The Contingency of Conservation: Changing Methodology and Theoretical Issues in Conserving Ephemeral Contemporary Artworks with Special Reference to Installation Art

Lizzie Frasco
University of Pennsylvania, frasco@sas.upenn.edu

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The Contingency of Conservation: Changing Methodology and Theoretical Issues in Conserving Ephemeral Contemporary Artworks with Special Reference to Installation Art

Abstract
Lizzie Frasco, College '09, Art History, Visual Studies

Non-Traditional Methods for Non-Traditional Art: Conserving Art in the 20th Century

Art conservation as a practice of preventing change in a useful way has recently begun to change with the more ephemeral nature of the material that increasingly characterizes late 20th-century art. Today’s neon lights, foil, newspaper, synthetic paints, soil, glue, and Magic Marker have not been tested for durability or chemical stability. Their uneven and unpredictable rate of degradation further complicates their analysis and evaluation during conservation. What are the current technical, historical, and ethical challenges in contemporary art conservation, and what do they tell us about the chances for the long-term survival of this art?

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The Contingency of Conservation:  
Changing Methodology and Theoretical Issues in Conserving Ephemeral Contemporary Artworks with Special Reference to Installation Art

Lizzie Frasco
Visual Studies Thesis 2009
Visual Studies Department, University of Pennsylvania
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Advisors:
Dr. Renata Holod
Colette Copeland
Dr. Gwendolyn Shaw

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Defining Installation Art

The conundrum of conserving contemporary art stems from some of the genre’s greatest achievements: the freedom of materials, invention in format, cutting edge technology, site-specificity, and deliberate ephemerality. A large percentage of contemporary artworks, which include installations, performances, conceptual and time-based media works, are time and context related. Not all contemporary artworks are intended as transient, but many of them will not last as long as their more traditional counterparts in paint and marble. The problem with their preservation lies with the use of nontraditional materials combined with the difficulty of reinstalling works that are often dependent on geographic and temporal context for meaning. While many artists delight in the freedom of creating ephemeral art, as conceptually oriented art has made “the material identity of an art work…entirely of secondary importance,” the artwork produced is daunting for those attempting to preserve it. The materials utilized are often unstable and unpredictable in their rate of change, and thus necessitate more hasty and invasive treatment than is needed for traditional objects. As meaning is sometimes derived from these characteristics of newer materials, conservation professionals are forced to question and reconsider many of the accepted tenets of their discipline. Older models simply cannot address this kind of unpredictability in a standardized and comprehensive way, and the need for new methods is readily apparent. Contemporary art challenges the values of conservation theoretically, technically and institutionally, as the profession is in its definition dedicated to prolonging the exhibition of and physical life of artworks by preventing and reversing changes in the authentic and original art object.

The non-traditional character of many late twentieth and early twenty first century stems from the post-modern deconstruction of the traditional art object and the flood of new possibilities it engendered. While curator Ann Temkin from MoMA is correct in saying “the counterpoint of mortality versus immortality has always provided an essential theme for works of art,” the main departure point of contemporary works is that they address the transience of life in both content and form. This significant change originates in the critique in the 1970s and 60s of the traditional and privileged art object, where artists attempted to undermine the artwork as a relic or commodity by merging art with life. From this came a rejection of the passive and detached optical contemplation of the viewer in favor of a more immersive, activated viewing. The dichotomies that were present then and now are defined by Martha Buskirk as “original/copy, performance/document, object/context, high/low, representative/abstraction, or permanence/transience, with each subject to subtle combinations and overlays as well as a continuing process of

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Chapter 1 | The Inherent Problem of Installation Art

redefinition.” The abandonment of the traditional artwork led to the non-traditional art forms currently showcased, as contemporary artists gained the ability to create any kind of art within a wider range of possibilities than ever before. While this freedom and the challenging avant-garde works it produces is hard-won, the continual search for what art historian Robert Storr calls ‘freshness’ has led to a “profusion of artworks that are doomed by their very immediacy or search for immediacy.” The kinds of materials that contemporary artists use and experiment with have led to a canon of works that must be considered differently from traditional works in both theory and practice.

The nature of installation art both embodies and exacerbates the issues identified in preserving contemporary, non-traditional artworks. While it is conceded that contemporary art generally “represents a special challenge, provides extreme experiences and causes restorers to revise supposedly secure positions,” installation artworks present problems in all areas – format, conception and material. The desire on the part of the artists to ‘decenter’ the art object, by removing and rupturing the front and centered viewing of works of art as embodied by the construction of perspective, have led to works that are conceptually and physically contingent on the arrangement and relationship of many parts. In addition to their material ephemerality, installation works also become logistical nightmares when exhibited. Since installation art has many sub-categories and manifestations, this paper will focus on installation artworks intentionally comprised of ephemeral materials but which are meant to be reinstalled (by the artist or the institution). These works are marked by their full or partial makeup of non-traditional materials and their complexity of meaning, whether physical, material or conceptual. These ‘material-oriented’ works are exemplars of the conservation issues facing contemporary art, as they combine the crucial intangible elements of conceptual art with multi-media, physical parts that require care. They represent the primary challenges facing institutions that store and re-install installation art, while also requiring the kind of documentation associated with performance and conceptual art. Material-oriented installations thus present a cross-section of the main issues in preserving installation art.

Other forms of art that could fall under the umbrella of ‘installation art’ include site-specific works, performance works, temporary installations (that can have built in mechanisms for degradation) and time-based media works. Because the term ‘installation art’ lacks a fixed definition, this paper will also include certain sculptural works that have an ‘installed’ disposition but could be seen as contained objects. Claire Bishop, at Warwick University, makes the distinction between an ‘installation of art’ and ‘installation art’ in that the “an installation of art is secondary in importance to the works

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5 Ibid., 10.
6 Robert Storr describes this phenomenon: “The problem we now face, however, concerns the great profusion of artworks that are doomed by their very immediacy or search for immediacy. Freshness of ideas or procedural attitudes often results in the premature physical deterioration of the object that embodies those ideas and attitudes. The creative misuse of traditional materials is an inescapable necessity for many artists, as is the experimentation with novel or untested materials.” Robert Storr, "Immortalité Provisoire," in *Mortality Immortality? : The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 35.
9 Louise Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art" (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2002), 19.
it contains, while in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity.” While both deal with how the viewer experiences objects positioned or placed in a space, the latter is considered an art form unto itself; certain sculptural objects discussed exist in between the categories, and will be included because they represent many of the same issues discussed in this paper. Many of the conservation issues discussed relate generally to contemporary art, though issues relating to specifically to installation art will also be addressed. Regardless of their exact definition, the works presented in this paper are non-traditional objects that present challenges through their material existence and in their continued presentation.

Though installation art encompasses a broad range of works, for the purposes of this paper it will be defined as any work that combines relational parts into a whole. Relationships are formed between the individual parts and between the parts and the whole, as well as the whole and the setting. In the sense that it incorporates painting, sculpture, found-objects and architecture, installation can be conceived of as a hybrid art form, where a total or mini environment is created into which the viewer is enters. The multiplicity of objects, however, is not a comprehensive definition; the conservator Cornelia Weyer writes that installation art “is at least one part, and often a number of parts, in every complex spatial and temporal context.” In her seminal work *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Claire Bishop describes how ‘installation art’ is often described as ‘theatrical,’ ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential.’ She goes on to say:

> “Installation art...differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art.”

The work produced under the term is diverse; some works concentrate on making the viewer aware of his or her senses, producing smells and visual stimulation, while others encourage or discourage contemplative interaction with the work. Regardless of the form, installation works are not self-contained objects and exert effort to decenter the viewer’s relationship to the work of art. The space or location of the work is a large

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10 Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 6. [Associate Professor of Art History]
13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 8.
15 This relationship is further elaborated by Claire Bishop: “Installation art presupposes a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it, and that it is possible to categorise [sic] works of installation by the type of experience that they structure for the viewer. Of course, it is possible to say that all art presumes a subject–insofar as it is made by a subject (the artist) and is received by a subject (the viewer). The case of traditional painting and sculpture, however, each element of this three-way communication (artist–work of art–viewer) is relatively discrete. By contrast, installation art from its inception in the 1960s sought to break radically with this paradigm: instead of making a self-contained object, artists began to work in specific locations, where the entire space was treated as a single situation into which the viewer enters.” Ibid., 10.
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factor, hence the reference to environments, and is utilized as a framework for the creation of meaning between parts. One of the major distinctions of this art form is that instead of “representing texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience,” and in doing so the viewer is activated.\textsuperscript{16} Many early works, however, were intended to be one-time experiences and subsequently dismantled and destroyed. This seemingly radical innovation is not, however, detached from the history of art; Glenn Wharton points out that “artists have always created ephemeral works for consumption at public festivals, in spiritual practice, and through other social and personal activities.” What is new is the fact that these works are now being collected and exchanged on the open market.\textsuperscript{17} These objects are inherently difficult for institutions that are trained to deal with self-contained art objects to preserve and reinstall.

