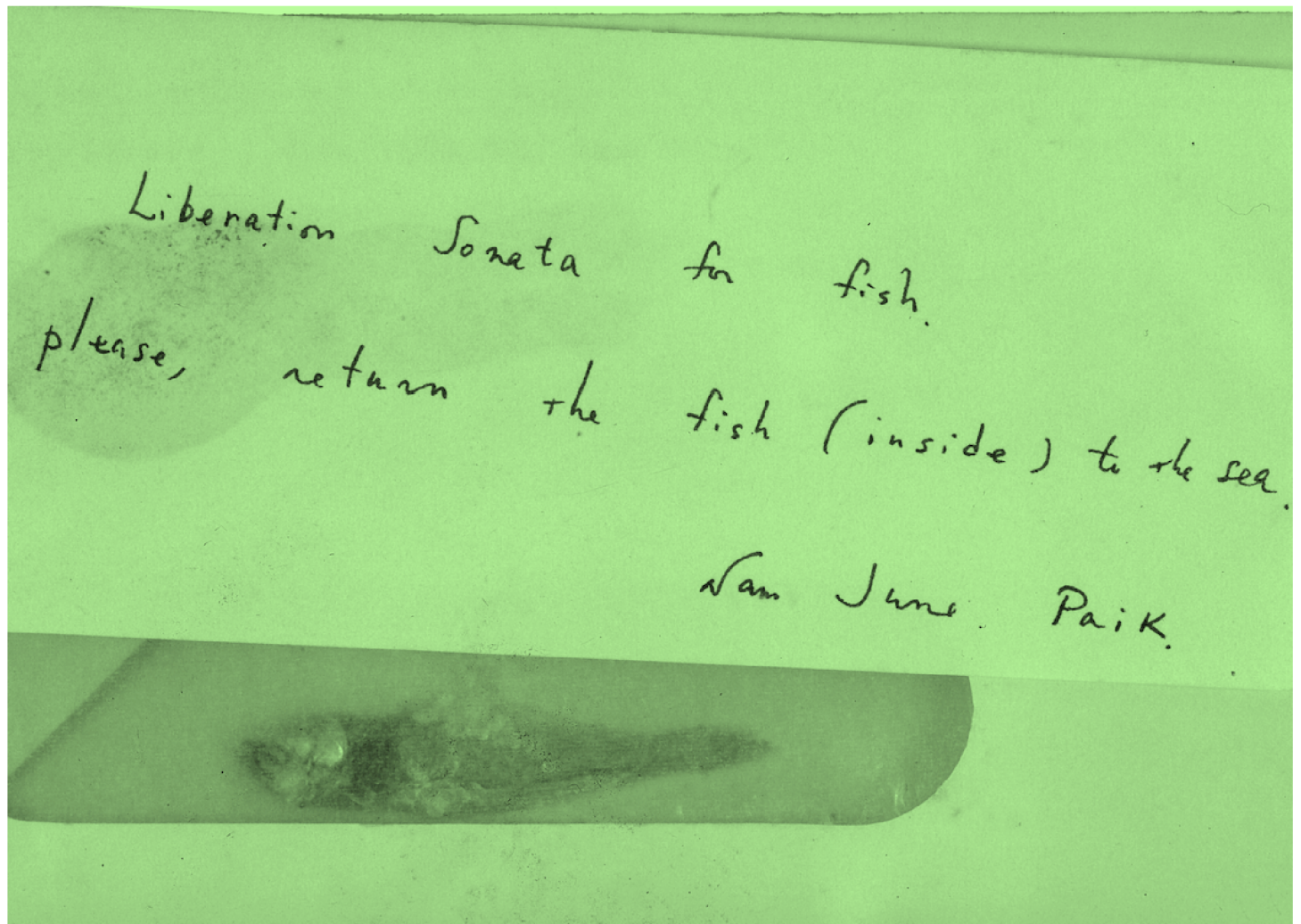
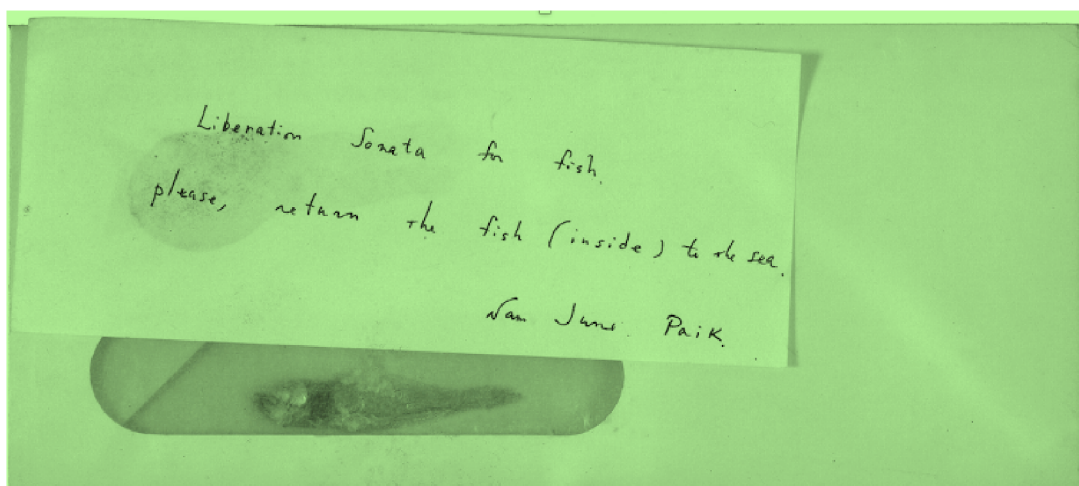


