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Conserving 32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly: Authenticity and Change

Colophon

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진지영

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Conservator,
Leeum Museum of Art

〈20세기를 위한 32대의
자동차: 모차르트의 진혼곡을
조용히 연주하라〉의 보존:
작품의 원형과 변형에 대하여

Conserving **32 Cars**
for the 20th Century:
Play Mozart's Requiem
Quietly: Authenticity
and Change

CHIN ZEEYOUNG

진지영은 리움미술관 보존연구원으로, 프랑스 아비뇽 고급미술학교 회화 보존복원과에서 석사학위를 취득하였다. 미술관 현대미술 소장품 전반의 보존처리 및 그와 관련된 연구를 하고 있다. 주요 논문으로는 「컬러필드 회화의 기법 연구: soak-stain을 중심으로」(2006), 「루이즈 부르주아의 〈Maman〉 재질과 보존 방안 조사」(2008), 「미디어 아트의 보존과 기록」(2011), 「백남준의 〈20세기를 위한 32대의 자동차: 모차르트의 진혼곡을 조용히 연주하라〉의 보존」(2014), 「유영국 유화 작품의 기법과 손상 유형」(2016), 「야외 금속제 현대조각품의 보존관리」(2021), 「김환기의 〈23-XII-71#218〉: 점화에 이르기까지」(2021) 등이 있다. 2020년부터 현대미술 보존을 위한 국제 네트워크인 INCCA의 운영위원으로 활동하고 있다.

Chin Zeeyoung is a conservator at Leeum Museum of Art. She earned her master's degree in the Conservation and Restoration of Painted Works of Art at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art d'Avignon. Chin researches on conservation and restoration of artworks in museum collections in the field of contemporary art. Major research papers that she published are: **The Conservation of an Outdoor Bronze Sculpture : Louise Bourgeois' Maman** (2008), **Documentation and Preservation of Media Art** (2011), **Conservation of Nam June Paik's 32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly** (2014), **Technique and Damage Types of Yoo Young Kuk's Oil Paintings** (2016), **Conservation and Maintenance of Modern Outdoor Metal Sculptures** (2021), **23-XII-71#218 and the Development of Kim Whanki's Dot Paintings** (2021). Since 2020, she is a Steering Committee member of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA).



Fig. 1. Installation at Skulptur Projekte Münster (photo by Roman Mensing)



Fig. 2. Installation at Samsung Transportation Museum in Yongin

After initially being exhibited for approximately 100 days at Skulptur Projekte Münster in 1997 (Fig. 1), Nam June Paik's installation **32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly** (hereinafter **32 Cars for the 20th Century**) became part of the collection of the Samsung Foundation of Culture. Before being shipped from Münster to Korea, each of the thirty-two cars underwent an inspection, with various types of damage being documented, including punctured tires, dented front grilles, broken taillights, missing steering wheels, and graffiti. Notably, the condition report sent to Leeum Museum of Art asserted, "The artist has indicated that flat tires are 'a part of the piece,' and are not a concern." Accompanied by the condition report, the cars were packed in containers and sent to Korea, where they were installed in front of Samsung Transportation Museum in May 1998 (Fig. 2), just before the museum's opening. As they had been in Münster, the cars were arranged around the museum in four groups of eight that respectively formed a square, triangle, circle, and line.

This outdoor installation was maintained for a whopping twenty-four years, until 2022, posing a continuous challenge to the museum's conservation team. Within a few years of the initial installation at Samsung Transportation Museum, various parts of the cars, including their roofs, began to rust and disintegrate, as the metal corroded from inside the body (Fig. 3). The once gleaming silver paint, which had reflected the bright summer sun in Münster, quickly turned dull gray and began to peel off in patches here and there. Exposed to the elements, some of the interior seats were repeatedly soaked and dried, accelerating their decay. The dilapidated condition of the cars soon became a problem, especially since the artwork was prominently placed in front of the museum, greeting every visitor. More importantly, the cars became a dangerous safety hazard, as children and even adults would often clamber up onto the weakened frames or hoods for photos. Furthermore, visitors sometimes exacerbated the problem by carelessly damaging various details of the cars or peeling off flakes of paint.