The physical nature of installation artworks is as difficult to conserve as any multi-media, contemporary artwork, and through inherent vice challenges the preservation ethic. Unless an artwork is specifically designated as an exercise in degradation, the relative ephemerality of most installation artworks comes from the instability and fragility of the media selected, from poor engineering or from material incompatibility. In some cases, such as Jana Sterback’s \textit{Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic},\textsuperscript{18} degradation is purposeful and contributes to the meaning of the work; in other cases, its degradation may be the “unintended result of experimentation with new techniques or substances, in which case it often appears regrettable” [fig. 2].\textsuperscript{19} The lack of quality and compatibility of materials for a work is called ‘inherent vice’ in the conservation world; while actions can be taken to slow the process of degradation, objects with inherent vice are limited temporally. The term ‘inherent vice’ is a marine insurance term that referred to goods with hidden defects that made them risky to the carriers. That inherent vice may or may not be intended requires museums to ask whether the work is an intentionally decaying entity or whether the decay is a function of the artist’s medium.\textsuperscript{20} This question in itself undermines the preservation ethic, which is central to the mission of most museums and is the driving force behind the preservation of cultural property for the future. Wharton states that the “zeal to preserve conflicts with artist who want their work to deteriorate or who assign greater value to a concept than its material manifestation.”\textsuperscript{21} In the event that a work intended to decay was acquired by a museum, the institution would be required ethically to let the work degrade against every desire and established principle. Thus, installation works fundamentally challenge the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{18} This work is owned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and is explicitly ephemeral to the point that it cannot be collected; the work is highly conceptual in that the flesh dress, which comments on the traditional \textit{vanitas}, is re-constructed with the artist’s sanction each time the work is exhibited. This type of work, which is primarily about the \textit{concept} rather than the specific material existence of the work, will not be discussed because they do not present the same issue in their collection. See the Walker Art Center’s website for more information.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 315.
\textsuperscript{21} Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 164.
preservation ethic of the institutions that collect and preserve them, as the institutions must assess the appropriate amount of degradation of an object before it is conserved.

*Primacy of the Object and Privileged States*

The challenges of preserving installation art extend beyond the physical into the inherent conceptual difficulties of the particular format. In rejecting the self-contained art object for a collection of relational and internal meanings, installation art defies the concept of the *true nature of the art object* on which conservation practice has largely been based. At the core of conservation as a discipline is the theoretical tenet that objects have a ‘true nature’ that can be identified and pursued in conservation practice.22 The ‘true state’ has been located traditionally in the appearance of the material art object which is the main communicator of representational content. In works of installation art, however, no cohesive material object is privileged; the meaning of an artwork stems from the relationship of its parts and is therefore often completely intangible. How can one reconcile the conservation principle that an object is an authentic document of aesthetic expression with the privileging of the idea over the object in contemporary art? These works question the reverence for the original object, essentially authenticity, and are hard to consider with “the ethical stance that protects the integrity of artworks…developed for art of earlier periods, when the art object itself constituted the principle record of the creative act.”23 The reverence for the ‘object’ is particularly problematic for works of installation art that “oppose the commercialization of art, museumistic aestheticisation and the self-satisfied enjoyment of art to the conscious application of mediation strategies taken from museum practice.”24 The ethical standards and guidelines for practice developed for self-contained objects with identifiable ‘true states’ are thus called into question by the nature of many contemporary artworks.

The deconstruction in installation art of the primary art ‘object’ leads to the inevitable destruction of its elementary reference value as well, often called the *privileged state* of a work of art. For many installation artworks, there is no one original state that provides a point of reference for preservation; though they often have the reference point of the initial installation, they are rarely installed in those original spaces and have often aged or evolved over time. Thus the context and configuration of the work often changes – many works are also meant to change over time, or are open to some interpretation on the part of the institution. More traditional works of art can be thought of as having a reference point that is easily identifiable, a point elaborated by Sherri Irvin in her essay *The Artists’ Sanction in Contemporary Art*:

> “Whereas traditional visual artworks have typically had a set of privileged and (ideally) unchanging properties fixed at a particular moment early in their histories, a contemporary installation artwork may be installed differently each time it is taken out of storage, or even constituted out of different objects at each exhibition site. The resulting variation in its configuration and visual properties

22 Ibid., 164.
24 Weyer, "Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art," 44.
Installation art ruptures what is often seen as a direct relationship between the artist’s personal, expressive content and the final in the form of the work of art; even when artists are involved in the care and reinstallation of their works, is it not uncommon for these works to be realized by their assistants, technicians, other specialists and museum professionals to various extents. 26 A major theoretical question then becomes whether the second installation of a work is fundamentally different from the first, and what then the reference point is for works that change rapidly and unpredictably. Conservation, traditionally based on the pursuit of the ‘original’ or ‘ideal state’ of a work of art, has had to adapt to deal with works that lack a fixed reference point. Conservator Salvador Muñoz-Viñas, in response to the idea that there exists an ‘ideal state, said the real objective of many restorations should be to return an object to a ‘better’ and less damaged state, and that it is more productive to “talk about a ‘preceding’ state, which may not be the state of the object when it was originated.” 27 Many installation works, especially those that explicitly deal with time and degradation, must be thought of as having a progression of physical states, some of which lie in the future. 28 That there is no fixed reference state to consider provides significant problems for preservation and reinstallation, where professionals must continually ask in the absence of definition what aspects of a work are meaningful and fundamental to its comprehension.

The Problem of ‘Meaning’

The qualities that infuse installation works with their avant-garde sensibility are the same qualities that make their meaning elusive. The desire to create the most challenging and complicated artworks, or the search for ‘newness as such,’ 29 has led to a deconstruction of the traditional art object and thus an unprecedented treatment of form and material. The move away from the traditional art object and the pretentious art institutions led to art practices where experimentation with materials was a driving creative force. 30 With the materials driving the concepts behind contemporary works, rather than the other way around, the earlier ideal of unity of form and content became an outdated model. Post-modernism allowed for more methods than the traditional creative

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29 Storr, "Immortalité Provisoire," 35.
30 Hiltrud Schinzel presents a fitting description of the freedom in artistic materials as akin to the choices available in a restaurant: “For the artist as well as the for the conservator of modern and contemporary art, numerous materials, techniques and media are at hand – comparable to food in a self-service restaurant. Being an artist, who would not willingly taste them all? The appetite of the creative mind is enormous.” Hiltrud Schinzel, "Mixed Media, Mixed Functions, Mixed Positions," in Modern Art: Who Cares?, ed. Ijsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (Amsterdam: The Foundation for the Conservaiton of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 313.
process where “decisions about form were inseparable from the act of making the work” and the work emerged “realized and self-sustaining.” D.H. van Wegen, curator at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, sums up the core issue with these innovations:

“More fundamental, however, is the difference in the role that the creative process and the material of an object have on the meaning of the work. With traditional art the meaning of an object in a material sense is less ambiguous. Material and technique are to a great extent subservient to the meaning of the work, which is chiefly expressed in the form of a representation. The materials of contemporary, non-traditional objects are in that sense not usually subordinate to the meaning contained in a representation.”

Shedding traditional interpretations and connotations, artists attribute idiosyncratic meaning to materials that requires many variables to decode and thus complicates the interpretation of those works on the basis of a shared art historical ‘canon.’ In addition to the materials the nature of the creative force, the layers of contextual meaning render the physical location of meaning that much more difficult. These works, which rely heavily on external meaning such as viewer interaction, become contingent on their surroundings and rely on the multivariable meaning “created by the artist, the art critic/art historian, the public, and the context in which it is seen.” The process of designating meaning, a major facet of conservation practice, is thus quite complicated installation art. Before any conservation action can be taken, the relative meaning of the parts of an installation and their relationships must be established, a daunting task given their complexity.

For traditional artworks it is often easier to establish a more direct relationship between form and meaning during the conservation process. Most artworks are, by their very definition, imbued with expressive individuality and meaning by the artists who make or conceive them. An artwork, thus, is the vessel of meaning for the beholder and the artist’s creativity thus “endows the art materials with its evidence, making them into the venue for individuality and meaning that we call a work of art.” For a more traditional, autonomous object of art, like the sculpture Torso by Antoine Pevsner, meaning is primarily and most importantly communicated through form and material [fig. 3]. The material, in this case cellulose nitrate plastic that was originally transparent, is the main and usually only means of communicating the artist’s intent. For works like Torso the material is imperative to the communicative function of the work of art, a fact evidenced by the breakdown of meaning in this work. The degradation of the cellulose

32 Wegen, "Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art," 204.
34 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art", 30.
36 Ibid., 213.
Fig. 3

Antoine Pevsner, *Torso*, 1925, MoMA.
nitrate over time, so that it turned brown and opaque, practically creates a new work of art. As Pevsner, like his older brother Naum Gabo, originally worked with the plastics in order to exploit their translucent properties, the current state of the work no longer represents the intended meaning for the work; *Torso* was once described as being able to “exploit light through the various densities and directions of the planes,” a capability it no longer possess.\(^{38}\) That the original expression of the work is undermined by the state of the material demonstrates just how important the physicality of the original work is for more traditional, self-contained works of art.

For installations, however, the contingency of the work of art on the context and the viewer complicates the original location of meaning in the material expression of a work. In fact, the goal for many conceptual artists was to deconstruct the meaning of the authentic work of art through placing less emphasis on the specific and original materials. Hiltrud Schinzel, at the University of Ghent, notes how an artwork’s material existence was once “looked upon as being of no importance, whereas its aesthetic and metaphorical properties are valued. As a matter of fact, one cannot be separated from the other. The artist’s fascination for new media and mixed media is so enormous that often the medium itself is the content of the work of art.”\(^{39}\) For some contemporary works, such as performance pieces and conceptual art, the material of the work is imbued with meaning throughout the piece but does not carry any independent meaning of its own. For the artist Félix González-Torres’ candy pieces, like *Untitled (Public Opinion)* from 1991, though the candy is meaningful within the context of the piece [fig. 4]. When the candy is taken away, as part of the performance of the works, the meaning of the artwork remains intact.\(^{40}\) For the material-oriented installation works that are the subject of this paper, however, like Mario Merz’s *Dal Miele Alle Ceneri* from 1984, the relationship of material to meaning is more complex [fig. 5]. While this work has a performative aspect, like many other material-oriented works, the material of the work and the ritual of its creation imbues the materials with specific and definitive meaning. For this work, and the other works in this paper, the materials still hold an original connection to the artist and his or her execution of artistic intent. These works, which can be called ‘material-oriented,’ have several layers of meaning. The makeup of meaning includes that which is attached to the actual objects of the installation, that which is created through the relationship of those parts, and the meaning in the relationship of the work to both the viewer and the exhibition space. While the physical make-up of González-Torres’ work is not fixed in any specific group of candy,\(^{41}\) the parts of *Dal Miele Alle Ceneri* retain their specific and original meaning even when they are disassembled and placed in storage. The layers of meaning for material-oriented installation works complicate their preservation, as the process of determining the relative importance of parts and how they should look is highly subject to error and interpretation. The meaning lies in the physical make-up of the work, but also with many other external sources including the living artist. The process of deciphering meaning is even difficult for traditional artworks,

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 175.


