

Nam June Paik, *Magnet TV*, 1965. Modified black-and-white television set and magnet, 38 3/4 x 19 1/4 x 24 1/2 in. (98.4 x 48.9 x 62.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Dieter Rosenkranz 86.60a-b. © Nam June Paik Estate

MPI CASE STUDY: RE-CATALOGUING NAM JUNE PAIK'S MAGNET TV

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In support of the Whitney's ongoing conservation efforts, MPI is re-cataloguing and providing additional descriptive data for all of the Museum's time-based media holdings. These tasks include photographing and relabeling artwork components, as well as certifying that catalogue records are accurate and adhere to current standards. As a prime example of this undertaking, in the Fall of 2019 MPI staff re-catalogued Nam June Paik's landmark video sculpture *Magnet TV* (1965).

Magnet TV is comprised of a black-and-white Conrac CRT television inside an artist-modified Magnavox cabinet, with a large magnet placed on top. Unlike the vast majority of the time-based media holdings in the Whitney's permanent collection, *Magnet TV* is distinguished by its lack of actual media. When the work is installed, abstract shapes are visible

on the TV screen, though they are not played back from any media carrier, nor are they sourced from an antenna. Instead, they are generated by the force of the magnet bending and distorting the TV's electronic signal.

Despite having no media as a component of the work, preserving *Magnet TV* is no easy task. While this is largely due to the difficulty of maintaining its hardware, the work also requires thorough documentation in order to untangle the complexity of the many technical and aesthetic changes it has undergone throughout its lifespan. In terms of its fluctuating technical aspects, there have been numerous instances of the Museum rejuvenating or replacing components that either needed to be serviced or that failed completely. As a precautionary measure, the Museum has had to ensure that working spares of obsolete or at-risk hardware are easily accessible. *Magnet TV* has also undergone aesthetic developments over time. It started out as an interactive piece—whereby visitors were permitted to move the magnet along the top of the cabinet so that they could alter the imagery on the monitor screen—but this was discontinued over safety concerns beginning with a 1982 Paik retrospective at the Whitney. Tracking these details about *Magnet TV*'s history allows the Museum to make informed decisions about how the work should be presented and preserved.

In order to account for *Magnet TV*'s many changes and to accurately re-catalogue it, the first step was to collect and organize all of the Museum's archival documents relating to the work. This included faxes, emails, slides, invoices, manuals, and floor plans, which were used to create a timeline of the material history of the work. While this required a great deal of back-and-forth and cross-referencing, closely analyzing this information allowed MPI to take stock of its holdings and better understand how to maintain the work if there are future issues. From there, MPI drafted a new cataloguing schema that was

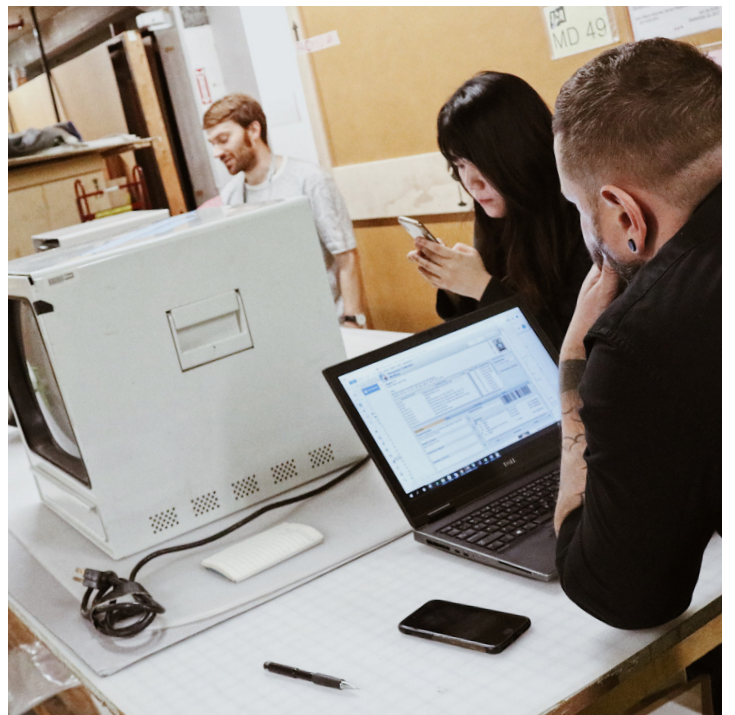


A spare Conrac cathode ray tube that can replace the one used in *Magnet TV* in case of damage or wear

more consistent, precise, and self-explanatory for future users. Suggestions included using standardized vocabulary for CRT parts so as to avoid vague or colloquial terms and providing more background information about individual components so as to better understand their source, function, and who could service them. Once the cataloguing schema was complete, MPI then collaborated with the Whitney's AV, Registration, and Art Handling departments to pull the *Magnet TV* components out of art storage, physically relabel them, and create new photographic documentation. In the end, this effort represents a major stride in sustaining *Magnet TV* for years to come.



One of two spare Conrac chassis for *Magnet TV*



The MPI team examines components of *Magnet TV* and updates their catalogue records