

**FROM SINGULARITY TO MULTIPLICITY? A STUDY INTO VERSIONS,
VARIATIONS, AND EDITIONS IN MUSEUM PRACTICES**

VIVIAN VAN SAAZE

ABSTRACT

In conservation literature it is often argued that with contemporary artworks—and especially with time-based media art production—the concept of originality as singular has become obsolete or at least highly problematic. Specific language is employed aiming to discriminate between the original and its reproductions, multiples, copies, variations, versions, replicas, editions, or emulated works of art. The close exploration of a case study shows that, despite the increase of multiplicity, the repertoire of singularity in museum practices is still particularly persistent. This paper explores how this repertoire of singularity is manufactured and reinforced in day-to-day practices through actors such as photographs, space, loan agreements, wall labels, artist's statements, artist's assistants, and specific choices of vocabulary. How can we understand the co-existence of singular and multiple repertoires in museum practice? And what does it mean for an artwork to be more than one?

INTRODUCTION

On a regular morning at a quarter to ten, a museum guard arrives at the second floor of the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt, Germany. She leaves her small bag on the chair facing the exhibition room and walks into the space of Nam June Paik's (1932–2006) *One Candle* (1988). The room is dark. From underneath one of the projectors, she fetches the matches and turns to the candle at the farthest end of the small triangular room. In one move she lights the candle. The room is suddenly illuminated by images of a single burning candle; the flickering flame being projected by a video camera onto the walls in three different colors. The

guard looks at the projections on the walls, she inspects the position of the video camera, and she lowers the candle in its tripod. Then she wipes some candle wax off the floor. And after deciding that all looks well, she takes a seat on the chair to await the first museum visitor (fig. 1).

This small routine is repeated every morning at the MMK. Before the audience enters the museum, *One Candle* is prepared for its display. The cathode ray projectors are turned on and the candle is lit by a museum guard.

One Candle by Korean artist Nam June Paik is a closed-circuit installation consisting of a burning candle filmed by a video camera and projected on the walls by several divergent cathode ray projectors. The work, first installed in 1988 at Portikus, a temporary gallery space in Frankfurt, entered the collection of the MMK in 1991. Since its acquisition, the work has been on display almost

permanently in the same triangular room. Right from the start, however, the museum was challenged by the obsolescence and malfunctioning of the cathode ray tube projectors. The old three-color tube projectors broke down frequently and were often in need of repair. In fact, in 1996, the entire set of projectors was replaced by a new set of cathode ray projectors (figs. 2, 3).

The set of technical equipment is also becoming obsolete and decisions have to be made if and how to replace the current projectors. The problem, of course, is that these specific projectors are no longer on the market and replacing the old-fashioned projectors with more sophisticated projectors would change the look and feel of *One Candle* all together. For these reasons, in 2004, the conservator of the MMK selected *One Candle* as a

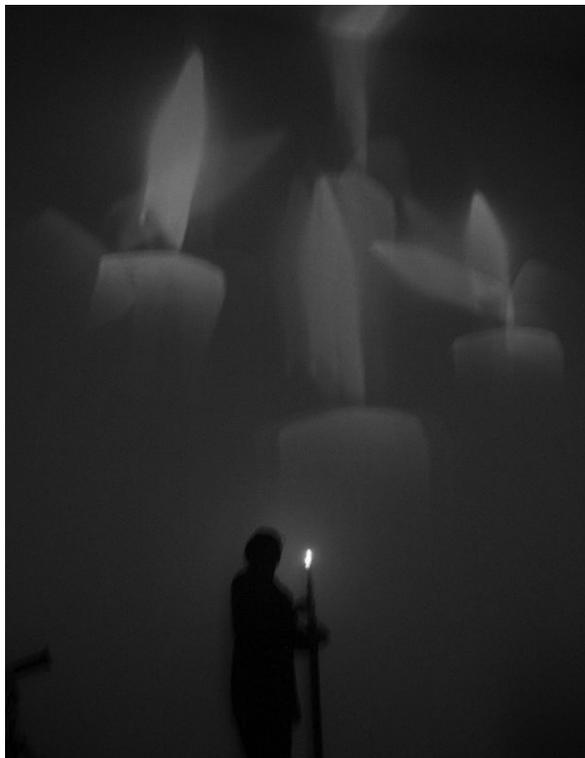


Fig. 1. Nam June Paik, *One Candle*, 1988, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main. Museum guard lighting candle, November 2006.