\(^{41}\) While the type of candy is fixed, the specific pieces of candy are not, as the viewer takes the candy with him or her.
which often have a more explicit relationship between meaning and form. For installation artworks, where meaning is often constructed externally to the work of art, the process becomes that much more fraught.

The combination of external and contextual meaning with conceptual intent leads to artworks that require special and individualized consideration. The installations considered in this paper are, through the use of ephemeral and degradable materials, more difficult to conserve than even conceptual or media-based installations. These works, in addition to showing signs of idiosyncratic meaning as created by the artist, utilize inherent vice and decay to create meaning. The intent or awareness of potential decay, in conjunction with the fragile nature of the externally created meaning, makes for works that are extremely vulnerable in the processes of storing, reinstalling and preserving. While some works, like the aforementioned Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic, are meant to degrade throughout their exhibition and are disposed of afterwards, there are many material-oriented works that utilize ephemeral materials without explicitly referencing their eventual decay. Sherri Irvin, recognizing the ‘deeply indeterminate nature of these works,’ poignantly asks:

“Is the work an essentially decaying entity, such that its decay is an interpretable feature of it? Or is its material degradation something we should politely ignore, as we ignored (and, when we have the resources, may attempt to correct) the yellowing of varnish, the flaking of paint... We may ponder, is this indeterminacy central to the work’s meaning? Or is it simply part of the framework, a function of the medium within which the artist is working, and thus to be ignored in the interpretation?”

Merz’s Dal Miele Alle Ceneri displays this essential indeterminacy seen in many ephemeral, material-oriented installation works [fig. 5]. The work is an igloo made of iron bars, steel sheets and attached slabs of gauze covered in dried wax; Merz was an artist of the arte povera school, which utilized common and inexpensive materials in their art in order to distance itself from the materialism of consumer society. As reported by conservator Kees Herman Abben from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, when several wax tablets became discolored and broken, Merz did not care about the visibility or invisibility of the repairs, as he was interested in signs of ageing though not as an explicitly part of the work. So while the work includes the inherent vice of both the deliberate use of materials like wax, in addition to its precarious construction (the work suffers structurally from its own weight), the piece only implicitly addresses ageing, a fact known only through consultation with the artist. This kind of inherent ambiguity reflects the difficulties of assigning meaning to installation works and their degraded parts.

This discussion of deciphering meaning for installation artworks is critical for conservation, as the intended meaning of a work is the most fundamental reference point for conservation treatment. The questions of ‘how the material should be treated’ and

42 Irvin, ”The Artists’ Sanction in Contemporary Art,” 315.
44 Ibid., 107.
‘which actions are necessary and which are not,’ fundamental to conservation practice, are determined by the overall concept of a work as well and the expression of that concept through individual parts. Since the determination of meaning is highly subjective, the process of conserving materially and conceptually complex installation artworks is continually being debated and modified. When museums acquire works with several layers of complex meaning, there is no fixed path for their conservation and the process thus becomes more open-ended.\(^{45}\) The unfixed meaning of many installation works renders the process of conservation more contingent, as conservators will necessarily emphasize different aspects of a work’s meaning than those intended by the artist. There must then be a constant reevaluation of the intended state and role of affected parts, and how they should be approached.\(^{46}\) Since installation artworks are, like any artwork, fundamentally linked to artist’s intention, the conservation process necessarily becomes more qualitative rather than quantitative. Artist’s intent is really the only way the meaning of the work can fully be captured, as it is inherently difficult to decipher the exact role age is supposed to play for any given artwork. The process of determining the meaning, rather than the meaning itself, is the basis for conservation practice. It is this process which determines the long-term success of an artwork and is challenged by artworks that age rapidly, unpredictably and sometimes purposefully. As conservator Louise Cone remarks, intent is important because “the significance of a material is only as great as what we, or the artist, ascribe to it.”\(^{47}\) The interpretation of meaning is one of the most challenging aspects of conserving any object; for installation art, however, there are many more complicated layers to be considered which hold various theoretical implications.

**Undermining the Preservation Ethic**

“Has the transition of art, from being an aesthetic object to be viewed with reverence, to being a dialogue oriented or perhaps even a non-existent object, affected museum structure and its role in representing art?” (Louise Cone)\(^{48}\)

Ephemeral, material-oriented installation works, in addition to challenging the basic identity of the art object and the interpretation of its meaning, also challenges the traditional preservation structure in the form of institutionalize collections. Artworks that are both materially ephemeral and physically deconstructed undermine the basic *preservation ethic* of the museum system. At the core of the museum system is the preservation and presentation of cultural heritage for the future as well as the display of artifacts in the present. Interestingly enough, these duties validate one another and are yet in conflict; showing works in the present fulfills the latter tenet while simultaneously jeopardizing the former, as exposure during exhibition is the main agent in degradation.\(^{49}\) If the basic structure of museums requires a constant compromise, the acquisition of

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\(^{46}\) Wegen, "Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art ", 204.

\(^{47}\) Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art", 30.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{49}\) Wegen, "Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art ," 201.
installation art only exacerbate and expands these necessary compromises. The American Association of Museums’ Code of Ethics states:

“The distinctive character of museum ethics derives from the ownership, care, and use of objects, specimens, and living collections representing the world's natural and cultural common wealth. This stewardship of collections entails the highest public trust and carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal.”

The basic purpose of a museum is dependent on the maintenance and possession of a collection; the transitory and contingent nature of installation art challenges the emphasis in collections on specific objects. The non-traditional materials have unpredictable and unstable rates of change, leading them to degrade rapidly and drastically, and play a different and unfixed role in the creation of meaning for a work. While the collecting of traditional art is done through the ‘filtering of time’ such that the degree of ageing is quantifiable, contemporary works whose ageing cannot be predicted are bought and preserved without the advantage of hindsight. Thomas Hirschhorn notoriously said making political art is to “work with the fullest energy against the principle of quality.” The museum, whose existence is based on the collection and preservation of many types of art, has to scramble to address the problems before the appropriate scientific information and technology is available to do so. Institutions have thus had to adapt the tenets of the preservation ethic to respond to these types of works.

Installation art challenges the museum structure in varied ways. In its conception, the critique of the self-autonomous object stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the remote and privileged framework of the very institutions in which many of these works now lie. The ideas inherited from minimalism, of reducing of authorship, questioning originality and uniqueness, denial of artistic skill and use of mass-production and reproduction were conceived in direct criticism of the museum as an institution. Many installations, with their explicit or implicit timelines of decay and use of materials with inherent vice, can be discouraging to collect. In particular, the challenge to traditional ideas of authenticity is difficult for institutions that identify the value of artworks in their rarity and originality; the practice of making artworks that “do not carry inherent evidence of artistic authorship have necessitated new conventions for designating and maintaining their categorization as works of art.”

Museum standards are based in the very idea that many early installations critiqued, namely the integrity of the object and its fundamental embodiment of the artist’s concept. Museums are, when purchasing installations, often primarily purchasing the rights and ownership of an idea. The institutions, in addition to desiring avant-garde art, have little choice, as they cannot ignore the genre of contemporary art.

50 American Association of Museums, ”Code of Ethics for Museums.”
51 While other models exist for the museum, for example the Kunsthalle, most models are predicated on the possession of a collection.
52 Cone, ”Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 16.
54 Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art, 12.
55 Ibid., 4.
56 Marontate, ”Rethinking Permanence and Change in Contemporary Cultural Preservation Strategies,” 300-1.
installation art simply because it is challenging. While the works focused upon in this paper have material remnants that are collected and stored, for many of them even the remnants will be short-lived. The purpose of this thesis is to address the manner in which these works are treated now and which can inform future practice. In acquiring installation art it can be said that museums have shifted from the ‘predictable to the unknown.’ \(^{57}\) While this might lead one to believe that the acquisition of these works leads to an uncertain future for cultural heritage, there are still many reasons to collect and value ephemeral artworks.

All of the challenges and issues of material-oriented installation works discussed in this section should not lead to a fatalistic or indifferent attitude towards ephemeral art. In fact, ephemeral art is currently, and has been for some time, a prevalent and significant aspect of contemporary art production. Professionals and artists alike recognize the importance and pervasiveness of art’s aspiration to the ephemerality of life. The sculptor Beverly Pepper, writing in *Art Journal* in 1978, stated “today’s art… retains a fourth dimension: time. Which isn’t surprising when you consider it, since time and space are generally assumed to be the common, inevitable properties of physical things.” \(^{58}\) As conservation represents the way in which a culture cares and therefore values its heritage, the discipline has had to adjust willingly or forcedly to accommodate such artwork. Not all conservators, however, perceive the challenge of conserving ephemeral art as unwelcome or unfortunate. One major attitude is reflected by the art historian Piet de Jong’s emphasis not on ‘how long this work will last’ but on ‘is this an important piece now.’ \(^{59}\) Aside from its cultural importance, ephemeral installations are also exquisite artworks that communicate viscerally and inspire the viewer. D. H. van Wegen has noted how “the expressive power of a work can be directly influenced by the fragility or evanescence of the material.” \(^{60}\) While some might perceive the use of ephemeral materials as the rejection of conservation, ephemeral installation artworks are meaningful not just to the artists and the institutions that collect them, but also to the art world and society as whole.