About Fish, or Toward Radical Affinity in Paik's Scores



By Hanna B. Hölling

It's a beautiful early fall afternoon, and once again, I find myself drawn into the orbit of Nam June Paik—a true luminary of the 20th century art scene and an indisputable pioneer in what we now refer to as “video,” “electronic,” or “media art.” I've been tasked with crafting an essay on the subject of Paik's early scores, and I'm grappling with the decision of whether to take a comprehensive approach, encompassing the numerous works that were either inspired by or gave rise to primary and secondary scores [1], or to focus my attention on a single example that would most effectively illustrate my points. Given my contemplation on the aesthetics of decay, my decision becomes clear in an instant: I will center my exploration on *Liberation Sonata for Fish*, a fascinating instance of a score-based creation by Paik, dating back to 1969, that notably embodies the concept of degradation.



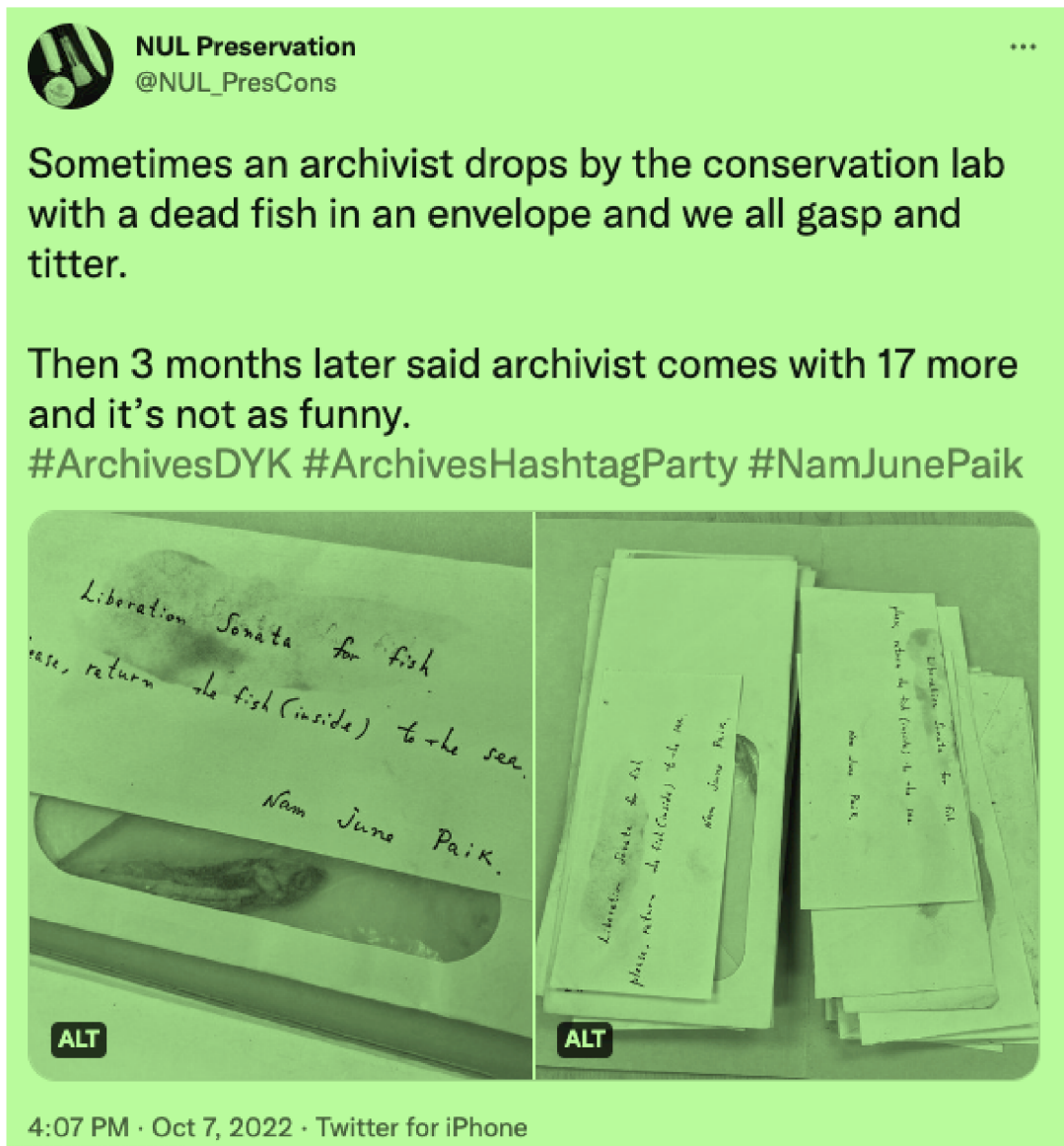
Liberation Sonata for Fish as depicted on this [website](#).

