victoria Walsh said, “knowledge legalized by the technology predicted in *Report on Knowledge*, written by Jean-François Lyotard in 1984, is circulated in numerous various forms.”<sup>5</sup> And Boris Groys said, “Traditionally, the main occupation of art was to resist the flow of time. Artists and art institutions shared a fundamental project to resist material destruction and historic oblivion.”<sup>6</sup> He also said, “The function of the museum becomes one of staging the flow—staging events that are synchronized with the lifetimes of the spectators.”<sup>7</sup> Groys also pointed out that the internet made the museum’s function of representing art history obsolete. Of course, in the case of the internet, spectators lose direct access to the original artwork. And so museum visitors are invited to undertake a pilgrimage to art museums in search of originality and authenticity.

Eventually, digitized art and its information are numerical information(bit) captured by a flat and superficial digital screen in which their synesthetic elements are dislodged. Therefore, a digital archive, which is information itself based on duplication without one-off presence, must accompany a birth of new values beyond the level of exhibiting and preserving artworks. Let’s go back again to the front. We have to acknowledge the characteristics of video

art, that is, the most crucial difference between moving images and still images. For the integrated distribution and proliferation of the form and content of video art that can be intuitively understood, it is necessary to rethink the practical function and design method of online network and discover the potential value of a digital archive in the nonmaterial structure.

### How to share an archive?

The fate of information of all archives depends on which interface users can access. What should be prioritized to bring, position artworks into the screen and map the potential values? It will soon become a fundamental concern about how information and knowledge should function. Therefore, archiving was a matter of ‘what to be collected’ in the past, but it has become something that goes beyond the level of preservation and recording. The new information in digital archives should contribute to a function as a practical research that is diffused and shared. It is now important to find an answer to the question of ‘how to share an archive?’ It is also similar to a situation in which art museums contemplate how to present artworks in a better way. Thus, we need to find a specific direction for interface design and establish a practical model regarding ‘how to show and share’ in building Paik’s Video Study.

In 1995, even before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was called the ‘age of art museums,’<sup>8</sup> Antoni Tapies foundation in Barcelona held an exhibition and symposium entitled *The End(s) of the Museum*. Art museums scattered around the world tried to break away from the traditional concept of art museums as they had so different aspects that they could not converge under one term which is ‘art museum.’ Originally, art museums were born with the concept of ‘the public,’ the product of the modern civil society.<sup>9</sup> The

white cube of art museums in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a modern space framed as an ultimate space of modernism. It was also a space for the chosen people who had their places in the institutional context. The values of the works exhibited or collected there were adjusted according to bourgeois ideology. It means that the bourgeoisie excluded other essential values of art and converted it only to the value of goods based on the concept of ownership by incorporating artworks into the capitalist context. However, the museum, which had changed its constitution as a post-modern museum, tried to change it through various experiments because the advent of digital media art changed the 'receptive methods.' This change subverts, expands, and transfers the meaning traditionally pursued by art to another dimension.

In an article on image aesthetics of new media, Lev Manovich considered the problem of how objects of new media created the illusion of reality after the advent of films and photography.<sup>10</sup> Digital media art with the latest technology triggered a change in the art world in which it was reproduced and present. The computer age brought a new cultural algorithm of reality-media-data-database and created the web as the totality of enormous and ever-changing data. Thus, it resulted in a socio-cultural revolution. Art also experimented with new possibilities, looked for changes, and expanded in the midst of the advancement of media and technology. Roy Ascott said that the development of the internet in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would create infrastructure on a global scale. This prediction stipulated that museums also must become part of the infrastructure in a sense. The 'digital art museum,' which we imagined as 'the art museum of the future,' selects, preserves, and shows the knowledge produced through computers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These art museums not only track changes or movements of culture, but also exist as a distributed form online

and can be used as a powerful knowledge for cultural arts. We must quickly adapt to a paradigm shift in communication, knowledge of art, and access to information.