Fig. 2. Nam June Paik, *One Candle*. Installation view before equipment change. Courtesy of Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main.



Fig. 3. Nam June Paik, *One Candle*. Installation view after equipment change, November 2006.

case study for the research project *Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art (2004–2007)* (Scholte et al. 2011). The project provided the conservator with an opportunity to further investigate the conservation problems of *One Candle* in relation to the technical equipment. One of the central questions raised by the conservator was: what is the significance of the projectors and what are the possible solutions for carrying this work into the future? In short, the underlying questions that emerged from the obsolescence of the projectors were: what is *One Candle* and what does it mean for *One Candle* to change?

THESIS OUTLINE

Of course, *One Candle* is not unique in its conservation problems. For many contemporary art works, the notion of art as a “fixed” material object becomes highly problematic due to the use of ephemeral materials or their conceptual or process-based character. How do museums deal with changing objects and is it possible to develop a theoretical framework for conservation that takes account of change?

In my PhD research, *Doing Artworks: A Study into the Presentation and Conservation of Installation Artworks* (Van Saaze 2009), I set out to empirically explore the working practices of contemporary art museums and their approach to presenting and preserving installation artworks. The research addresses the challenges museums are confronted with when they wish to acquire, present, and preserve installation art. The study centers around two still vital key-concepts in conservation and museum practice: authenticity and artist’s intention. The first chapter introduces and discusses the two concepts that are central in conservation ethics and practice: authenticity and artist’s intent. In this chapter the origins and changing meanings of these concepts are traced in conservation history and theory.

Chapter two demonstrates how, in contemporary art, the physical object does not always provide enough to go by. Through the lens of *One Candle*, the concept of authenticity and the object as a fixed and stable entity are scrutinized. Within the museum, *One Candle* is considered to be one, a coherent, original, untouched artwork that needs to be preserved. However, as I will argue here, maintaining this notion of “oneness” becomes problematic when focusing on museum *practices*.

Chapter three examines the notion of artist’s intention and argues that this is instead articulated in the interaction between the artist and museum professionals. In this chapter, the practices of two museums and their successive reinstallations of works by the same artist are compared. The comparison shows that these distinct museum strategies transform the life and identity of the work of art. The chapter focuses on interaction between artist and museum. Whereas the previous chapter demonstrated that the material object does not always offer a solid grip, this chapter shows that, in looking for something to hold on to, the artist (like the physical object) does not always provide sufficient footing to go by.

The last chapter builds on the previous two case-chapters and seeks to deepen and further develop theoretical vocabulary introduced in earlier chapters. The artwork studied in this chapter can be characterized in terms of variable objects, authors, dates, and collections. Traditional questions about the materiality of the object are increasingly being replaced by questions about ownership, authorship, and copyright issues.