Liberation Sonata for Fish was distributed free of charge to the attendees at Charlotte Moorman's 7th Annual New York Festival of Avant-Garde, Ward Island, New York, in 1969. The columnist and critic for the Village Voice Jill Johnston comments on the piece in 1969: “..uh, what ho we have something here, an envelope from Nam June Paik with a tiny dead fish in it and a message .., terrific I'll do that and while I'm at the edge of the polluted river liberating my dead fish I might see Ralph Ortiz's dead rats..”[2]

Created in the aftermath of Paik's most active engagement in Fluxus, Paik's *Liberation Sonata for Fish* recalls the Fluxus aesthetics of instruction and event score (notably instigated by George Brecht and practiced by the members of Fluxus' international circles) which combined a textual description of varying length and abstraction with the form of a paper object, often enclosed in an envelope or in a box (examples are *Water Yam*, 1963, or the scores entailed in the collective anthology *Fluxus I*, 1964).

In the majority of cases, the work comprises an envelope that contains a dead, dried-out fish, or the remains thereof. The score, which at the first sight seems handwritten, is printed either on a small format envelope or on a separate piece of paper attached to an envelope with glassine window. The work exists at least in two variants, one prompting the user to return the fish to the water, one to the sea, that have been distributed across the collections worldwide in an unknown number of editions.

Though I had encountered *Liberation Sonata for Fish* at least two times during my earlier research in several Fluxus collections, such as in the Smithsonian American Art Museum ([Nam June Paik Archive](#)) and in the collection of the [Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund \(Germany\)](#), I have always deemed the work singular, if not unique, given its physical make-up. But the recent reactivation of my research on Paik, followed by my browsing through archives of the World Wide Web on the search for a dead fish, has taught me otherwise. Suddenly, there it was: a tweet that featured a snapshot of the work's multiple editions.



Tweeter feed captured on October 20, 2022, featuring multiple copies of the *Liberation Sonata for Fish* from the collection of the Northwestern University Libraries as a part of The Charlotte Moorman Archive.

I was stunned by this discovery. How many lives of an artwork, and how many fish lives, one can discover by doing research online. The seventeen (!) editions of the *Liberation Sonata for Fish* glimpsed back at me from two images displayed on the screen of my computer, uploaded just two weeks ago. The work seemed dead and deactivated, perhaps awaiting liberation. But this discovery accelerated my heartbeat. From the tweet, in which a conservator expressed their astonishment about the contents of the envelopes delivered to the lab by an archivist, I learned that the multiple editions are housed in the Northwestern University Libraries, as a part of the Charlotte Moorman Archive and the unprocessed (as of December 2022) unprocessed Geoffrey Hendricks archive [3]. The long thread of responses suggested the readers' keen interest in the challenges of

keeping this type of work in archival vaults. One reader commented, "But.... it's Nam June Paik. You were expecting something different?!!;" another contended, "the conservation of some of [Paik's] tv and video art seems a lot worse." I could not help but empathize.