We are faced with a new paradigm of collecting, preserving, and researching digital media art, which is not a material object but non-material art. The various arts such as performance, video art, media art, online art, internet art, net art, sound art, virtual art, and AI art are so-called 'time-based art' or 'time-based media.' The environment for collection and preservation that the arts demand is fundamentally different from the existing one that depends on materiality, due to the electronic and immaterial properties of the media and its major properties, such as reproducibility, interactivity, virtuality, connectivity, and variability. Such an environment is not a passive place for preserving artworks and listing information, but an archive as an active place. This is why it is necessary to shift from an archive centered on physical artworks to a content management system centered on digital objects. At this point, digital archives bridge the gap between records and records, and derive hidden narratives. Therefore, users can search, acquire information, and reconstruct their individual knowledge by themselves. The process of recontextualization is possible through searching in archives.

The characteristics of knowledge and information of the archives and the needs of users would naturally change according to the features of operating institutions. It is practically impossible for all archives to meet all the requirements. For example, the purpose of the institutional archives of national and public art museums or art centers, including NJP Art Center is different from the one of the archives managed by private organizations such as The Stream. The former aims to acquire 'universal values' in terms of collection and preservation of public goods by archiving knowledge products derived from collections or projects of art museums. On the

other hand, the archives of private organizations have alternative characteristics. They include the archives that are alienated from the interest of institutional archives and place no limits on subjects of research. Thus, they can also play a role in discovering and introducing artworks of up-and coming artists who are marginalized from the mainstream. These archives should consider creating new values with a different approach from institutional archives such as national and public art museums in terms of objects and purposes.

Paik's Video Study, an institutional archive that seeks to acquire an universal value, is planning an unprecedented worldwide archive service that provides Paik's video works for free online. The plan, which started on the premise of Paik's idea of a 'video commons market,' is an innovative decision to release all materials of the world-famous artist Nam June Paik as "public goods" for free. It is the practice of an archive that other national and public art museums in Korea have not yet attempted. It also would be a cooperative network model as a sharing platform, unlike institutional archives, which have adhered to the archive model as exclusive ownership with an unrivaled status. However, some issues need to be solved before constructing Paik's Video Study. The foundation for the basic concept of art museums, including NJP Art Center, is their own collections. Collecting was the most important function of art museums. Therefore, it is not a mere accumulation of artworks, but a cultural and social act that creates 'values' and 'meanings.' Based on their own missions and collecting policies, art museums build their collections by researching, selecting, systematically recording, preserving, interpreting, and communicating valuable artworks. The collections and objects of archiving in art museums are organized as one or more objects and each one has its own order and structure. It means both the process of creating collections and the records produced as a result of it in

relation to the context of making collections. Thus, there are records and reference materials from the process of creating artworks, such as tools, notes, and drawings used by an artist(or a group), the work itself, and all records related to an artist's life. They all have to be referenced by categories and recontextualized according to a classification system when converted to an archive.

Paik's Video Study also contains many primary materials. The archive materials include various editions and single-channel videos of analog videotapes produced from the 1970s to the 1990s, broadcasting videos, recording of performances and interviews, and Paik's video sculptures. The post-production, the revision, and the footage from broadcasts are also archived. These are the world's only original Paik's videos. What should be noted here is that Paik's Video Study can develop its potential with the distinction due to specificity of digital media, unlike conventional art museums. Above all, it would be possible to impose order on surrounding records by using digital originals of artworks as core records. The new order can have a greater effect in network-based digital archives. This is not annihilating the material reality of analog works and materials. On the contrary, since it can bring various expandability as value information, it can give new values and draw a new topographical map.

## Serving as the 'Critical' Archive

The Louvre Museum has recently put about 482,000 items from its collection online ([collections.louvre.fr](http://collections.louvre.fr)) for the public to visit free of charge in March 2021. Visitors can enjoy various artworks such as paintings, sculptures, furniture, fabrics, and jewelry on the museum's recently revamped official website. For the first time in the museum's history, it has made its artworks available online whether they are on display or on loan, and even artifacts and

artworks in its preservation center in Liévin, in the north of France. On the archive website, users can also download images of artworks. The Louvre Museum states that showing its collection online is aimed to help the public feel art closer and encourage more people to visit the museum amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The Metropolitan Museum of Art launched “The Met at Open Access” on its website ahead of the Louvre on February 7, 2017, allowing images of all artworks accessible for use under Creative Commons Zero (CC0). Anyone whether they are artists, designers, educators, students, professionals, or hobbyists is able to use, share and remix images of more than 375,000 artworks uploaded on the Met’s website without restrictions through this service.<sup>11</sup> The museum posted an article titled “Introducing Open Access at the Met” to explain how to download images. The Met announced that it would reinforce partnerships with Creative Commons, Wikimedia, Pinterest, and others to make its digital images reach everyone on the Internet.<sup>12</sup>