By not collecting ephemeral installation art, institutions would be passing judgment on an entire genre of contemporary art practice. Preservation and conservation are, by definition, value judgments on the kinds of art worth preserving. Museums already acquire such a small portion of the total works possible that what “they reject is important for establishing the value of what they do acquire.” \(^{61}\) It could be considered misleading, and potentially unethical, for contemporary art institutions not to collect art works simply because they were ephemeral. These museums would then have to concede that they represent only a *partial* cross-section of contemporary art and contemporary art


\(^{59}\) Marontate, "Rethinking Permanence and Change in Contemporary Cultural Preservation Strategies," 301.

\(^{60}\) Wegen, "Between Fetish and Score: The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art," 204.

practice. While a model has been developed to deal with the proliferation of site-specific and temporary installation works, that being the Kunsthalle, many institutions dedicated to contemporary art do attempt to preserve and collect a reasonable amount of ephemeral installation works. In fact, the question of ephemerality is really a relative one; every object will eventually degrade and decay. This type of artwork reminds one of the fundamental difficulties of conserving any art, as and ‘unaltered heritage’ is not feasible and in ways “Museum and life are contradictory principles.”62 Society and human beings however, through a drive to preserve and maintain the past, continue to attempt to do what appears impossible. If any artwork could be considered ephemeral in due time, then surely the fact that material-oriented artworks degrade more rapidly and unpredictable is not a sufficient reason not to collect them.

Contemporary art, particularly material-oriented installation works, has been demonstrated as problematic within the museum setting. Nevertheless, there is a concerted effort on the part of the institutions to collect, store, reinstall and exhibit these artworks over time. In order for this to be possible, the discipline of conservation has had to adapt theoretically and methodologically. Through a discussion of the challenges contemporary art poses to traditional conservation, and subsequently the establishment of a methodology that seeks to address many of the theoretical issues created, the conservation and art community as a whole has developed the will and capability to deal with contemporary art.

Chapter 2 | Defining the Tenets of Conservation

The theoretical problems of installation art deeply affect the way the objects are approached in conservation practice. The artworks fundamentally challenge the accepted tenets of the discipline as defined by institutions, museum professionals and historical precedent. Conservation itself, much like installation art, is marked by its contingency; in order for there to be conservation, a conservation object must exist. The standards of the practice are based on the characteristics of the object being conserved, though there are overarching and unifying tenets. In the case of much contemporary art, the goal of the profession, to preserve cultural property for the future, is undermined by the very objects it concerns. This goal is exercised through a range of actions including documentation, examination, treatment, research and care. The cultural construct of preservation behind the word ‘conservation’ manifests in several terms that necessitate clarification:

“After a ‘quick perusal’ of an issue of Preservation News, [the historic preservationist Daniel] McGilvray found no less than 32 notions used to describe a variety of conservation-related actions… each one possessing its particular set of unique hues and undertones: preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, revival, protection, renewal, conversion, transformation, reuse, rebirth, revitalization, repair, remodeling, redevelopment, rescue, reconstruction, refurbishing.”

‘Conservation’ is unique among these as it is defined by professional standardization in addition to codified methods of scientific, technical and historical analysis. The methodology of the discipline methodology stems from both the sciences and humanities, which frame the ongoing debate of scientific and objective versus aesthetically subjective practice. While both influences are often equally important, the challenges of installation art in defining context and meaning necessitate a higher emphasis on subjective analysis in practice. An exploration of the theoretical origins and practical application of conservation will further illuminate the challenges of conserving installation art and will provide the basic concepts for a theoretical analysis of the current methodology.

This paper considers the broader concept of ‘conservation,’ as defined by traditional practice and in the context of installation art, as well as the specific actions of preservation, restoration, preventative preservation and informational preservation. The intent, however, is not to discuss specific and technical treatments, but rather to address the larger philosophical issues that arise out of these treatments. Though the action of ‘conserving’ installation art includes all the specific actions of preservation, restoration etc., and these facets will be considered when relevant, the main impetus of this paper is to discuss conservation theory pertaining to installation art in the context of larger cultural heritage conservation.

History of Conservation

Conservation is by definition a deliberate and conscious process. It begins with a society-wide recognition of the cultural, historical and political value of communal objects, regardless of their nature. The Salvador Muñoz-Viñas wrote in his influential book *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* that the practice rose from the consolidation of the idea of art in the west in the eighteenth century, evidenced by the recognition of art history as a discipline, which in turn led to the privileged status of art in society.3 The provision of means for conservation is predicated on the notion that what is being conserved is *worth* saving. The development and standardization of the discipline began with the distinction that the skills required to “treat a painting were different from those required to treat the walls of a common peasant house... and that cleaning a Neolithic axe requires a different attitude and knowledge from that needed to clean a household lamp.”

The constructs behind the practice of preservation and conservation are marked by self-awareness and deliberateness, and are not universal to all cultures and periods. As it developed, conservation was heavily influenced by progressing scientific technology and the philosophical school of positivism.5 Through these influences, positivism contributing the idea that every rational assertion can be scientifically or mathematically verified, conservation was understood to be a matter mainly of chemistry and objective analysis.6 While not necessarily a negative outcome, conservation has had to evolve in the twentieth century specifically to incorporate aspects overlooked when scientific principles are applied to objects of subjective aesthetic value.

The writings of several enigmatic figures who took up the subject, most of them working with building restoration, still form the basis of the main discourses of modern, institutionalized conservation. The art critic John Ruskin and architect and theorist Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc still embody the two poles of conservation theory; while the former despised restoration and saw the signs of ageing as the most valuable feature of a building, the latter engaged in liberal restoration which “filled in the blanks” and was borderline reconstruction.7 Seeing its practical implementation as intrusive and a ‘disturbing agent,’ Ruskin advocated against the very kind of restoration in which Viollet-Le-Duc engaged. Viollet-Le-Duc famously wrote that restoration meant to “reestablish [an object] in a finished state which may in fact never have existed at any given time.”8 While this ‘pristine’ and desirable condition may have been largely imaginative, any restoration activity was still meant to exist coherently with the original appearance of the building.9 Viollet-Le-Duc’s behavior may seem extreme and inappropriate to contemporary audiences, but in the context of installation art, as discussed below, the practice of reconstruction and re-interpretation has once again, and necessarily, entered the dialogue of conservation practice. One could argue that any act of conservation involves some level of ‘filling in the blanks.’

4 Ibid., 2.
6 Ibid., 200.
While conservation theory has evolved greatly since LeDuc and Ruskin, their opposing principles still form the foundation of the practice. As Salvador Muñoz-Viñas writes, later theorists constantly confronted the difficult dilemma of reconciling their positions, because “conserving both an object’s original state and the signs that history has left on it is not an easy task.” As they represent the least and the most conservative attitudes towards conserving cultural heritage, and embody the extremes of the discipline, many theorists have expanded their principles and pursued some kind of compromise. The Italian architect Camillo Boito was a proponent of the importance of the ‘monument-as-document;’ his devotion to the original elements of that ‘document’ led him to establish principles still used, such as “the need for original and restored parts to be clearly discernible, which allows for honest restorations of the object.” The Austrian art historian Alois Reigl re-emphasized, in the face of highly positivist, scientifically minded conservation practices, the need for full and holistic conceptions of conservation. In a field where aestheticism and the scientific model continually compete, Riegl was a unique voice considering the social value of historical and artistic objects and their qualitative ‘age value.’ As technology and scientific methodology improved throughout the twentieth century, conservation, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States, increasingly moved towards what is called ‘new scientific conservation,’ where hard material sciences formed the basis of conservation analysis. The art historian Cesare Brandi, in his paramount 1963 publication *Teoria del Restauro*, advocated the aesthetic approach of conservation, which emphasizes the unique nature of artworks and their potential aesthetic unity. Brandi thus also formed the basis for a return to more subjective aspects of conservation practice in the latter twentieth century, compensating for the gaps in pure scientific conservation based on positivism. This more qualitative and holistic approach to conservation, often overlooked in scientific conservation, is particularly important and relevant to installation art.

**Definition of Conservation**

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10 Ibid., 5.
11 Ibid., 4.
12 Ibid., 5.
14 Muñoz Viñas acknowledges that “though different conservation ideologies may well coexist in the same country or region, some rough, blurred patterns can be perceived: new scientific conservation has taken a slight precedence in Anglo-Saxon countries, while in Mediterranean and Latin-American countries, artistic-value-based approaches are somewhat favoured [sic].” Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 6-7.
15 Ibid., 6-7.
17 Muñoz Viñas describes this development: “In the latter nineteenth century, Boito’s *srestauro scientifico* gained wide acceptance. This new theory retained truth as a guiding principle but stressed that truth was objectively determinable, and thus it was achieved by objective methods. In this way, personal appreciations would not step in the way of conservation and discussions would be avoided – or at least, drastically reduced. Of course, the best, and perhaps the only way to establish objective truths was the way of science.” Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 65.
The specific standards and definitions of contemporary twentieth century conservation originate in this historical dialogue surrounding the role and purpose of conservation. While the same terms might still vary in meaning based on context, the three main components of conservation, preservation or stabilization and restoration, are universally recognized. The terms conservation and preservation are often used interchangeably and defined differently by different authors and institutions, with one denoting the profession as a whole and the other denoting the practice performed on specific objects. The AIC defines ‘conservation’ as the profession and actions specific to conservators, while Salvador Muñoz-Viñas use the same term in the broader sense, which includes the entire, general practice of conservation as well as other professionals involved, like curators, lawyers and other museum officials. The definition he offers for preservation is that it is conservation in the narrower sense, and thus includes the specific actions of the conservator. This definition is similar to the AIC’s term stabilization, defined as “treatment procedures intended to maintain the integrity of cultural property and to minimize deterioration.”

