

Revisions—Zen for Film
On View September 18, 2015–January 10, 2016



How do works of art endure over time in the face of aging materials and changing interpretations of their meaning? How do decay, technological obsolescence, and the blending of old and new media affect what an artwork is and can become? And how can changeable artworks encourage us to rethink our assumptions of a work of art as fixed and static? *Revisions—Zen for Film*, an exhibition on view in Bard Graduate Center's Focus Gallery from September 18, 2015 through January 10, 2016 explores these questions through *Zen for Film* (1962–64), one of the most evocative films created by the Korean-American artist Nam June Paik (1932–2006).

Created during the early 1960s, Paik's *Zen for Film* consists of the screening of blank film leader for several minutes.

As the film ages and wears in the projector, the viewer is confronted with a constantly evolving work: the visual occurrences on the film leader are caused by the projecting mechanism and random events in the environment, which in turn makes the accumulation of traces on film unpredictable. Inherent in the work's material and conceptual aspects are notions of chance, trace, changeability, boredom, silence, and nothingness. With *Zen for Film*, the projection of a film leader creates an image of apparent nothingness that oscillates between the immateriality of projected light and the material traces, which slowly obliterate the leader's transparent surface. *Zen for Film* shares meaningful aspects of chance, silence, and nothingness with such works as composer John Cage's *4'33"* (1952) and artist Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951).

Fluxus offers a conceptual-temporal framework for *Zen for Film*—also known as *Fluxfilm no. 1*. An international forum of artists, composers, and designers, Fluxus's origins lie in the concepts of indeterminacy and experimental music that Cage explored in the 1950s. Fluxus propagated “do-it-yourself” aesthetics, while valuing simplicity over complexity. During the 1960s and '70s,



Nam June Paik. *Zen for Film* as a filmic remnant from the 1960s (right) and three *Zen for Film* Fluxkit editions (left). Photograph by Brad Iverson. From *Fluxus Codex*. Detroit: Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988. © Nam June Paik Estate.

artists including George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, and Benjamin Patterson were associated with the group.

Developed during an Andrew W. Mellon “Cultures of Conservation” Fellowship at Bard Graduate Center, *Revisions—Zen for Film* offers a unique and intimately focused encounter with the materiality of Paik's work, present here in one specific instance in a series stretching back to the early 1960s. The rationale behind the project is to critically revise—and question—some assumptions about *Zen for Film* so as to foster a broad reflection not only about media that refuse simple classifications but also about artworks radically shaped by curatorial, conservation, and presentation decisions. *Revisions* strives to unfold the world of an artwork without any potential disruptions, exposing the artwork as artwork—the “thing” and its world, its event, and its process. The exhibition is perhaps the only occasion to date in which viewers will be able to contemplate *Zen*

for Film in the singularity of its presentation, incorporating an investigation of its genesis, transformations, and ongoing interpretations. *Revisions* provides a fresh perspective on a piece with a rich history of display, and asks precisely *what*—and *when*—an artwork might be.

Exhibition

The Gallery's corridor leads to a viewing room where the visitor encounters *Zen for Film*: a projection of electric light accompanied by the sound of a 16mm film projector. This minimal ensemble invites a deep and prolonged engagement on the viewer's part, mobilizing perceptual and cognitive powers. In the same room, *Zen for Film*'s film canister (ca. 1965) and *Zen for Film* as a Fluxus edition (ca. 1965) evoke the work's most immediate material context. In *Zen for Film* the conditions of display, environment, and audience contribute to the work as a whole.

Returning to the corridor, the visitor encounters the digital interactive component of the exhibition that strives to provide an understanding of *Zen for Film* through conceptual associations that correspond to viewers' experiences of it—boredom, chance, materiality, nothingness, silence, time, and trace.

Through these concepts, *Zen for Film* is linked with a number of artworks understood as potential inspirations, antecedents, and contemporaries.

Together these suggest issues of appropriation and continual reinterpretation. Included in the digital interactive are artworks by Cory Arcangel, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, John Cage, Com&Com, Tony Conrad, Merce Cunningham, Guy Debord, Marcel Duchamp, Ceal Floyer, Ken Friedman, Yves Klein, Imi Knoebel, JODI (Joan Heemskerk / Dirk Paesmans), Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, Peter Kubelka, Kasimir Malevich, Christian Marclay, Nam June Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray, Robert Ryman, Paul Sharits, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Mungo Thompson, Michel Verjux, Lawrence Weiner, and Andy Warhol.

The exhibition was curated by Hanna Hölling, Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Professor, Cultures of Conservation, at Bard Graduate Center. In preparation, she offered graduate courses; In Focus: Beyond the Object

Nam June Paik. *Zen for Film*, ca. 1965. Assembled and designed by George Maciunas. Plastic box with offset label, containing blank film loop and offset card. The Museum of Modern Art, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift, 2627.2008.a-c. © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2015 Nam June Paik Estate.



Principle—Object, Event, Performance, Process in the spring 2014 and In Focus: Revisions—Art, Materiality, and Continuity in Fluxus (1960s–70s) in the spring 2015 semesters. Students contributed substantively to the project through their participation in the courses and as faculty assistants.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by *Revisions: Zen for Film*—a fully illustrated book by curator Hanna Hölling that offers an in-depth analysis of *Zen for Film* by constructing a sequence of ten thematically ordered chapters, or “revisions,” spanning a theoretical-historical context and the frameworks of exhibition, dissemination, and continuation. Following an introduction that contextualizes *Zen for Film* within the emergence of experimental film, Fluxus, and Paik’s own life, the “revisions” begin with the author’s presentation of three encounters with the film that problematize its multifaceted existence. Other “revisions” explore the ideas of nothingness, boredom, and Zen Buddhism involved in Paik’s artwork; the issue of cinematic time so intriguingly destabilized by the film; an exploration of its multiple existences as film, editions, and object; and the particular problems posed by exhibiting it. The final “revisions” examine *Zen for Film*’s associations with music, conceptual art, and performance, as well as the associated aspects of authenticity, authorship, and intention. The book concludes with a proposition for understanding the film in terms of relative duration.

This cross-disciplinary inquiry into *Zen for Film* has been triggered by the premise that if we are to continue maintaining responsibility for the lives of artworks, then scholars, curators, conservators, and caretakers must understand profoundly what they are.

Revisions: Zen for Film is available in the Gallery and online at store.bgc.bard.edu.

Focus Gallery

The Focus Gallery presents small-scale exhibitions as part of an academically innovative project that also includes graduate seminars, public programming, and publications both in print and online. Envisaged as a laboratory, the Focus Gallery promotes experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media and reflects Bard Graduate Center’s commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

Related Public Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Group Tours

Exhibition tours are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

About Bard Graduate Center

Bard Graduate Center is a graduate research institute in New York City. Our Gallery exhibitions and publications, MA and PhD programs, and research initiatives explore new ways of thinking about decorative arts, design history, and material culture. Founded in 1993, it is an academic unit of Bard College.

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#ZenForFilm

Front page: Peter Moore. Nam June Paik casting shadows on *Zen for Film* at the New Cinema Festival I, Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, New York, November 2, 1965. © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. © Barbara Moore / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. © 2015 Nam June Paik Estate