

ABSTRACT

Untitled (Piano) by Korean-American artist Nam June Paik (1932–2006) is a mixed-media work that was the subject of a major conservation intervention at the Museum of Modern Art by the author and Glenn Wharton, Conservator of Time-based Media. The work was originally composed of an upright player piano that plays show tunes loudly; fifteen cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors that display two psychedelic looped videos with imagery from the life of John Cage and content from two live-feed video cameras; two U-Matic tape playback decks; and a floodlight on a tripod. This poster will address the practicalities of undertaking an extensive media sculpture conservation project with a focus on honoring the practice of an artist who incorporated variability, chance, and distributed authority in his work.



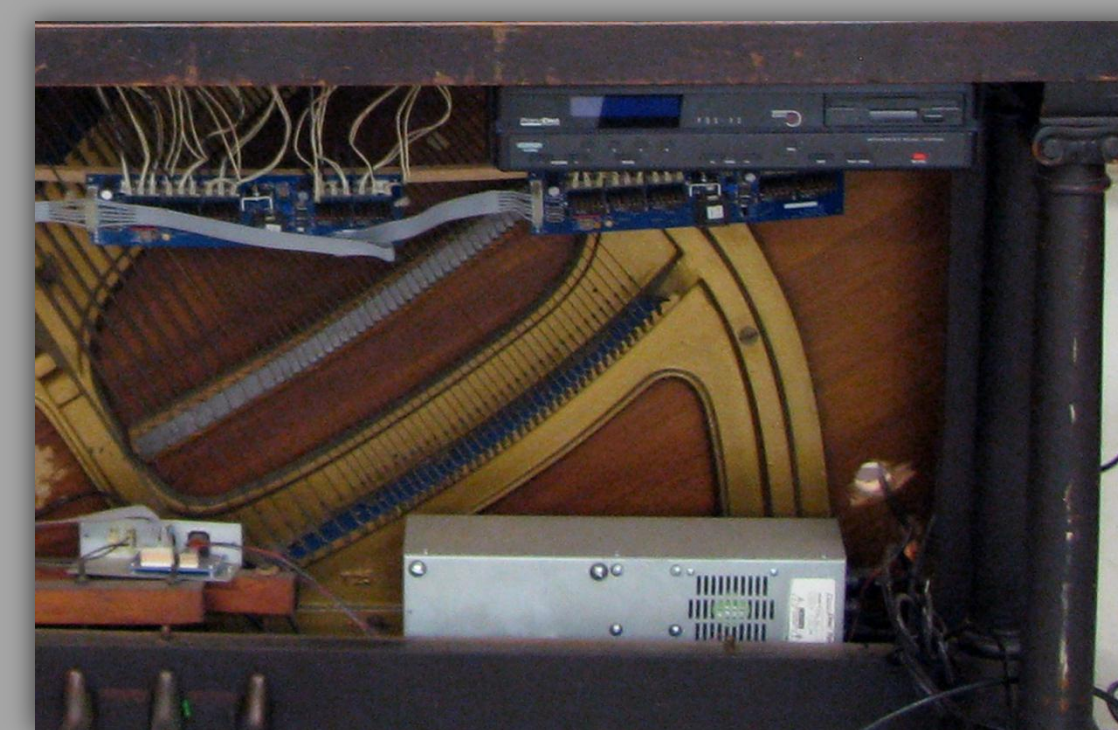
Nam June Paik. *Untitled*. 1993. Player piano, 15 televisions, two cameras, two LaserDisc players, one electric light and light bulb, and wires, overall approx. 8' 4" x 8' 9" x 48" (254 x 266.7 x 121.9 cm), including LaserDisc players and lamp. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Bernhill Fund, Gerald S. Elliot Fund, gift of Margot Paul Ernst, and purchase. © 2013 Estate of Nam June Paik

NEGOTIATING OBSOLESCENCE IN A FUNCTIONAL MEDIA SCULPTURE: NAM JUNE PAIK'S *UNTITLED* (PIANO)

Emily Hamilton

HISTORY AND CONDITION

When the work was exhibited at MoMA in 1994, the two looped U-matic videos were migrated to LaserDisc with Paik's consent, and consequently two LaserDisc players replaced the original U-Matic players. During this exhibition and a later exhibition in 2007, the PianoDisc player piano system, an obsolete system designed for floppy disks, presented problems related to a faulty driver. The piano itself was operational during installation, but there was extensive damage from overuse to the hammer mechanism. The wood has many scratches and dents from heavy usage. Two of the CRT monitors are not functional, and the other monitors are dusty from exhibition.