The historic preservationist Bernard Feilden defines preservation as dealing “directly with cultural property” and states that its “object is to keep it in the same state.” He also writes that maintenance, good management and organization are aids to preservation. The terminology is further confused by the fact that the words for conservation in Spanish, Italian and French are restauración, restauro and restauration respectively; their affinity with the word ‘restoration’ in English, which is distinct from conservation, makes translations difficult. For the purposes of this paper, ‘preservation’ and ‘conservation’ will be used to denote the broader sense of conserving objects, with ‘preservation’ having a slightly different connotation in its inclusion of more contextual information, an important distinction regarding installation art. For the more specific and technical actions performed by conservators on objects, the terms ‘stabilization’ and ‘conservation treatment’ will be used.

Restoration as an aspect of conservation is more easily understood in opposition to stabilization as a more additive process. ‘Stabilization’ or conservation in the narrow sense includes the examination, analysis and treatment of an object such that it ceases to have alterations over time; as a process, stabilization seeks to preserve the status quo of an object through halting decay and preventing future decay, intending to “keep the perceivable features of an object in their present state for as long as possible... [by] modifying some of the object’s non-perceivable features” (internal, chemical reactions). Restoration, however, attempts to “revive the original concept or legibility of the object” by returning it to a state closer to its original through “modifying its perceivable features.” One of the basic characteristics of restoration is its visibility, as objects that are restored often do not look like they did previously, while objects that are stabilized will. Before the advent of the scientific method and positivism, aestheticism reigned

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18 American Institute for Conservation, "Definitions of Conservation."
21 Ibid., 20.
24 Ibid., 20.
and restoration was its modus operandi. Though restoration is based on the investigation of archaeological evidence and original design, with a consistent reverence for the authentic material, 25 it has been criticized in instances for being inadequate, subjective, irreversible and too invasive. Nevertheless, restoration is an important part of the conservation process; stabilization and restoration necessarily act together in all instances, though in differing proportions.

Other constructs associated with conservation that are considered more administrative or managerial than technical are ‘preventative conservation’ and ‘information preservation.’ ‘Preventative conservation’ includes all the other actions performed by both the conservators and other museum staff to protect objects, and is “performed in such a way that neither perceivable nor unperceivable features of the object are altered in any way.” 26 Through actions external to the object, such as careful management of the environment, creation of new housing and addition of protective implements, preventative conservation attempts to avoid damage before it happens. This aspect of conservation includes the exhibition and presentation of the object, its storage and transportation as well as its interaction with the public. 27 ‘Information preservation,’ much like preventative conservation, does not deal directly with the physical material of an artwork. This aspect of conservation is seemingly simple but is exceptionally important. Information preservation describes the activities based on the production of documentation through records, photography, video and condition reports; it preserves “part of the information contained in the object (the text, the shape and the look), but not the object itself.” 28 The kinds of information collected through this process include provenance, previous treatment including replacement, display and even its cultural and artistic meaning. Often the kind of information under this umbrella term is paramount for and affects future conservation treatment, for both aspects of restoration and stabilization. It is crucial for installation art, as the installation and exhibition of many material-oriented works require extensive documentation for their re-presentation.

**Conservation Standards**

There are several widely accepted and utilized standards and characteristics of conservation practice, including reversibility, durability, minimal intervention and authenticity, which are challenged by the nature of many contemporary artworks and particularly installation art. Conservators utilize these standards, as outlined in many professional organizations including the AIC, the IIC (International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works) and ICCROM (International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), as guiding principles in making decision and the subsequent defense and assessment of their actions. A short list made by Feilden in the 1980s covered many of these standards:

Interventions should:
- Be reversible, if technically possible.

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Not prejudice a future intervention whenever this may become necessary.
- Not hinder the possibility of later access to all evidence incorporated in the object.
- Allow the maximum amount of existing material to be retained.
- Be harmonious in color, tone, texture, form, and scale, if additions are necessary, but be less noticeable than the original material, while at the same time being identifiable.29

That treatment should allow for future conservation actions points to the standard of reversibility, where the character of the treatment, including the material and the method utilized, are chosen so that there is room for later intervention and removal of the treatment.30 The driving force behind this tenet, as articulated by conservator Barbara Mangum, is that “in 50 years, someone is going to call us bad restorers, because the works have changed. The original is going to age, and whatever we have done to it is going to age at a different rate.”31 Related is the concept of durability, where conservators utilize highly stable and predicable materials so that the treatment of the work does not age for a long time and does not permanently affect the original material; an example of a successful application of durability would be utilizing water color to inpaint an oil painting.32 The principle of minimal intervention is also intended to minimize the unintended consequences of treatment by encouraging the conservator to only do as much stabilization or restoration as the object absolutely and necessarily needs. It teaches the conservator to “restrict himself to the necessary, to consider conservation before restoration and preventive before curative conservation, to limit an intervention as closely as possibly and not to select more material for adding to the object than is really necessary.”33 Different conservators and conservation labs practice varying degrees of minimal intervention, as “farther-reaching interventions are usually necessary if the object to be restored has to fulfill a function going beyond display in a museum.”34 Authenticity as applied to conservation practice is less complicated than in the realm of art theory and the art market; basically, in the name of caution, conservators observe authenticity by respecting the original material and physical integrity of the work of art.35 Essentially, though exceptions exist, no actions will be undertaken that would permanently alter or harm the original material, which is assumed based on traditional theory to retain the authenticity of the work as a record of the creative act.

Emphasis on Materiality of Artworks

Many contemporary artworks by their nature undermine and conflict with these tenets due to the importance placed on their specific material existence. The principles of durability, reversibility, minimal intervention and authenticity all imply a fundamental

33 Ibid., 44.
34 Ibid., 44.
respect for the material of a work as well as the assumption that the material is lasting and conducive to conservation; even the more quantitative conservator Cesare Brandi that “it is primarily the original material of an object, or what is left of it, that can serve as a sound basis for future generations to build their own interpretations of the original appearance” and that thus “the original materials has the highest priority, in whatever condition it has survived.” Traditional concepts of conservation place emphasis above all on the material aspects of a work, which is impractical for objects questioning the very validity of the original material. The detachment of meaning from the material for installation works leads to a crisis of what is being conserved. Contemporary artworks that utilize ephemeral materials and unstable combinations to convey meaning are almost impossible to approach the way a conservator would a traditional artwork; more aggressive actions, like substitution and replacement, are often needed much sooner and to a greater degree because of the rapidly changing nature of many works. Many of these works, though degrading in short periods of time, accumulate monetary and social value that necessitates this kind of proactive treatment. These kinds of actions are often taken in consultation with the artist or in accordance with their intentions, as many contemporary artists do not place the same authority and emphasis on the original material. If the artist does not care about the authenticity of the material, is the conservator still required to?

One example of these is the conservation of Mario Merz’s work *Cittá irreale* from 1968, which was comprised of white neon letters draped across a wax-plastered gauze cloth stretched over a triangular metal frame [fig. 6]. Regardless of the actions of the conservator, the neon tubes in the work will burn out. The neon tubes were replaced once in 1974 and copies were recently made as part of the project *Modern Art: Who Cares?* for the time when the current tubes burn out. Two factors affect the consideration of authenticity in this specific case. Firstly, Merz himself did not make the tubes, and though they were not created by Merz’s own hand, the originals would have had nuances in form that would not be evident in the reproduction. Clearly the replacement of the tubes undermines the tenets of minimal intervention, durability, reversibility and authenticity. The most extreme course of actions were taken: the materials utilized for the restoration are no more durable than the original ones, the action is clearly not reversible without affecting the current state of the work and the original material was removed. In this instance, however, this course of action made the most sense in preserving the intent and aesthetic and conceptual unity of the work. This is just one instance where a contemporary artwork requires actions outside

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39 Ibid., 69.
40 Ibid., 70.
41 Ibid., 71.
Fig. 6

Mario Merz, Cittá irreale, 1968, Stedelijk Museum.
the accepted canon of conservation measures; this same idea will be demonstrated in relationship to installation art in the case studies section.

The changing nature of the conservation object is another issue presented by contemporary art. The changing nature of the conservation object has fundamental implications for conservation practice, as with “the application of the guiding principles of restoration theory to installation art, we find that the familiar close association between restorer, intervention and object of restoration has to a large extent been broken.” Historically, objects of either inherent material or cultural value have been the recipients of conservation. This distinction is part of the conscious practice of conservation, where the same action performed on different objects “may be considered as either carpentry or conservation” based in the nature of the object. This demonstrates how the abstract aims and principles of conservation are insufficient, and that the nature of the conservation object is essential to the definition of the discipline. Contemporary artworks, however, are rarely constructed of valuable materials and are often purposefully constructed of inexpensive or discarded as part of their meaning. Mass-produced objects, considered worthless on their own, become valuable in the context of these artworks. The age of an object, which dictates value for many other kinds of art, is not relevant for contemporary art; the rapidity of ageing for non-traditional materials undermines the value of the appearance of age. It is also characteristic of contemporary art that it is valued for its newness rather than its record of time. Contemporary artworks, unlike archaeological objects or older artworks, are also not considered as having historical value, another criteria for the conservation of many other kinds of objects. They even undermine the more universal goal of conservation in searching for the true nature of the conservation object, as the artwork’s true nature often lies in its conception rather than its materiality, or they simply lack any one true state as with installation art. Furthermore, with installation art, there really is no actual object to be conserved; often the preservation of the work is based more around its presentation and execution than its actual objects. The changing needs and definition of the conservation object have thus necessitated a consideration of new approach and changing conservation principles in practice as well as in theory.