To avoid confusion, it must be said that I myself was not involved with the actual conservation research of these cases. This was done by people far better equipped for this job than I. My approach was more of a participant observer, studying the day-to-day working practices of the museum by employing methods of ethnographical research such as observation and conducting semi-structured interviews. Much of the materials presented here are produced during fieldwork at the museum in Germany. My sincere gratitude goes out to the MMK for opening up their practices to me.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Perhaps I should here say a few more words about my research approach, which I adopted from social sciences. My research starts from the premise that things or objects are not “things in and of themselves,” but are constructed in practices. Artworks in the museum seem autonomous, but their continued existence is the result of a lot of work and effort. Artworks, in other words, need to be “done.” Moreover, as we have learnt from sociologist Howard Becker (1982, 2006), art is not an *individual* product, but “the product of collective work, the work that all these different people do, which, organized in one way or another, produces the result that is eventually taken to be the artwork itself” (Becker et al. 2006, 3). Thus, instead of taking the supposed object for granted, I explore the processes that shape the artwork. Rather than focusing on stability, this approach accounts for the artwork’s transformations and indeterminacy. It helps to analyze “art in action,” and draws attention to changes, transformations, and places of friction.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the first case study from my thesis specifically on the notions of singularity and multiplicity. I will explore how the *One Candle* at the MMK in Frankfurt gained the status of a single and unique artwork in need of preservation. How, in other words, singularity was accomplished. Thereafter, I will explain how, in search for *One Candle*, its solidness crumbles and how it is also more than one.

But first, let me introduce another *One Candle*, because although the MMK’s *One Candle* in Frankfurt was treated as a single and unique work, my initial interest in the work was raised by a *One Candle* I experienced in Berlin.

MORE THAN ONE ONE CANDLE?

The first time I saw the work *One Candle* by Nam June Paik was during the temporary exhibition, *Nam June Paik: Global Groove 2004*, at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2004. It must have been about a year later, when I learned that *One Candle* belonged to the Frankfurt collection. I was at the time surprised to see the images of the work in the collection of MMK. In fact, I doubted whether what I saw in Berlin was the same *One Candle* as the one in the collection of MMK? Because despite the many similarities, there were also striking differences in appearance and experience. I remembered the *One Candle* in Berlin as a dramatic piece, creating a stunning and vibrant background of candle light to the gallery walls and ceiling. The *One Candle* in Frankfurt, however, seemed to be very modest and intimate, reminiscent of a chapel. Was my memory wrong? Was it not *One Candle* in Berlin after all? Or how could it be that two seemingly different installations go by the same title, artist, and date of creation?

In Berlin, there was no reference to the *One Candle* in Frankfurt. How then does the *One Candle* I saw in Berlin relate to the one in Frankfurt? Might there be more than one *One Candle*? Actually, how many *One Candle* works exist and by whom and how is it decided which is the

authentic artwork? Is it the first *One Candle* as installed in Portikus in 1988, *One Candle* as it entered the MMK collection in 1991, the *One Candle* at MMK from 1996 onwards when the set of equipment was replaced by a new set, or the *One Candle* that I experienced in Berlin? Perhaps, all these different *One Candle* works could be equally unique? Still a bit puzzled but even more curious about this work and the issues of authenticity and authorization, I decided to look into the histories of *One Candle*, and with it into the working practices of the MMK.

Within the museum, *One Candle* installed at MMK is clearly considered to be the one and only authentic *One Candle*, a unique work of art produced by the artist then purchased and preserved by the museum. *One Candle*, as I will show, however, is not singular by nature.

In the museum, several mechanisms and arguments bring the repertoire of singularity into play. There is the narrative of the artist, Nam June Paik, coming to the museum in 1991, choosing the particular triangular room and authenticating the work as installed by his assistant. Also, it is said that Paik, after installing the work together with his assistant, meaningfully signed one of the cathode ray tubes (which has been removed as it is no longer functioning) to make it his.

Also, *One Candle* has been on display in that same chapel-like room for nearly 16 years now and, over time, it has gained an iconic character; it has become a monument for and by Paik, who passed away in 2006. Despite alterations to the technical equipment, *One Candle* at the MMK is considered to be one of the last untouched installations by Paik. And so the installation at the MMK not only has an augmented importance within Paik's legacy, it has also gained importance for the MMK and its collection. Over the years, the connection between *One Candle* in that specific space and the museum has become stronger and tighter. MMK's *One Candle* has become part of the MMK itself. By displaying *One Candle*

as a permanent work rather than a portable work, its context has become part of the identity of the work, a work that is now thought to be in need of preservation. Moving the work out of the gallery has become associated with a sense of loss.