Starting from 1998, the cars were repainted every two years with silver paint in order to conceal cracks, corrosion, and contamination (Fig. 4). In addition, on-site repairs to fix various problems were performed on three occasions. However, the repeated coats of paint did nothing to solve the fundamental issue of the corroding metal, while the ever-thickening layers of paint increasingly distorted the artwork. Meanwhile, corrosion continued to steadily erode areas that were not protected by paint—such as the underside of the car, the engine and other parts below the hood, and the interior of the trunk – until components began to detach. Eventually, the cars became so unstable that on-site repairs were no longer sufficient to reinforce their structure.

The enormous scale of the artwork made proper management particularly difficult. Moreover, the cars had already been damaged before they became an artwork, having been found in the scrapyards and fields of the midwestern United States, deteriorating from corrosion and constant exposure to the elements. In addition, being made from actual cars, the artwork contained numerous different materials, including steel, aluminum, wood, rubber, cloth, cotton wool, leather, plastic, and more. Implementing preservation measures for any one of these materials was insufficient to prevent the overall deterioration.

Another major challenge was the local weather, which changes drastically with the seasons. Permanently installed outdoors, the artwork had to endure the low temperatures, low humidity, and heavy snowfall of winter; the scorching heat and torrential rain of summer; and the pollen and yellow dust of spring and autumn (Fig. 5). In 2012, humidity and temperature sensors were installed inside two cars, and observations were conducted for a year. The highest recorded humidity was 97% and the lowest was 9.4%, while the temperature ranged between 70 degrees Celsius and -19.7 degrees Celsius. In such a harsh outdoor environment, the efforts to partially repair or repaint individual areas were basically futile.



Fig. 3. Various damage to the cars



Fig. 4. Cars being repainted at Samsung Transportation Museum



Fig. 5. Snow-covered cars



Fig. 6. Photographs from Roman Mensing

Consequently, in 2011, after thirteen years of outdoor display, Leeum Museum of Art decided that a comprehensive conservation treatment was required. Unlike the earlier stopgap measures, each of the thirty-two cars was repaired, reinforced, repainted, and cleaned, and individual records were initiated for each car. To supplement the scant archival materials related to the artwork, which had consisted of only one drawing, a few photos, and the aforementioned condition report, we contacted Skulptur Projekte Münster, who then put us in touch with Roman Mensing, who had been the event's official photographer in 1997. We also contacted Mark Patsfall, who had overseen the original installation of the artwork. Through ongoing written and telephone correspondence, we were able to obtain new photographs from Roman Mensing (Fig. 6) and to conduct multiple interviews with Mark Patsfall, who shared valuable information about the installation process, including memories of his personal interactions with Nam June Paik and gallerist Carl Solway.

According to Patsfall, Nam June Paik believed that all of his artworks, including his video works, should be preserved if possible, even if it meant upgrading the technology, so long as their inherent nature was not altered. He recalled that Nam June Paik “felt the piece should be kept up as long as humanly possible, which was his idea also with his video pieces – technology could be upgraded as long as it did not change the character of the piece until this was no longer possible and the piece could then remain as a document of itself.”¹

Over a period of two years, in 2011 and 2012, all thirty-two cars were reinforced and repainted. The primary focus of this conservation treatment was to remove as much rust as possible and protect the exterior by applying new silver paint, thereby treating the main cause of damage while restoring the appearance of the cars (Fig. 7). Another goal was to improve and organize the records in order to make future care easier.

¹ From our 2011 interview with Mark Patsfall.

Of course, even this extensive conservation project did not guarantee that the artwork would be indefinitely preserved in a stable condition. After the work was reinstalled in front of Samsung Transportation Museum in 2012, various maintenance issues recurred, necessitating further repairs.