**Changing Methodology**

The insufficiencies of current conservation practice for contemporary art demonstrate the need for changes and augmentations to the traditional methodology that are already well underway in contemporary practice. Changing practices address the fear of loss that contemporary art engenders for some conservators and collecting institutions. The artist Helen Escobedo expressed this collective fear when describing a contemporary environment where “nothing is sacred, little is safe, and the best way to preserve valuable objects is to bury them underground, the way the pharaohs did, never to see the light

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43 Muñoz-Viñas, Contemporary Theory of Conservation, 28.
44 Ibid., 28.
45 Ibid., 35.
46 Ibid., 90.
This sentiment is only worsened by the fact that the traditional tenets of minimal intervention and reversibility are not sufficient to handle the kind of work currently being produced, and have led to the various movements in the last two decades where such tenets were reevaluated and new possibilities for treatment began to form. Conservation as it stands has been and is currently in the process of changing to incorporate more qualitative and interpretive practices that have incorporated necessary practices that do not directly concern the scientific and material treatment of an artwork. While scientific analysis is still crucial to conserving artworks, it is no longer considered inherently superior to non-scientific analysis, so often disregarded in the early development of the discipline. Thomas Reese, former Deputy Director of the Getty Conservation Institute, said conservators of contemporary artworks must “enter into the critical spirit of the works themselves if they are to save and transmit not merely decontextualized fragments but their essence as well into the future.” As a consequence or as a benefit, the role of the conservator has in some cases become more a matter of archiving secondary materials than of actual treatment of a work of art. The changes were nevertheless necessary, and have allowed for conservation to begin to effectively address many of the challenges installation and contemporary art pose.

Decreasing emphasis on authenticity and increased need for subjective, qualitative analysis of contemporary art objects has initiated an evolution of conservation practice. While certain tenets are being questioned, however, such as the unwavering emphasis on the material aspects of an artwork, the changes to the practice are not out of line with the overarching principles of the discipline. Authenticity of artworks is not being obliterated from the methodology, rather in exploring “the ethical framework of conservation, itself in a constant state of flux, we … revisit our accepted notions of perenniality, integrity and authenticity.” The historical attitude of conservation that ‘we can know more than we can tell,’ has not, however, been disregarded; rather, it has been modified to extend beyond technical material research to include the external and relational meaning of installation art. The existing integrity of art object, defined traditionally as physical, aesthetic and historical, is being reconsidered rather than ignored. Conservators continue to attempt to keep objects intact when appropriate, despite the fact that it is no longer a sin to alter the material components of a work of art. The changing methodology simply takes a ‘step back’ from conservation treatment as usual in order to incorporate

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48 Muñoz Viñas best describes this development: “This scientific approach to conservation gained momentum, and in the second half of the twentieth century, it obtained some recognition as the best approach to conservation problems – the only valid one, actually, since non-scientific approaches were disregarded as obsolete at best, or as a product of ignorance in many other cases. Conservation became a university discipline, professional bodies were created, national and international associations emerged and publications flourished. The role of science in conservation became apparent through the use of scientific techniques but also, and more conspicuously, through its symbols: microscopes proliferated.” Muñoz-Viñas, Contemporary Theory of Conservation, 70.
51 Ibid., 51.
52 Muñoz-Viñas, Contemporary Theory of Conservation, 65.
more subjective consideration and definition of the necessary variables.\textsuperscript{53} Installations are still works of art that require the respect their cultural value entails, and thus are not approached \textit{without} working rules, but rather with continually \textit{evolving} rules.

\textsuperscript{53} Weyer, "Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art," 46.
Chapter 3 | Theoretical Issues in Conserving Installation Art

Artists’ Intent

Central to contemporary conservation theory is the idea of artist’s intentionality and how it informs actual practice. The artist’s intention mitigates many of the issues articulated in the previous section by ‘filling’ in many of the theoretical gaps. It also allows for conservators to develop more principles that address the conceptual and subjective needs of artworks in addition to physical and technical treatment. There artist’s intent, particularly for the more conceptual works of the twentieth century, forms a paradox whereby works degrade and thus undermine the artist’s intent while the intent itself exists indefinitely.\(^1\) One recurring and significant question in the face of degradation is whether the transformed state of the object reflects what the artist originally intended. Despite its seemingly controversial nature, an articulation of the artist’s intent compensates for the shortcomings of only considering the scientific aspects of conservation; only considering age in relation to individual material parts of a work runs the risk of neglecting the work as a whole. While its material aspect might be stable, it is possible for the entire work to exist nevertheless in a state completely contrary to the way it was intended. Hiltrud Schinzel articulated this fact when she wrote “conservation does not just mean safeguarding the material…because the intrinsic, ideal value of an artistic work is automatically linked with it.”\(^2\) The attention paid to the physical parts versus that given to the more immaterial, unifying qualities of the work forms the fundamental dilemma of conservation practice. All this assumes, however, that one can even discern artistic intent.

The validity of intentionalism, or the ability to discern the intent of the artist, is one of the most prominently and exhaustively debated subjects of the twentieth century. Though the basic aspects of the debate will be discussed here, this paper cannot feasibly present and assess the entire discourse on intentionalism. This discussion addresses the concept of ‘authenticity’ in art theory while focusing on how it is made relevant to conservation theory, and is intended to quiet those anti-intentionalists that would deconstruct the basic tenets of conservation before deeper theoretical analysis can be approached. Intentionalism in conservation is related to the general goal of preserving and restoring artworks to their ideal state, which is generally concluded to be state in which the artist originally intended it to be seen.\(^3\) As discussed earlier, contemporary art lacks the age value and historical importance of many objects of conservation. This fact creates a need for some other inherent aspect of the object to guide its conservation. In the late nineteenth century, with the advent of positivism and New-Scientific conservation, the idea of ‘artist’s intention’ emerged from the ability through scientific

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\(^3\) Dykstra, "The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation," 199.
innovation to discern original materials from later additions, interventions or alterations. The conservators had the right approach, as the principle created a universal goal for conservation, which would be based in objective analysis of the intentions of the artist rather than those of the beholders. Just as artist’s intention became an accepted idea in conservation, a 1946 article in The Sewanee Review by the authors Wimsatt and Beardsley sparked a debate over the term. This article, entitled “The Intentional Fallacy,” questioned intentionalism by positing that artists are not always aware of their intentions when creating a work of art, and that it is a fallacy for beholders of the work of art to interpret the mentality of the artist in any sense. The idea that artists’ intentions are neither “available nor desirable as a standard for assessing art” became known as anti-intentionalism.

While the debate continues, and has no conceivable end in sight, the fallible aspects of intentionalism are in a way irrelevant. While intentionalists would argue a “sense of the artist’s intention, however obscure, can be a useful resource in interpreting a work of art,” it is actually the process of searching for intent that is most useful practically and theoretically in conservation. The intentional fallacy as a concept is most relevant in art criticism, for example, where there is an attempt to ascribe intentions and meaning by those other than the artist. Without an attempt to grasp artist’s intention, regardless of whether it is even possible, conservation practice would be guided only by scientific principle and analysis, and would thus overlook important aspects of artworks and lead to great error in practice. In the case of artists deliberately using ephemeral materials to convey symbolic meaning, a lack of knowledge of intent could lead to an unflinching preservation of the original material of the work, despite the conceptual inaccuracy of such an action. The philosopher Henry David Aiken describes the practical and necessary nature of the process:

“We consider an artist’s intentions because we have questions about his work that we cannot always answer without his guidance, without knowledge of what he was trying to do or say. And we arrive at our interpretations not by gaping at the ‘work itself,’ but by a complex process of trial and error involving many things besides looking at the work. Anyone who has sought to interpret a work belonging to a culture other than his own knows how true this is.”

The search for intent stems, from a “deep-seated concern for honoring symbolic meaning,” and cannot be written off because of its seeming philosophical impossibility. In an excerpt from my interview with Glenn Wharton we discussed the practical need for intent:

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4 Louise Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art" (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2002), 53.
7 Ibid., 199.
8 Ibid., 204.
9 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 53.
EF: What would you say to someone who…believes in the intentional fallacy and impossibility of ever knowing what the artist really meant?

GW: Very interesting. I taught in my course last semester on the conservation of installation art, we’ve had a session called artists’ intent. I called it that deliberately because I think it’s a very problematic phrase. And so we started by talking about the intentional fallacy and the art historical literature around there. This ability for even an artist, much less anyone else, to be able to talk about the relationship between the idea in their mind and the product, that would be the work of art.

EF: Yeah, what you were saying about oral history, just the translation itself…

GW: Yes, there’s a whole school of art historians who say no one can articulate what was in the artist’s mind, and it’s a fallacy to assume that. And so what we need to do is just start with the object, and we can expand from that by knowing more about the artist, by knowing more about the materials, by knowing more about the time period, the social context, the political context in which it was created, the art historical context. But it’s really the art historian’s job to do that, not the artist’s. (…) I would agree with whoever you just referenced that it’s the right approach, but it’s wrong to oversimplify it, and think that it’s going to be easy, and think that that’s the only course of research that’s appropriate.

