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Round Table

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VIDEO DIGITAL COMMONS

Round Table

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Contributors: Park Sang Ae, Ashok Sukumaran, Shaina Anand, Jung Sera, Hyun Seewon

Moderator: Kwon Tae Hyun

**Kwon
Tae Hyun**
(hereafter
KWON)

Let's start the roundtable of the symposium *Gift of Nam June Paik 13*. I am the moderator for today's conversation, Kwon Tae Hyun. I will give a brief introduction of the panelists and enter into a conversation with them. Park Sang Ae is a curator and archivist at NJP Art Center and preparing to open Paik's Video Study. Jung Sera is the founder and director of The Stream, a video art archive platform, and works as an independent curator. Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand are the artists of CAMP, a collaborative studio based in Mumbai, India. The exhibition *CAMP, After Media Promises* is currently being held at NJP Art Center. Lastly, Hyun Seewon, an independent curator and researcher, runs an Audio Visual Pavilion, an exhibition space.



The NJP Roundtable
held on November 27,
2021

Can we get lost in digital archives too?

KWON Today's discussion begins with Paik's Video Study, a digital archive platform. The first question that comes up naturally is 'What are the advantages or problems of converting from an analog archive to a digital one?' The

symposium speakers presented various opinions about that, either positively or critically. Among them, there was an interesting question from Park Sang Ae. That is, “Can we get lost in digital archives too?”.

Park Sang Ae
(hereafter PARK)

Browsing an archive is slightly different from looking for a book in a library or searching for something on Google. Because objects in the archive form several complex relationships, either vertically or horizontally. Therefore, when we enter a keyword, we browse an archive in an environment where we have no choice but to look at context between materials given by a creator rather than finding a target exactly. I wondered if the characteristic of an archive in which users have no choice but to see context between objects could also be applied to a digital archive. In the digital environment, the success or failure of a system is determined by how effectively we find what we want when we enter a keyword. Then, is ‘getting lost,’ which can be called the characteristic or virtue of archives, possible in a digital environment? While thinking about it, I used a little imagination and came up with the aesthetics of digital archives. In relationships among materials or records, there might be the secondary context in which users accumulate data while browsing an archive besides the original context given by a creator. Researchers may obtain a new research direction in such a secondary context rather than a keyword initially conceived. This is the aesthetic aspect that digital archives can provide, which analog archives cannot provide.

KWON

In archives, researchers have to move bodily to look for materials, as if they go for a walk. They may encounter materials that they do not expect at all in the process. The question from Park is whether such an accidental encounter could be realized in the digital environment. She also shares the idea that as user data continue to pile up, a semantic map with secondary contexts will be drawn.

Interestingly, allegories such as ‘stroll,’ ‘pathfinding,’ and ‘mapping’ frequently appear in this topic. Paik used the term ‘literary stroll’ while thinking about what if ancient philosophers of the East and West were recorded on video. Isn’t it an expression to emphasize that archives can function in a completely different way if it not only conveys an object as information but also includes elements that it does not intend to convey, such as the weather of the day, a philosopher’s stutter, or a gap between words? I think we can look at ‘njp.ma’ or ‘pad.ma,’ which CAMP has worked on, as examples of the digital archives that function aesthetically by themselves beyond information retrieval.

Ashok

Sukumaran
(hereafter
SUKUMARAN)

The software that creates a ‘timeline’ using video data was first designed for pad.ma. We developed it while thinking about a function representing time. We made it possible to view a video in a digitally represented format by interpreting a video in a new way. The more these attempts are made, the more possibilities open up. CAMP showed an example as an artist and released the code as open-source. Other users can also contribute to the archive, Nam June Paik’s ‘gift,’ in their way.

**Shaina
Anand**
(hereafter
ANAND)

We tried to look at the archive aesthetically. There may also be materials that users already know. We could flip through pages if it were a book, an analog medium. We tried to make the access method of video materials similar to that of a physical medium. Users can search for a clip in a video or cut and edit it by themselves. We also considered in many ways how a video was filmed in the first place. For example, pad.ma tried to convey information about shots which scenes were filmed with. The data could be used in various ways to study media history or archaeology. We also designed an interface where users can use digital tools to have a very analog experience.

Shall we go back to the metaphor of 'stroll' in the archive? If we walk around a city with a smartphone, all our footsteps can be tracked down. These days, taking a stroll has a different meaning than it used to do. We leave traces when we access archives and play with them. Then, other users can come and see the traces of data.