Then, in order to allow the museum to display other cars from its collection in the front square, sixteen of the thirty-two cars were relocated to the far end of the museum grounds. This relocation significantly altered the setting and appearance of the artwork, which had once occupied the grand square in front of an eighteenth-century German palace in the Baroque style. Hence, in addition to the problematic condition of the individual cars, the overall installation no longer appeared cohesive. Furthermore, at Samsung Transportation Museum, the central musical component of the work had never been carried out. During the original installation in Münster, Mozart's **Requiem** was played from the cars, but this element was not part of the permanent exhibition at Samsung Transportation Museum, due to technical difficulties and the absence of clear instructions. Given all of these factors – the missing sound element, the divided and diminished installation, the somewhat arbitrary arrangement, and the ongoing battle against corrosion and peeling paint—concerns were raised about whether the artwork should continue to be displayed in its current state.

In 2022, curators, registrars, and conservators at Leum gathered to discuss the artwork and its future. Although sporadic discussions about these issues and possible solutions had taken place through the years, there had never been any determined effort to tackle the problem. Finally, thanks to the convergence of many factors, such as the museum's policies, economic circumstances, decision-makers' understanding of the issue, and the willingness of stakeholders, the time has come to take action based on collective deliberation.

Under any conditions, finding a place to exhibit or store thirty-two cars is no easy task. And given the time,

labor, and cost involved in maintaining the cars, especially considering their ongoing deterioration, this task becomes impossible without specific strategies and budgets for conservation. With this in mind, numerous possible measures have been discussed, including the partial removal of the cars, indoor exhibition, transferal to a storage facility, and selective preservation (including the somewhat extreme option of conserving some of the cars while disposing of the rest). Additionally, questions were raised about the original appearance of the artwork, with some participants wondering how the artwork's current appearance could be made more faithful to the original and whether such alterations were permissible.

During the course of this process, previous exhibitions and iterations of the artwork were more closely examined. In addition to the original presentation at Skulptur Projekte Münster and the permanent exhibition at Samsung Transportation Museum, other versions of the work had been displayed on four occasions. In 2002, Nam June Paik himself had exhibited sixteen of the cars in New York, alongside **Transmission Tower**. In 2004, as part of the Sydney Festival, sixteen cars were exhibited in a different configuration in front of the Sydney Opera House. On both occasions, the cars were arranged much differently than they had been at the Münster exhibition in 1997. Then in 2006 and 2010, eight cars and one car, respectively, were exhibited indoors at Leeum Museum of Art and Nam June Paik Art Center. Noting these previous instances of displaying fewer than thirty-two cars and using an indoor space, we realized that we too could be more flexible and consider possibilities that diverged from the original plan.

In October 2022, after twenty-four years of permanent outdoor exhibition, **32 Cars for the 20th Century** was removed from the exterior of Samsung Transportation Museum and transferred to an out-of-the-way indoor storage facility (Fig. 8), where it is scheduled to remain until a more effective conservation plan can be determined. In 2023, discussions

about the conservation plan resumed. It was decided that the largest of the cars, a 1954 Cadillac hearse, would undergo a detailed inspection to assess its current condition and identify solutions for each type of damage. The ensuing inspection produced a seemingly endless set of questions. How should the rust and discolored or contaminated paint be removed from the car's surface? How could the heavily corroded, disintegrating areas of sheet metal be repaired? What type of paint should be used for repainting? What is the best way to repaint smooth glass and chrome surfaces, where paint adhesion is difficult? Should the deteriorating leather, fabric, and cotton wool of the interior seats continue to be preserved? Was it absolutely necessary to preserve the heavy engines of the cars, which were always hidden from view? Therefore, as of 2024, Leeum Museum of Art is collaborating with conservators specializing in paint and sculptures to determine how to preserve and restore the overall components of the artwork. In this process, we are continuously thinking about the original appearance of the artwork and the nature of any alterations in order to ensure that we achieve a faithful representation.