Jim Coddington also discussed the artist’s intent in our interview, saying “what we mean by intention is a vehicle towards making real world decisions. This is not an abstract argument, it is a tool to arrive at decisions.” [Appendix A]. So despite the problematic theory behind the artist’s intent, its practice in conservation is fundamentally marked by pragmatism and necessity that legitimize its discussion and rationalization.

The search for intent gains knowledge about a work that is necessary and would not be conceived of otherwise, especially when the artist is still alive and willing to speak with the conservators. In fact, some see the interaction with the artist as the only valid way to pursue, as evidenced by conservator Louise Cone’s statement that “the knowledge of an artist’s intention has its limitations and is only attainable if the artist is alive and willing to express this type of information.” Whether or not one believes in intentionalism, it becomes readily apparent how important the process of pursuing the ‘ideal’ states of conservation objects. The term conveyance has gained popularity, as it communicates all the relevant aspects of intention without all the messy philosophical connotations; either way, the search for intent is necessary in discovering what a work is meant to convey and thus how it should appear. The elusive intention, assuming it exists, has several facets that are relevant to the decision-making process of conservation treatment. As defined by the Richard Kuhns in the article "Criticism and the Problem of Intention” in 1960, intention has four senses – “biographical motives, aims vs. outcomes, expression in media, and inherent creative spirit.” These senses are important for conservation whether or not they are labeled intentional, as surely the articulation, communication and expressive effects of a work are relevant for all conservation

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11 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 51.
actions. The search for intent reveals qualities of a work that the artist regards as essential, leading to informed decisions otherwise not possible. The informed decisions manifest in varying ways; for example, “artist’s original intent is defined and used differently by the various schools or approaches to cleaning: partial, selective and total.” One successful and highly demonstrative example of the practical uses of analyzing artist’s intent is evidenced by the treatment pursued for the artist Krijn Giezen’s work *Marocco* [fig. 7]. Problems were encountered when the artist disagreed with the desire of the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, which owns the work, to kill the bugs living in the work. In order to determine the right course of action, a working group at the museum assessed the perceived original intention and meaning of the work.

Giezen’s work *Marocco* is controversial because the Frans Hals Museum went against the wishes of the artist by deciding to kill the bugs infesting *Marocco* based on its assessment of the intention of the work at the time of its completion and acquisition. The working group researched the work and interviewed the artist in order to decide what the desired state of *Marocco* should be, since the infestation not only threatened the work but also jeopardized the other works in the collection around it. It had to be decided whether the artwork, a collection of ephemeral articles brought back from Morocco by Giezen in the early 1970s displayed in a wooden box, was intended as souvenir and document or as a process of decay and deterioration. As explained by the working group, “if the work is seen as a document, the authenticity and historicity of the materials play a larger role; if the work’s essential meaning is derived from the degradation process, then the idea, the concept, should have greater emphasis.” During the interview with the artist, Giezen identified all his works as visual reports, and was quite pleased with the current aged appearance of the work; in retrospect, he found the ageing to both aesthetically pleasing and an important aspect of the work. Furthermore, he had an intense emotional reaction to killing the insects, especially by gassing, and disagreed with the proposed actions of the working group (he had already refused for the Textile Museum in Tilburg to kill carpet beetles in a wall hanging, which the museum then returned to the artist). In the end, using articles written contemporaneously about the work, the working group decided that Giezen had originally intended *Marocco* as a souvenir of his trip through Africa, and that only retrospectively did he identify the importance of age and the process of decay. The working group stated that “if the work is simply conceived as a visual record, the material has to be preserved as far as possible

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13 Ibid., 200.
14 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 52.
16 Though the artist eventually came around to the museum’s decision, he was resistant enough at first that this statement is warranted.
17 Smit, "The Transitory Nature of Memory," 94.
18 Smit recounts how on his trip Krijn Giezen collected material for the work *Marocco* – twenty objects from the everyday life of the Berber people, ‘exhibited’ in a display case covered by a sheet of glass, including the remains of dried plants and animals; bunch of herbs, a chameleon, a hedgehog, a goat’s leg and a fox’s head.
20 Ibid., 97.
21 Ibid., 96.
in its original state… if *Marocco* is mainly a story of natural degradation, ageing and mortality, the concept rather than the materials needs to be conserved.  

While it is unfortunate that the museum had to openly disagree with the artist, the logical reasoning in this instance in assessing the meaningful aspects of the work legitimizes their actions. There is often conflict stemming from interactions with living artists and the meaning they ascribe to works after their completion. This problem will be further elaborated in the section on artist’s sanctions.

The actual application of the search for intent, while a valid methodology, is particularly complicated for contemporary artist due to the avant-garde nature of the work and the presence in many cases of living artists. As mentioned earlier, the driving force of the art institution is the *preservation ethic*, and conservators are agents of that force. Often, within the museum setting, artworks gain cultural and social meaning beyond the artist’s original conception. This aspect of collecting makes it that much more problematic for conservators to reconcile the intention for many artworks to change, degrade and ultimately disappear with the main tenet of their profession. In other cases the artist may actually have no specific intentions for their artwork, and it then becomes the job of the conservators, art historians and curators to address the meaning and fate of the work of art. One example of this would be the work *33 Questions per Minute* by the artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer from 2001. According to Glenn Wharton, the artist placed no restrictions on the configuration of the individual LCD screens in subsequent reinstallations and was open to future reinterpretations [fig. 8]. Because so many non-traditional contemporary artworks and installations require innovative approaches to their exhibition and long-term care, analyzing the physical aspects of a work produces insufficient evidence about artist’s intent (a process undertaken with many traditional works where the artist is deceased or unknown). The living artist thus becomes an invaluable source for necessary information that cannot be gained elsewhere, and interviewing artists about their works during acquisition or re-installation has indeed become common protocol at many institutions. This process, however, as demonstrated with *Marocco*, can be quite difficult as the emphasis on artist’s intent grants the living artist an agency that can come into conflict with the entity that legally owns the work.

As the *Marocco* example demonstrates, there is a practical and useful application of artist’s intent in the conservation process, regardless of the theoretical validity of the actual intent. As the Steven Dykstra points out, there are larger issues confronting conservation as a discipline: “unlike philosophers, historians, and literary critics, art conservators did not separate along intentionalist and anti-intentionalist lines. (…) Conservators were artificially and superficially separated into two ad hoc schools – aesthetic conservators and scientific conservators.” Twentieth century conservation has largely been mired in a debate over methodology, which minimized the debate over intent; the nature of contemporary artworks, however, have necessitated a return to the debate over and emphasis on artistic intent. This stems is particularly true for material-

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22 Ibid., 96.
23 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 51.
24 Ibid., 51.
26 Wharton, Glenn. Interview by Lizzie Frasco.
27 Dykstra, "The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation," 199. [Private conservator and state department official]
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *33 Questions per Minute*, 2001, MoMA.
oriented artworks that derive explicit or implicit meaning from methods that are irreconcilable with the preservation doctrine. As conservator Glenn Wharton has written, the “debate over meaning turns to action when conservators make decisions and intervene in the physical lives of artworks – including conceptual pieces whose primary value lies in the nonmaterial realm of experience and interaction.”  

While many have made the argument that the challenges facing contemporary art are not necessarily unique or unprecedented, as all art was contemporary at one time and therefore posed unprecedented problems, there is a uniqueness to the issues facing installation art because of the non-traditional and idiosyncratic relationship created between meaning and its material expression. Artists’ intent has necessarily become the guiding principle, rather than the scientific or objective investigation of meaning inherent in material, because of these complexities. Paintings conservator Cornelia Weyer said this best:

“What importance is to be attached to materiality on the one hand and to ideality on the other, whether any antagonism at all develops between the two or whether the one and the other are so intimately bound up with each other that they can only stand and fall together – all these are questions that must be asked of an installation as object of restoration, when reaching decisions about restorational measures. Whether the durability of a conservation material represents a relevant selection criterion must in this respect by measured by a large number of object-related characteristics.”

The ‘large number’ of characteristics that must be considered in relation to every conservation action for many material-oriented installations has necessitated a greater involvement of the living artist when possible.

As many aspects of these kinds of works can often only be expressed is discussion with the artist, a theoretical and methodological shift has occurred where greater emphasis is placed on meaning outside the physical artworks. In fact, artistic intent has become intrinsically linked with a knowledge or understanding of the role of the artist in the artwork for non-traditional contemporary artworks. The earlier discussion of the relational meaning of installations demonstrated how for many artworks, there is intangible meaning external to the physical existence of the work of art; discovering this meaning thus requires alternative methods and sources. While this alternative investigation of meaning does not invalidate the traditional documenting of measure materials and techniques, which is still fundamental to conservation, it does distinguish the needs of contemporary art from those of say oil paintings or archaeological objects. The quantifiable aspects of art, such as color choice, line and brush stroke quality and media size and preparation, are limited in the amount of information they can supply for de-centered and highly conceptual art objects. Dykstra points out that these facets represent artistic intent in a ‘limited and specific sense,’ and that “the artist's investment is expressed in the choice, preparation, and application of the media, not in the nature of

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29 Cornelia Weyer, "Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art," VDR Beiträge 41, no. 2 (2006), 44.
31 Ibid., 215.
32 Ibid., 215.
the media itself.” In this sense, one could argue that no work is sufficiently evaluated based on its material state, whether the artist is known or living or not; one can see then how important it is to consider aspects outside the artworks for installation art. Material-oriented installation works contain a persistent competition between their physical and conceptual facets, which necessitates a continual evaluation of the works in the traditional sense through scientific analysis as well as the more recent practices of the involvement of living artists and the consideration of the artist’s sanction.