KWON

Having a word with CAMP makes me think of the possibility that we can not only be used by the Internet but also actively use it. Nam June Paik was also an artist who used advertisements, popular culture, and mass media radically. The Internet creates an immense power structure, but it also can overturn it. It is interesting because it seems that the possibility could be realized through the aesthetic practice of an archive. In particular, 'Timeline' suggested by CAMP is also interesting because it reminds me of Paik's concept of random access. The appropriation of existing content with a new aesthetic

method called 'Timeline,' in which users can click on a specific point and enter it, seems to be similar to Paik's practice of attaching a reel tape to a wall so that it can be viewed in a completely different way.

What do we gain or lose when digitizing

Nam June Paik's work?

KWON So far, we have listened to the positive potential of digital archives. But one important issue remains. One of the speakers at this symposium, Professor Wolfgang Ernst, gave a critical opinion on digital archives. He argues that it is essential to recognize the structure in which media operates from the perspective of media archaeology. For example, the conversation we are having now is broadcast through YouTube. This situation also has its own mechanism, and it influences the way we talk and determines something essential. Ernst speaks with an analog synthesizer that visualizes his voice in the symposium lecture video. And he keeps reminding us of his relationship to the analog synthesizer and the situation in which the viewer is looking at him on a computer monitor. Ernst is also concerned that many factors arising from the material nature of the medium will be lost in the process of digitization when all of Nam June Paik's videos that he made into various media are equally digitized.

Jung Sera
(hereafter
JUNG) When converting physical information into the digital, elements that we feel and experience with our body are removed. Therefore, it is somewhat valid to argue

that it cannot be called an archive. But, as we can see in CAMP's work, we gain other kinds of inspiration in digital archives. We need to consider digital archives in terms of diversity because digitization makes another possibility. Digital archives consist of a structure in which customized information and knowledge circulate based on users' experientially. Users can find the traces that other users leave in this cycle and use them in their direction. Or they can discover new knowledge to develop another path. Digital archives can be used as an aesthetic tool for creators and as another reference for researchers. So, we have to look at the archives with numerous possibilities in mind. Also, as archivists, we need to display our imagination ability to make people use the archive for their purpose.

SUKUMARAN This topic has been discussed for a long time in film studies. There is a long-standing worry that considerable damage can be done when converting analog film to digital. However, we are not being forced to digitize, and we digitize with our will. Therefore, it might be more important to think about what we can achieve through digitization and how we can respond to the digital environment. Although some physical parts of the video will be lost in the process of digitization, the digital video created in this way can be used as a basis for creating new works.

ANAND As Professor Ernst said, recognizing the distinctiveness of analog media from the media archaeological aspect is important, of course. And it is essential to consider

the experimental aspects of treating media, especially in media art. But if we don't digitize, the beautiful films that remain in our archives will no longer be available for watching. We must remember that these films are also available today because someone recorded them on VHS in the 1960s and 70s when they were aired on a local broadcast. The material can remain even when no one has the film because someone recorded it and digitized it. Thanks to the digital archive, we can preserve around 4,000 movies, including numerous masterpieces.

PARK

In a virtual environment, all information is converted to binary code, and indeed the paradigm is entirely different from analog media. Therefore, we need to see digital archives in a new, completely different perspective from analog archives. But let's come back to the stans of the museum and think. We need to see digital archives newly and, at the same time, preserve and organize analog materials that can be called 'original.' Because we have been keeping analog materials with great care since Paik started video art, we understand his works and thoughts. Other panels take note of 'use,' but I think 'preservation' is important, too. I guess Professor Ernst says that 'medianess' should be well preserved. And why we maintain medianess is that users' experiences that come from the media must be maintained. For example, how can we keep an experience in which analog voice is visualized before the user's eyes? If we cannot avoid the wave of digitization and must move to a virtual environment, museums will have to balance this new paradigm with media archaeological preservation.

KWON

This roundtable is held to discuss the way we should go at the point of time the digital archive is begun to make. So, we looked at digital and analog archives from a dichotomous perspective to some degree. However, the two archival practices can coexist, so we will be able to use digital archives to disseminate and share works while maintaining analog archives from an archaeological media point of view. In other words, Wolfgang Ernst's 'preservation' or Hannah B. Hölling's 'post-preservation' are not opposing opinions, and we can find choices and practices that cross between the two. Does anyone have an idea about this?