As globally renowned museums rush to open information about their own collections online and make images downloadable, we need to reconsider the differentiated format and purpose of online archives. As video art and moving images have narratives in their nature, appreciating them requires time. Since still images are not enough for spectators to imagine the whole work, archiving video art cannot just rely on images and requires a different method from others. The Stream, under its keywords of ‘Korea,’ ‘video art,’ and ‘archive,’ has ruled out servers that require big budgets, and has instead designed the archive interface based on streaming by marrying web hosting and cloud system in part. This is how The Stream enables the online archive to replace the time-required art appreciation. Though artworks are posted in full duration or in part depending on artists, every artwork is distributed via streaming. Also, tagging is available based on summarized information and

keywords about artworks written in Korean and English. Websites run by artists are linked to the online archive. The Stream provides its entire materials free of charge through these services for public purposes. New items are steadily added to the archive every week and every month. The platform becomes alive and thus is operated on its own. The Stream's own contents such as critiques and interviews with artists are also available on its online platform. Hence, website visitors can see images, videos, and texts on a single page. This is because I wanted the archive to act as a practical material for exhibitions and research, rather than a streaming platform that stays only in the dimension of appreciation.

While we were working to establish The Stream, I studied a lot of preceding online platforms. Online archives in Europe, especially those in the UK and Germany, make various attempts on their service platforms specialized in video art and moving images. Tate Modern in the UK, in particular, offers artworks in its collection as well as their high-definition digital images for sale, if buyers intend to utilize the images for commercial use, reference, research, or exhibition. Also, Tate Modern has hosted symposiums and roundtable discussions to set up policies on the use of and payment for reproduced and distributed analog and digital images of its collection. The policies follow the museum's own philosophy and are employed in its archive research. 'Intermedia Art,' one of Tate's online pages, focuses on archiving artworks in immaterial forms such as new media, sounds, and performances. It also restores old VHS video art onto digital media, adjusts the resolution of part or all of the restored images, and allows anyone to watch them online.

Overseas institutional archives aimed for public research or reference such as Tate include SFMOMA, ZKM in Germany, FACT in Liverpool, Whitechapel Gallery in London. These are online video art archives operated by outstanding museums and media

art-specialized institutions. LUX, established in London in 2002, is a non-profit organization and a renowned distributor of moving images in Europe. This organization works as a specialized agency that collects and distributes moving images and promotes artists. It also runs various offline programs. Vdrome, launched in the same year as The Stream in 2015, partially serves as an online archive platform, identifies itself as an online movie theater, and provides streaming service for artists' video works. Videotage in Hong Kong and Rhizome and E-flux in New York have begun in the private sector and not as institutional organizations and operate online archives on their own websites as well. They appear to be online journals, but constant stream moving images such as video art and films and provide relevant records. In Asia, China and Hong Kong are at the forefront of rewriting Chinese modern art within Asia through archive platforms, where they discover artists who may represent Asian art and support them by providing critiques and promotional activities. The most notable is the Asian Art Archive, a Hong Kong-based non-profit art organization, which has expanded its research to the whole of Asia and archived massive materials especially about modern art in East Asia.

As such, global archive institutions and organizations are leading the trend to allow the public to access their materials by creating an online and offline database in a flexible manner and progressively building digital archives. Digitalized materials have different features from prints and have the merit of free access as they transcend time and space in terms of sharing. This is how 'sleeping knowledge' transforms into 'alive knowledge,' leading to archives that perform their tasks actively, and more importantly, rewrite the art history and provide critical views. We need to make knowledge and information that have migrated onto the internet serve as 'the critical archive.' The internet has

the powerful feature of networking, guarantees the expansion into other media, and works as global channels. These strengths help to distribute and reproduce new values. This circumstance requires the need for research on spectators and archive users who are networked in the post-internet era. This implies all of us are possibly potential providers or mediators. It also means new curation becomes necessary on the internet in terms of distribution and dissemination. That people now obtain remediated and networked archive information on their computers in the current accelerated technological environment is another reason for that need. We have to note that a new map may be drawn for art and that it will become possible mainly by the online digital archive which would enable 'analysis' and 'critique.' Archived information and knowledge that are accompanied by criticism can 'rewrite' the map of contemporary art. This is why archive operators should continuously support archivists' professional research, so that archive services serve and function as the core of the museum that rewrites the history and forecasts the future.