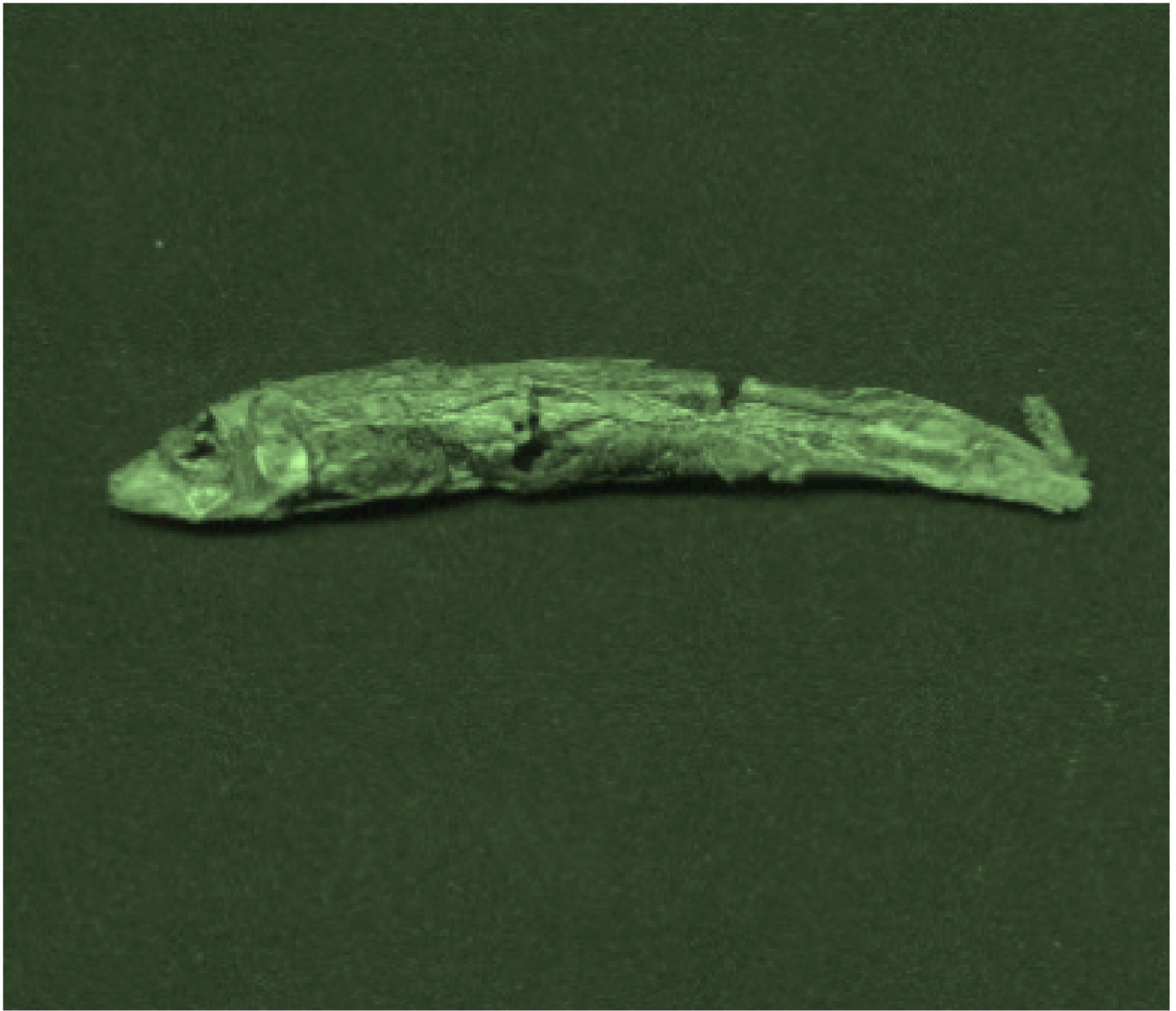
The absurdity of *Liberation Sonata for Fish* lies in the proposition to free a dead fish by releasing it to its natural element—an act which acquires a drastic overtone in the times marked by massive extinction of species. Is what I am seeing evidence of an unfulfilled liberation? Who is liberating and who is in need of liberation? Or does archival preservation become a tacit metaphor for the fish's liberation, as its body dried out and became a specimen enclosed in the archival folds of a highly controlled habitat, both environmentally and institutionally?