Over time, *One Candle* in its characteristic triangular room at the MMK has become the one and only authentic *One Candle* that it is considered to be today. The site thus is an important actor in the manufacturing of the work as singular. One of my respondents expressed this sense of belonging as follows: "People often first walk past it to see the Beuys work. But on the way back they enter the small room and stay there for quite some time in silence. Sometimes people haven't been here for a while and say fondly, '*ach dieser ist auch noch hier*' (oh, this one is also still here)" (Van Saaze 2007).

To summarize, *One Candle* at the MMK has gained its status and urgency to the extent that it is now perceived as *the* single and unique *One Candle*. Keeping certain events and stories connected to *One Candle*, its almost permanent display in the triangle room, and the rituals performed by the guard, all help to accomplish this repertoire of singularity. All these things are *done* by the museum. Yet *One Candle* is also made one by *not* doing something, namely, by *not* emphasizing practicalities. Within the existing theoretical framework, practicalities such as tinkering, repairing, replacing, or reinstalling are easily left out of focus. In contrast, paying attention to all those practicalities and details, as I have done above, demonstrates that *One Candle* is perceived as a solid work, frozen in its original state *despite* all changes in materiality. The repertoire of singularity is strong and persistent as long as practices are *not* placed in the foreground. If, however, we look into the histories of *One Candle*, then a different repertoire appears.

Much of the documentation that I found on *One Candle* was scattered around over many cupboards, folders, and computers in several offices. As a consequence, I had

to move around and became acquainted with the conservator and his assistant, the collections curator and his assistant, the librarian, technical staff, housekeeper, deputy director and his assistant, the photographer, museum guards, the director and his assistant, and the storage manager. Each of these current (and former) staff members, it appeared, was connected to *One Candle* in one way or the other and all had collected their own materials, memories, and stories on the art work. It soon became clear that many of the staff members were (or had been) involved with *One Candle* and their involvement and actions had affected the course of *One Candle* in different ways. New—sometimes contradicting—details and bits of information appeared. So, after starting off with having first one, then two or perhaps even more *One Candle* works, I now had an artwork that seemed to be everywhere in the building. Fragmented into little bits and pieces in different departments, offices, and minds. How then could I make a consistent story out of these bits and pieces of *One Candle* that I gathered during my fieldwork? Of course, I could visit the work in the triangular space, but from documentation research and interviews, I learned that also the physical work on display at the MMK was less stable and untouched than the singular repertoire accounts for.

For example, over the course of time, most of the equipment had been replaced and, in fact, it turned out that the installation had at one point been dismantled and was later re-installed by museum workers. This clearly did not coincide with the image of *One Candle* as a permanent work installed by Paik. In fact, none of the people I had spoken to before had told me about this. It seemed as if this little rupture in *One Candle*'s permanent character had been erased from institutional memory.

In the face of all the material changes that *One Candle* had undergone, I found it hard to locate the equation of the work's authenticity with one single condition and moment in time. Over the years, *One Candle* has been changed in many ways as the result of many caring

hands and minds. Only when the spotlight is deviated towards the practices in which *One Candle* is lit, turned on and off, repaired, stored, replaced, re-installed, its solidness appears to be manufactured instead of a given. Within the museum, *One Candle* is considered to be one, coherent nearly untouched art object. When attending to practices and practicalities, however, the opposite appears to be the case.

So, where does that leave the *One Candle* I saw in Berlin? Interestingly enough, the temporary display of *One Candle* at Berlin was not known at the MMK. But after inquiring with the curators of the exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim, I learned that, at the time, Nam June Paik was involved with the set-up of the show and the lack of any reference to the MMK collection might just have been an omission. In fact, from my research at the MMK, I learned that, over the course of time, *One Candle* has been on loan at several remote venues. The ones that I could trace so far are, among others, the Kunsthalle Bremen, New York, Seoul, Bilbao, Iowa, Paris, Italy and most recently Berlin again but this time at the Hamburger Bahnhof.