JUNG

Preserving the original in terms of media archeology, which Professor Ernst discussed, is very meaningful. However, sometimes it isn't easy to realize the technology to represent the original. No matter how well-preserved an original is, the original work can become a relic if the technical standards for playing it change. Therefore, we need to choose between eliminating all possibilities of the original material or preventing the taxidermizing and finding new opportunities even if the value of the original work is damaged in the process of digitization. Paik's Video Study suggests the possibility of a public archive under the banner of "video digital commons" at such a point of choice. I hope that many researchers or creators will gather at Video Study and use these digital materials to create and research. So, we need to think more actively about using the digital archive as a new reference, beyond the digital versus analog dichotomy.

How should we share Nam June Paik's gift?

KWON Let's take a moment to share our thoughts on Paik's Video Study, the central theme of this symposium. All of you have a content platform or an archive that you project and run. Considering your experiences, please share your thoughts on what Paik's Video Study should look like.

HYUN
(Hyun Seewon) As I listened to others and saw the CAMP's work, I thought it was critical to 'see at a glance in a digital environment. As a curator, I think of archives in terms of 'usage' rather than 'preservation.' Furthermore, I have made many efforts to create work optimized for the digital environment from the beginning. Many contemporary artists and designers do not regard online as a replica or another offline version but rather create works that have taken the online world as their birthplace. An idea I got from some designers was that proper control is essential. This is an aesthetic insight, and it seems to be connected with what CAMP said. From the name of the project to the interface, I think you should choose to reflect the concerns of writers, designers, and curators, even if it's a personal decision. I think the name "Video Study" is unique. The combination of 'video' and 'study' may not satisfy everyone. Still, I expect it to be a significant public activity for that very reason.

JUNG When creating a digital archive, there is also the issue of choosing whether to publish the entire work or not. It is also a problem with The Stream that I run. If we want

to release part or whole of the video, we should confer with the creator. We must choose how much we stream if we choose to stream an extract rather than the full video. In Paik's Video Study, which is preparing to open, I want to see parts that are not visible in the current NJP Art Center archive platform, that is, what I expect as a researcher or curator.

SUKUMARAN Let's talk about what decisions we must make. From a philosophical and general perspective, such a question relates to controlling information. We think it all comes from the public or some unknown. And it all must go back to them. It's not about ownership. No one can fully own or monopolize anything. For that reason, we should think about how to return the materials to public viewers. And we must also consider how users access the materials. For example, people with only a smartphone and not using any other device should access them. Our job as archivists is to open and publicize these channels. We must continue to open up accessibility to as many people as possible and to users who do not yet know these materials but may be interested in this information in the future. Our mission is to return Paik's gift to people around the world.

PARK I have gathered your opinions so far and selected four keywords. I think the four keywords: publicness, works and records, control and access, and potential as commons should be reflected in Paik's Video Study. These Keywords seem to be in close contact with the great theme of NJP Art Center, 'digital commons.' Paik's

Video Study has publicness as the only archive of Paik's video works in the world. NJP Art Center preserves Paik's works and records left by him and his colleagues. However, it is not convenient to visit here in person to view the original videotapes. Therefore, NJP Art Center has provided materials in the form of pdf or prints to use these materials and promote publicness as a public art museum. And we continuously offer the opportunity to read the materials to researchers worldwide who apply for access. Nevertheless, there were many limitations in using the materials. Therefore, we have decided to release these materials digitally and completed a legal review.

The NJP Art Center has Paik's video works. And it also contains broadcasts, images recorded exhibitions and production processes, and commercial advertisements. Therefore, we are designing the library to provide more abundant information rather than merely showing these images in a digital environment.

In how the museum's resources act as public goods, it is crucial who will have the authority to control these resources and to what extent. Paik's Video Study will be open to the public in 2022. It would be wonderful if it were a form where users could add secondary information by annotating video materials like 'njp.ma' platform proposed by CAMP. However, given the circumstances, it won't be easy to do so next year.

It was an excellent opportunity to imagine the potential of Nam June Paik's video archive as a commons through the CAMP's work. CAMP's works and NJP Art Center's video digital commons experiment matched well, and the CAMP's artists participated actively, so the njp.ma

project is ongoing. Considering the CAMP's suggestions in this project, we will continue experimenting with the next stage.

KWON

Today's roundtable was an excellent opportunity to hear various opinions on the archives and Paik's Video Study. The concept of ownership to artworks or the myth of an 'author' is being dismantled in today's digital environment. In this context, the keyword 'commons' seems to be a radical idea that can question the classical museology or archive concept. Thank you for joining us here today.