Paik, whose involvement with Fluxus can be traced back to the Proto-Fluxus in Germany in the early 1960s, must have acquired a profound understanding of scores through his musical education. Paik's musical accomplishments date back to the early 1950s; later, as a follower of John Cage and a participant in Fluxus, both in Europe and in the United States, he became "le grand expérimentateur" in the field of new music. During his early education in Tokyo, Munich, and Freiburg in the 1950s, Paik devoted himself to the study of music—and seemed destined for a career as a classical pianist. He moved from Korea to Hong Kong and then to Japan, where he studied aesthetics, music, and art history and eventually wrote his undergraduate thesis on the composer Arnold Schoenberg known for his contribution to serialism. His further studies with Wolfgang Fortner in Freiburg and his activities in the electronic studio of the West German radio station WDR in Cologne, an important center for contemporary music that attracted such composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel, and György Ligeti further evidence his musical connections. Paik's musical background permeated not only the variety of his forms of expression but

also had a crucial impact on his creative process and the afterlives of his works.

Creating a work based on a score means endowing it with the potential for a multitude of materializations. The radical openness of score-based works means they can never be fully completed. In other words, no one realization of the score can neither fulfill the work nor put a closure to it. But such openness of the score-based work seems to be at odds with *Liberation Sonata for Fish*. If we decide to follow Paik's score, we might liberate the fish, allowing it to return to its natural habitat. Once the fish is gone, the score is realized and the performance, completed. What is left is the empty envelope with Paik's instructions. The fish is missing but the work still instructs.

Multiplicity and uniqueness go hand in hand in *Liberation Sonata for Fish*. Although, as a score-based work, the work is not only designed, despite my earlier claim, to hypothetically generate multiple performances but also is itself a multiple work (in the sense that it exists in an unknown number of editions), one can say that its individual editions are unique due to the unique process accompanying their decomposition. The stains, watermarks, impressions of the once-alive fish body on the paper, and, not least, traces of use, render each of these editions an "original" uniquely marked by the long performance of degradation and decay. In other words, despite the score's hypothetical promise of an event's multiple returns, the score itself, as a solid concretization of matter, performs the instability of its own material constitution, thereby undergoing physical degradation, change and decay manifested in the disintegrating cadaver.



Dead fish from *Liberation Sonata for Fish* as depicted on the website

<http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2014/01/nam-june-paik-liberation-sonata-for-fish.html>

BUt the fish puts forward an aesthetic of decay that goes beyond the common sense imagination that art needs to be fine (as in “fine arts”) and is here to satisfy our senses. Accepted as artistic material at least since Dieter Roth (1930–98) and appreciated in architectural ruins since John Ruskin (1819–1900), decay and disintegration make apparent the otherwise implicit movement – the disintegration and perpetual recreation – of all matter. At this point, I agree with Caitlin de Silvey: Appreciating loss and decay might have a productive relation to the past [4]. Instead of mourning the crumbling corpus of the dead fish and posing questions of identity (“is this work still the same, or is it different in comparison with its 1969 manifestation?”), out of these remains we might read other narratives. We

might understand change not as a loss but rather as a release to other states, more open and indeterminate.

From these considerations, there emerges a politics of affinity and growing recognition for other species, not in their lived form but also in a dead one, as a premonition and a forecast for those still living. Death becomes bearable, as a mere transition from one state to another in a universe made up of vibrational matter. Seeking solidarity with the dead fish, in the difference between its dead and my living body, I find myself no more wishing to liberate the fish. The fish seems to liberate me, by providing a perspective that living a dead life might just as well mean a *different* kind of living. In this vein, caring for a dead fish might take the form of radical sociability, a building of a coalition between different bodies in their respective differing states of vitality.

[1] I have expanded on the notion of the score in Hölling, "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," *On Curating*, 51 (2022), see the section "A Priori, A Posteriori; Primary, Secondary."

[2] Jill Johnston, *Village Voice*, 1969, an excerpt available [here](#). Johnston refers to the central figure in U.S. Post-war art, Raphael Montañez Ortiz.

[3] Scott Krafft, the chief curator of the collections, has been instrumental to my understanding of the work in this institution. He explained that one of the variants in their collection includes 9.5" x 4" envelopes with glassine windows and one 6.5" x 3.5" without windows. Some of the editions are missing the fish. At a later time, in their unprocessed Geoffrey Hendricks archive here, he discovered 4 copies of the large envelope version of the piece (none of which had a fish inside) and 2 copies of the small envelope version (which both still had the fish).

[4] Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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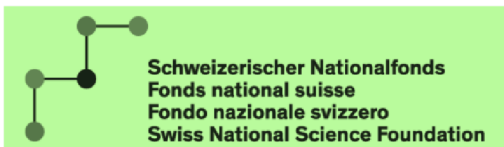
Hanna B. Hölling

November 5, 2022

WRITINGS

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