Detail of the original floppy-disc player piano control mechanism (top right of image)

RESEARCH

Nam June Paik encouraged the participation of others and shared authority with them in producing and installing his works. This made conservation research and decision-making far from straight forward, as many people needed to be consulted and come to agreement. The conservators researched technical options and gathered opinions from Jon Huffman of the Nam June Paik Studios and MoMA curators Barbara London and Doryun Chong about the presentation and long-term care of the work.

Critical questions included the display of obsolete playback equipment and parameters for future conservation interventions. Nam June Paik playfully changed his works with each installation and often incorporated new audio and video technologies into his older video sculptures. A key question was whether to continue this tradition or freeze the existing technologies at the moment of his death. The decision was made to update playback technology as necessary to maintain functionality, but to position new equipment so that it is not visible to the viewer. One unresolved question is whether to display the obsolete LaserDisc players with the work since that was the last iteration that the artist approved, even though they are no longer functional and were not in the original composition.

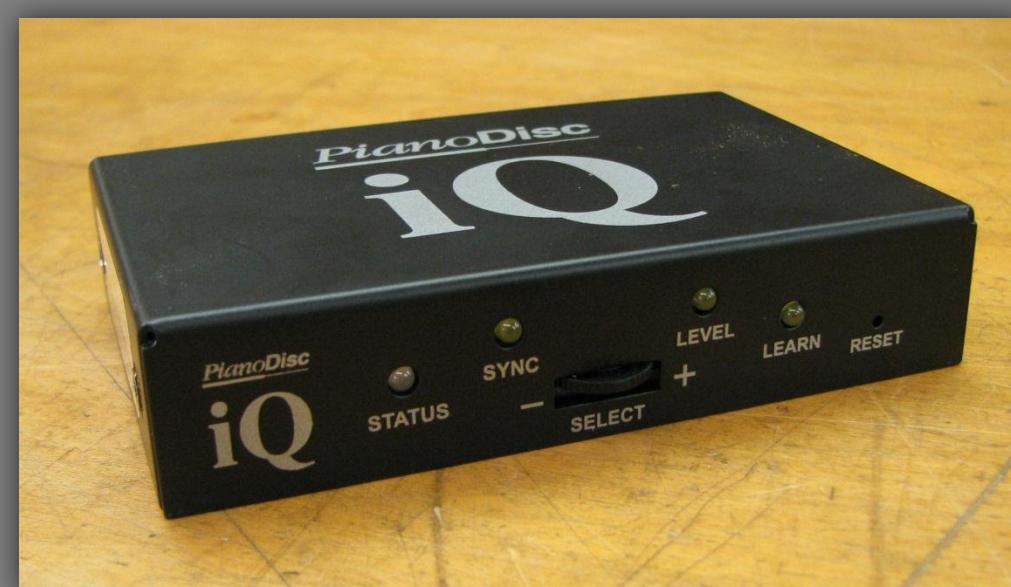
A similar work titled *Piano Piece* in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Working with their staff, differences were identified between the two sculptures, and information was shared between institutions as the conservation project progressed.

TREATMENT

The treatment of the piano involved replacing the original 5 1/2" floppy-disc player-piano mechanism, as future repairs and disc replacement would be impossible because of technical obsolescence. PianoDisc, the company that made the unit, still exists and now make wireless units that play encoded MP3 files. We worked with Paul Keogler of Dancing Ivories, a piano repair company on Long Island, to replace the unit and repair the piano. The original floppy-disc player-piano unit on the piano was left as evidence of the original technology, and the new MP3 unit was hidden away behind it. The hammer mechanism of the piano was also repaired, though scratches from use were left untreated.



Original piano-player unit and exposed circuitry under the keyboard.



The new digital player piano mechanism.



The hammer mechanism during treatment. Worn hammer shanks and felt pads were replaced.



Peter Oleksik and Emily Hamilton calibrate a monitor using a blue gel filter. When looking through the filter, it is possible to tell when the colors are balanced.



The CRT monitors were tested and calibrated as a group at MoMA.

The CRT monitors and other electronic equipment were surveyed, surface cleaned, and calibrated. Two non-functional monitors were repaired by CT Lui and Raphael Shirley of CTL Electronics. This was done by swapping the cathode ray tubes of the originals with tubes from purchased monitors of the same size, allowing the continued use of the original monitor casings. A full set of backup CRT monitors and video cameras were acquired and extra bulbs were purchased for the spotlight. The video elements were remastered from LaserDisc to uncompressed Quicktime digital files.

CONCLUSION

Nam June Paik did not leave a clear plan for conserving his work, but in making decisions conservators should take into account the spirit of his work and the opinions of those who worked closely with him. This kind of conservation intervention will continue to be necessary because of ongoing technology obsolescence, making this and other media sculptures continually dynamic.



Emily Hamilton

Assistant Conservator, Saint Louis Art Museum
Kress Conservation Fellow, Museum of Modern Art 2011-2012
Emily.Hamilton@slam.org

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