But what is a faithful representation, exactly? Which point in time defines the "original" form of the work? Is the

Fig. 8. The thirty-two cars in their current storage facility





Fig. 7. Conservation work carried out in 2011 and 2012

Fig. 8. The thirty-two cars in their current storage facility



original form something that can be defined or attained? In the field of art conservation, the state of the artwork at the precise moment when it changes hands from the artist to the museum is generally considered to be the original form, with any subsequent changes or damages being observed and assessed against this benchmark. But since the 1990s, there has been a gradual shift away from the previously held notion that the original form and material of an artwork must be preserved at all costs, accompanied by an increasing call for new approaches to conserving contemporary art. Conservator Brian Castriota described this shift as moving “away from material fixity towards a fixity of artwork identity, essence, or experience.”² In the past, conservation typically relied on scientific analyses of materials and composition to bring the artwork as close as possible to its presumed original appearance. But according to art historian Hanna Hölling, it now “seems that conservation has...reached beyond its romance with science and is seen as a critical act of valorization and interpretation.”³ Today, in order to faithfully reproduce the true appearance of an artwork without compromising its integrity, conservation experts must seek to understand the essence of the artwork, which begins by identifying its core components.

So what are the core components of **32 Cars for the 20th Century**? The shapes of the cars from different periods of the twentieth century? The gleaming silver paint, which subtly reflects light and brings a sense of unity to the entire installation? The old television sets that are piled inside the cars, providing harmony or contrast? The specific arrangement of the cars, which can significantly alter

2 Brian Castriota, “The Enfolding Object of Conservation: Artwork Identity, Authenticity, and Documentation,” in **Conservation of Contemporary Art: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice**, eds. Renée van de Vall and Vivian van Saaze (New York: Springer, 2024), 60.

3 Hanna Hölling, “The Technique of Conservation Hands and Minds, Science, and Humanities” (2015), 2. This paper is available on the author’s personal website: https://www.hannahoelling.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Hanna-Ho%cc%88lling_The-Technique-of-Conservation_draft-October-30.pdf

the grandeur or solidity of the installation? The music of Mozart's **Requiem** echoing from inside the cars, creating a solemn atmosphere? If the silver paint of the cars gradually becomes dull, discolored, or tainted by rust, does the artwork lose its "true" appearance? If the cars themselves deteriorate, losing their structural integrity until they resemble junk, rather than functioning vehicles, will the artwork fail to convey the artist's intentions? If only some of the cars are exhibited in a narrow indoor space, rather than a wide outdoor square, is that a distorted image of the artwork?

Determining the core components of an artwork and selecting what to preserve is an act of interpretation that requires artistic, historical, and socio-cultural judgments and evaluations. This process is inherently complex with many variables to consider, particularly with installation art, wherein it is necessary to preserve both the material and conceptual elements of the artwork, as well as to consider the meaning of the installation space. While the physical components of Nam June Paik's **32 Cars for the 20th Century** and **Transmission Tower** are obviously very important, it must be noted that the artist himself altered the "original" appearance of **32 Cars for the 20th Century** for the 2002 exhibition in New York. In fact, prior history shows that the appearance of this dual installation has varied for each of its exhibitions, in accordance with the respective venue, purpose, and circumstances. Adding to the complexity, both of these works include media elements that unfold over time. Moreover, both works have features that will inevitably need to be replaced over time (especially if they are installed outdoors), such as the silver paint on the cars, the audio systems playing Mozart's **Requiem**, and the laser equipment on the tower. Such replacements imply potential alterations to the original form, arrangement, and appearance of the installation. As these replacements are repeated through the years, doesn't the artwork move further and further from its original form? As such, in addition to the original materials,

are we not forever losing some of the artist's intentions, methodologies, and techniques? What attitude should we take towards the losses that inevitably occur through the process of reproduction and restoration? Focusing strictly on areas that we can control, we must decide which elements of the work are the most important to preserve, while recognizing that any measures to preserve a work over a long period of time will necessarily entail some type of transformation. We must also acknowledge that our decisions regarding preservation are inherently subjective. Indeed, the reason we ask questions like "How far can reinterpretation go?" and "To what extent are transformations permissible?" is because we are extremely cautious about imposing our subjective interpretations.