Instead of dismantling the MMK piece and shipping the equipment to the institute that requested the work, the approach has been to contact Paik's assistant in Germany to ask whether he is available to install it and a contract is sent that allows for a one-time creation of the work. Aside from the paperwork, the MMK itself has not much to do with these installations. In all cases, Paik's assistant has taken care of installing the work at each remote venue. A certain degree of authenticity of these works is—so to speak—assured by the engagement of Paik's assistant as a representative of the artist. To indicate the separate status of these temporary *One Candle* works, the term used by the museum staff is exhibition copies.

The coexistence of the many different configurations of *One Candle*, of course again makes problematic

the understanding of *One Candle* as a single, unique, physical artwork with one date of creation. The existence (although temporary) of the many different *One Candle* works, in fact, emphasizes the conceptual character of the work at the MMK and undermines the equation of its authenticity with one single condition—and with it the necessity of going back to the authentic projectors. Rather than freezing *One Candle* in a certain state as is suggested by the repertoire of singularity, through loan agreements the museum allows for flexibility in terms of location, site, and aesthetics. On the one hand, we have the singularity of the art object and the emphasis on the original material condition of *One Candle* at the MMK, while at the same time we have these more flexible and variable *One Candle* works on loan. How is this possible?

The problem, it seems, is that little is known about Nam June Paik's own thoughts about fixity and change through reinstallation and technical replacement once a work has been purchased. Many of his works, like the many variations of *TV Buddha*, have been said to develop like variations to a theme. Some argue that seriality was employed by Paik as a playful artistic strategy to counteract the art world's model of uniqueness. Yet, although Paik is known for his signature and ambiguous notion of originality, as an artist practicing in the museum and gallery circuit, he also worked within existing economic models employed by the art market. One way of dealing with the issue of versioning was to slightly alter his titles.

In the museum, the repertoire of one single *One Candle* is stronger than that of incompatible *One Candle* works. For the director as well as the conservator, the *One Candle* versions, and the *One Candle* in house remain two separate things. The conservator explains:

Do I consider *One Candle* as a unique work? Yes and no. Very clearly. I can just repeat, yes because it is a unique artwork. Yes, because we have it on display since

16 years and it came into the collective memory as such. And no, because you can show other versions in other places. (Van Saaze 2006)

Interestingly, there is also another mechanism coming into play here as the distribution of the *One Candle* works also reinforces the value and solidness of the semi-permanent *One Candle* “at home” at the MMK in which the wall labels play an important role. When I tried to gather images of the several *One Candle* works abroad by collecting the catalogues, I was time and again confronted with the same image, that of the *One Candle* at the MMK. Apparently, one single press image of the MMK is used because the catalogues of the temporary exhibitions are usually printed prior to the actual installation process of the loan. This, again, manufactures *One Candle* at the MMK as *the* one and only authentic installation. The image, like the wall label, plays an important mediation role; in a very active way it contributes to making *One Candle* singular.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have looked into the practices of caring for *One Candle*, and with it into the working practices of the MMK. When evaluating installation art and time-based media art, one could argue that the concept of originality and authenticity as singular has become obsolete. In respect to new media artworks, it has been argued that a new museological paradigm shift is needed to account for the variable, multiple, or flexible character of such works (Laurenson 2006, Ippolito 2008).

This case study demonstrates that within the museum, the repertoire of singularity is persistent. *One Candle* is considered to be one, coherent, hardly untouched art object. Yet when attending to practices, the opposite appears to be the case. Over the years *One Candle* has been changed in many ways.

The point that I have raised is that the activities of collecting and conservation assume that an artwork has an authentic state that as such can be preserved. Yet, the assumption also fulfils itself; by aiming to capture the authenticity of an artwork, conservation as a practice also constitutes it. Authenticity, in this view, is not something out there waiting to be discovered. Rather, it is part of practice and can be studied as being “done.”