This is the point where we need to get prepared in another aspect regarding providing all knowledge for free. Paik's Video Study, as an institutional one, needs to set up a new plan regarding the scope of materials open to the public, when it digitalizes analog objects and makes them available for free of charge. How Tate Modern, mentioned above, divides its materials is a good model. It might be suggested that NJP Art Center take different approaches to materials that are to be opened for free and to those that are to be used for extensive research. At the same time, NJP Art Center needs to establish an internal research lab for the archive policy to most effectively manage the digital heritage of Paik, the one and only artist in the world. This means that NJP Art Center should prepare itself to pursue values that go beyond promotional

activities of introducing artworks of Paik to the general public and encouraging global spectators to visit NJP Art Center. At the same time, NJP Art Center needs to provide differentiated service to related organizations such as globally renowned museums and galleries, curators, researchers, academic institutions, and university research institutions which are interested in researching Nam June Paik with advanced-level archive information for cooperation and networking. NJP Art Center should utilize this kind of division policy to use its materials as useful public goods, and simultaneously obtain practical benefits necessary for its operation and research ethics.

The fast-changing world paradoxically shows why it is important to record and leave things behind. The diversification of visitors through the network forms new interpretations and layers of information, and museums can use this as an opportunity to diversify archive contents. While the previous archive system is difficult to accommodate the flow of variable changes, we today have the system as ‘a platform that shares the flow itself.’ Now we need to get prepared for the next generation by merging a format that adapts to new technological environments based on the online digital archive with the characteristics of format users who are networked. In the future, the digital archive will provide a path to another art experience on the network and serve as a reference for customized knowledge through new interfaces and layouts. I would like to call this new digital archive a ‘critical archive.’ Critical Archives will be a driving force for rewriting, reproducing history, predicting, and preparing for the future by summoning scattered heritage into digital form.

- 1 | Campanella: *Der Sonnestaat*, p. 66. Quoted from *Spatial Turn*, eds. Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann, trans. Gi-suk Lee, Simsan Publishing, 2015, p. 185.
- 2 | “Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage,” [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17721&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (last accessed on October 27, 2021)
- 3 | “Museums and Universal Heritage,” <https://icom.museum/en/ressource/icom-2007-universal-heritage-general-conference/> (last accessed on October 28, 2021)
- 4 | National Museum of Korea, “The Development Strategy of Museums in the 21st Century and Beyond”, an international forum (2019) [https://www.museum.go.kr/site/main/archive/post/article\\_233](https://www.museum.go.kr/site/main/archive/post/article_233) (last accessed on October 27, 2021)
- 5 | For more details, see the following. Victoria Walsh, “A Study on Situation Specificity: Curating, Technology, and Future,” *What Museums Do: Between and Variation in Curatorial* (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2018), p. 123.
- 6 | Boris Groys, “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 50 (December 2013) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/> (last accessed on October 28, 2021)
- 7 | Links on the above article (last accessed on October 28, 2021)
- 8 | Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, trans. Jane van Nuis Cahill (New York: Universe Boos, 1967), p. 278. Quoted in Yun Nan Ji, “Museums in the era of post-capitalism between cathedral and department store,” *Korean Bulletin of Art History* 17 (2002), pp. 148-183.
- 9 | *Discourse on Exhibition*, ed. Yun Nan Ji, NOONBIT Publishing, 2007, p. 121.
- 10 | Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (UMass: MIT Press, 2001).
- 11 | “Case Study on Counterparties in Major Countries Regarding Artworks Administered by the Government,” the Report on the Short-term Overseas Training (September 2018), p. 33
- 12 | <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection> (last accessed on October 30, 2021)