Starting with the Münster exhibition, various parts and details of the cars have been lost or damaged, while corrosion has continuously eaten away at the metal panels. Fortunately, however, the cars have not yet lost their structural integrity, and remain in a condition that allows them to be moved and exhibited without much difficulty. Yet we must accept that some of the components of this work are inherently unstable, and the steady deterioration will inevitably result in damage that exceeds the scope of everyday maintenance. Given that the cars no longer function and have lost various parts, we must stop thinking of this work as an artwork made from "cars," and start thinking in terms of the individual materials that are intertwined to form the artwork. This greatly complicates the preservation process, making it impossible to predict how the work will change through the course of the inevitable repairs and treatments. It is essential to recognize this and to continue our discussions, and more importantly, to establish methods for documenting the non-material aspects of the installation, such as its overall appearance, the sound elements, and the viewer experience. Such multifaceted data will surely be invaluable in opening up possibilities for future exhibitions and preservation.

In the field of contemporary art, the preservation and management of installation artworks requires an entirely different approach than that of individual pieces. From the moment that we decide to “preserve” an installation work by using physically and chemically stable materials and locking it away in a dark storage room with controlled temperature and humidity, and never showing it again, it will gradually be lost. Every time that an artwork is newly installed and exhibited leads to new interpretations and presentations, providing an opportunity to closely study the artwork once again. Similarly, repeated attempts at reproduction or transformation can also serve as opportunities for reflection and reassessment of previous exhibition methods. Through exhibition, the artwork will live on in the memory and experience of viewers. The interaction between researchers, viewers, and the work itself is essential for its existence, and thus for its preservation. We already know that the documentation accompanying exhibitions and installations plays a significant role in the preservation and transmission of artworks. I believe that in this process of documenting, we should record not only what may be lost through reproduction, but also what can be gained. Furthermore, we should not overlook the fact that openly sharing information about the preservation, reproduction, and exhibition processes can lead to active public participation and increased understanding.

Finally, I would like to consider the eventual disappearance of artworks, which is something that we will inevitably face in the future. How long can we preserve artworks? And in what form can we preserve them? In the case of **32 Cars for the 20th Century**, Nam June Paik seemingly provided answers to these worrisome questions, when he declared that the cars should not be repaired and said that the work could be “bulldozed” if it was no longer in a condition to be displayed.⁴ In light of this, should we actively exhibit the gradual disappearance of the artwork? Or simply observe the process of its natural deterioration? Do we have

the authority to control or intervene in the process by which the artwork is destroyed? Is it possible to explain, interpret, and find meaning in the process of disappearance? And are art lovers truly prepared to accept such a decision? Such questions cannot be hastily answered, as we still attach great importance to preserving the historical and symbolic value of **32 Cars for the 20th Century**. We must recognize that every preservation method that we choose eliminates countless other possibilities, while also accepting that the artwork we are preserving will inevitably take on a new appearance. Today's decisions reveal which elements of the artwork we prioritize for preservation, and those decisions may change in the future. In conclusion, I believe that a deep interest in the exhibition and preservation of artworks in museums, along with the accumulation of diverse information, interpretations, and opinions on the results, can provide richer and more interesting possibilities for artworks.

4 In 1997, in response to an inquiry about the maintenance and preservation of the work, Paik sent a handwritten fax that read, "Don't repair the old car itself!"; "Bulldozed" is from an interview with Han Yongoe, former director of Samsung Foundation of Culture.