I have shown that the repertoire of singularity is not a given but is manufactured and reinforced through acts such as photographs, space, loan agreements, wall labels, artist’s statements, artist’s assistants, the period of installment, and specific choices of vocabulary. Only when we focus on the practices by which *One Candle* is lit, turned on, repaired, stored, replaced, reinstalled, put on loan, labelled, measured, and discussed, does its multiplicity become visible.

Yet, if *One Candle* can be more than one, how come it is not many? Perhaps here the notion of continuity is helpful. For an artwork’s lifespan to be prolonged it needs continuity. Changes that are perceived as being ruptures that are too big will break this chain of continuity. In that case, the agreement of sameness becomes threatened. From this we learn that, in order for an artwork to keep up the appearance of being intact or at least being relatively stable, its changes have to be slow and gradual.

One Candle, as currently on display at the MMK, is hardly the same object as it was in 1988 at Portikus, but is it still the same artwork? The information on the wall label used at the MMK suggests it is. There is no sign of any alterations. In reaction to the common way of describing artworks in terms of a single artist, date, medium, dimension, and collection, John Ippolito (2008), in a recent article suggests a different way of labelling new media artworks. To account for the work’s richness and to avoid fixity and reduction, Ippolito suggests that a versioning system offers a solution to the issue of originality in relation to works that require reconfiguration over time.

Based on the findings related to *One Candle*, I would add to Ippolito’s argument that such a differentiated way of labelling an artwork would not only account for the artwork’s variability, it would also provide more insight into the work that is done to ensure an artwork’s continued existence. In other words, such accounts would turn it from a liability (like Ippolito’s critique on the way museums are kept captive in their old paradigm) to an asset; a way to be more transparent about museum’s working practices, and to open up discussions about these practices.

Parts of this paper have been published in Hermens, E. and T. Fiske eds. 2009. *Art, Conservation and Authenticities. Material, Concept, Context*, London: Archetype.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the staff of the MMK for their hospitality. Also, I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. Dr. R. Zwijnenberg, Dr. R. van de Vall and IJ. Hummelen, and colleagues at ICN and Maastricht University as well as Glenn Wharton for their invaluable comments to earlier versions of the dissertation chapter on which this paper is based. I am indebted to the organizers of this meeting, the EMG and the Kress Foundation in providing an opportunity for me to present this work-in-progress during such an inspiring meeting.

REFERENCES

- Becker, H. S. 1982. *Art worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Becker, H. S., R. R. Faulkner, and B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eds. 2006. *Art from start to finish. Jazz, painting, writing, and other improvisations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ippolito, J. 2008. Death by wall label. In *New media in the white cube and beyond: Curatorial models for digital art*, C. Paul. Berkeley: University of California Press. 106–130.
- Laurenson, P. 2006. Authenticity, change, and loss in the conservation of time-based media installations. *Tate Papers*. www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm (accessed 04/01/10).

- Scholte, T. and G. Wharton. 2011. *Inside installations: Theory and practice in the care of complex artworks*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Van Saaze, V. 2009. *Doing artworks. A study into the presentation and conservation of installation artworks*. Ph.D. diss. Maastricht University and Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage.
- Van Saaze, V. 2007. Personal communication with museum guard, MMK, Frankfurt, Germany.
- Van Saaze, V. 2006. Personal communication with conservator, MMK, Frankfurt, Germany.
- Wharton, G. 2009. The challenge of installation art. In *Conservation: Principles, dilemmas and uncomfortable truths*, A. Richmond and A. Bracker, eds. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann. 210–222.

Vivian van Saaze Ph.D.
Postdoctoral researcher
Maastricht University
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Literature and Art
P.O. Box 616
6200 MD Maastricht
The Netherlands
+31 43 388 3472 3317 (phone)
+31 43 388 4816 (fax)
vivian.vansaaze@maastrichtuniversity.nl
www.fdcw.unimaas.nl/staff/van saaze
www.newstrategiesinconservation.org