Before discussing the artists’ sanction as related to installation art, one example stands out as demonstrating the importance of researching intent as related even to individual artworks. An example of the limitations of more traditional approaches, that ignore the artist’s intent, would be the differing intentions expressed through various works in the artistic oeuvre of the artist Sol LeWitt. The quintessential conceptual artist, LeWitt’s most famous works are his wall paintings, which are constituted by the concept of the work rather than its physical execution and can indeed be repainted in different spaces. The works privilege the idea over the form, and as part of the works are conceived of by the artist but executed by other people. Though LeWitt is known primarily for these works, which fundamentally question authenticity, by their very nature, not all of his work can be interpreted this way. A fundamental mistake was made when a museum owning one of his sculptures entitled *Standing Open Structure* from 1964 inquired to the artist whether the work could be refabricated (like many of his other works) overseas rather than being loaned to a European venue. LeWitt did not agree to the refabrication and reportedly responded by saying “Would you repaint a Mondrian?” Kimberly Davenport, Director of the Rice University Art Gallery in Houston, when writing about this instance said “thoughts of practicality led to an overgeneralization of LeWitt’s conceptual stance and generated the conjecture that any of his works may be reproduced and still be authentic” and that “although purporting to be in keeping with the artist’s intent, this approach disregarded the simple fact that among LeWitt’s oeuvre are unique pieces.” In this instance, it was crucial to solving the issue that the artist was still alive, and a gross misinterpretation of the work could have been the disastrous result otherwise. For his sculpture pieces, the artist’s intent is in every way for the original work to be preserved and for authenticity to be maintained, while for other works this is not necessarily true. This example demonstrates both the importance of intent for conservation as well as the necessity in many cases of communicating with the living artist to respect intent or finding other painstaking ways to do so.

**Artists’ Sanction**

Once the importance of artists’ intent is established, one must figure out then how that intent is established and defined particularly for works with conceptual aspects and where the meaning is not necessarily captured in the materiality of the work. For the material-oriented works discussed in this paper, communicated intent is fundamental to

33 Ibid., 215.
35 Ibid., 42.
36 Ibid., 43.
discovering whether degradation is an explicit or implicit aspect of a work made of non-traditional materials, as the different dispositions lead to different courses of treatment; works where explicit degradation is part of the meaning of the work would be left to degrade, while those where it is only implied by the artist’s use of a certain material would be restored and could even allow for replacement of parts. Intent, intrinsically related to a work’s meaning, may also be “positioned another place, requiring the conservator to look other places, and consider other contexts,” before making decisions about treatment. Searching for intent is a complicated and subjective process, however, that needs codification, or at least clarification; Davenport states how “central to the issue of intent is where to turn for authority. (...) The object can reveal this intent if, paradoxically, the intent has been understood and acted upon.”

One prominent way in which this intent is both understood and granted authority is through the growing practice of consulting with living artists about artworks well after they are fabricated and collected, a practice which necessitates the consideration of the *artists’ sanction*.

The *artists’ sanction*, as canonized by the aesthetics scholar Sherri Irvin in her essay “The Artists’ Sanction in Contemporary Art,” basically encompasses all of the external information regarding a work where meaning is not solely mediated by the material. It is a practical concept that is often used without reference to the specific term; conservators considered what an artist said and did in relation to a work well before it could be called their particular *sanction*. Sherri Irvin has, however, defined the term in a specific and cohesive way that is particularly relevant here to the discussion of installation art. In order to properly interpret contemporary artwork, Irvin argues, one must appeal to the *sanction*, as it reveals information about the artist’s intention at relevant points for the production of a work. This requires:

“That we examine the artist’s publicly accessibly actions and communications, the contexts in which they were delivered, and the conventions operative in those contexts to determine what the artist has sanctioned. The artist’s sanction may serve to fix the boundaries of his or her work, to determine whether a particular feature is relevant to the work’s interpretation, to establish in what genre the work belongs, and, in some cases, to determine whether it, *qua* artwork, has a particular feature or not. Under the right conditions, the artist has a degree of special authority over these matters: through his or her actions and communications in particular contexts, the artist can stipulate certain aspects of the nature of the work. In short, through his or her sanction the artist can endow the work with certain features, just as he or she endows it with certain features by manipulating the physical materials that will ultimately be displayed to the viewer.”

For works where the intent is not clear, particularly related to authenticity and degradation, appealing to the artist’s sanction is enough to help determine what possible future states an artwork should have, which leads to a clearer understanding of the work

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37 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 18.
38 Davenport, "Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time," 40.
and the conservation treatment that should be pursued.\textsuperscript{40} Through their specific sanction, artists can express which future states matter to their work in relation to their original intent.\textsuperscript{41} For artworks that expressly reject or undermine the preservation ethic, the artist’s sanction may be the fundamental way that the work is understood and therefore approached. The artist’s sanction, achieved through interaction with the living artist, is one way to approach the inherent problems of installation art as presented in the first chapter.

Through a specific example, Canadian artist Liz Magor’s \textit{Time and Mrs. Tiber} from 1976, Irvin discusses how the sanction is established and its ramifications in terms of meaning assessment and preservation practice. Magor’s work consists of a collection of recipes and jars of preserves the artist found in an abandoned house in British Columbia that belonged to a woman named Mrs. Tiber; the work also consists of preserves made by the artist [fig. 9].\textsuperscript{42} The work is at its basic level about age and our attempts to preserve ourselves, as the jars were found after Mrs. Tiber had passed away, and the artist was particularly conscious of the aspect of decay in the work. Irvin makes the case that Magor’s sanction is established through “her explicit communications with the institution holding control over the work,” and that the sanction determines how the work should ultimately be interpreted. Originally, when the preserves developed mold and other signs of degradation while on display at the National Gallery of Canada, the artist told conservators to throw the work in the garbage.\textsuperscript{43} Beyond the mold, the work had also developed botulism, a deadly bacteria that compromised the health of those viewing the works. The artist, however, later changed her mind about the work, and in a very clear example of an artist’s sanction, agreed to adding preservatives and better sealing to the jars that she had made herself.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, the artist decided that ultimately the work should not be thrown out when no longer exhibited, but should be transferred to the museum’s study collection so that the work was in effect “preserved within the institution, though no longer put on display.”\textsuperscript{45}

Irving argues that the introduction of Magor’s sanction after the execution of the piece permanently changes the meaning of the work theoretically rather than simply physically. The idea that the artist’s later actions and communications that are ‘other than’ or separate from the initial creation or presentation of the work can fundamentally change the work is quite radical, as the traditional reading of the artist’s sanction relied primarily on the \textit{sanctioned} formal features of a work.\textsuperscript{46} The artist’s sanction in relation to \textit{Time and Mrs. Tiber} retains decay as a core aspect of the conceptual feature of the work while changing the desired endpoint for the work; the changing of the endpoint changes the nature of the work, however, as well as its ultimate interpretation. Irving states:

“It is interesting to consider Magor’s decisions about the work in light of such a reading. Her initial view was that the work should be allowed to decay at its own

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 316.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 316.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 316.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 317.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 317.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 317.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 319-20.
\end{itemize}
natural pace, with minimal intervention by conservators... An adjunct to this attitude was that the work would eventually "die," at which point it should leave the realm of art (signified by the museum itself) just as humans leave the realm of life."47

With the established sanction, however, aggressive conservation measures, with the goal being to retain the object indefinitely for study, become acceptable. This changes the reading of the work, such that "we might say, based on this new sanction, that the work undermines the message it purports to deliver, showing instead that both artist and institution are in denial about their ultimate relationships to time."48 Though those unaware of the artist’s sanction in this case might continue to read the work in the same way, theoretically the time-line of the work has been fundamentally altered in a way that is both acceptable to the institution and the artist.

The importance of the artist’s sanction as defined by Irvin is twofold; it dignifies to greater extent the artist’s role in the treatment of the work after its execution, and also provides a standard for assessing difficult works where meaning resides outside the the materials. Irving points out that unless otherwise indicated, change or degradation in works is usually "something to be ignored as we interpret the work, not something to be acknowledged and figured into our interpretations."49 This idea, that the artist’s opinions and actions are important to the meaning of a work, is not itself revolutionary. Steven Dykstra also expressed a similar dependence on the artist, saying “artists are prime beholders uniquely situated to be ideal interpreters of the meaning that their work conveys. (...) The artwork itself expresses something, but it is the artist who tells beholders what he or she means it to say. Contemporary art lends itself to this approach in the form of consultation with living artists."50 Irvin’s analysis of the artist’s sanction, however, positions the artist’s sanction as something that must be taken into account in its preservation, as it fixes features of an artwork in a specific way and thus “many contemporary artworks have special features that oblige us to consider the artist’s sanction if we are to apprehend them correctly."51 The involvement of the living artist through artist’s sanctions fundamentally redefines practices of reinstallation and conservation and is thus a transformative aspect of the new methodology.

This is not to say that Irving sees the artist’s sanction as constituting the artistic intent of a work, but rather as an aspect that can no longer be ignored as it is for so many traditional artworks (where there is not sanction to realistically be had). In fact, while she sees the sanction as having an important relationship to the intentionality of work, the sanction per her definition is an outgrowth of the intention of the work but the two are not identical.52 The sanction does not thus determine the intention but instead puts that intention into action in a specific way. The sanction thus determines for example whether flaking paint or visible age is part of work of art, rather than an aspect that needs to be fixed, but does not fix the interpretation of that visible age in a stead-fast manner. It is this very sanction that determines, particularly for installations, how presentation relates

47 Ibid., 324.
48 Ibid., 324.
49 Ibid., 317.
50 Dykstra, "The Artist’s Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation,"207.
52 Ibid., 321.
to the meaning of a work. It is because of the sanction that the fundamental differences between artworks are often articulated, as the work of artist Cildo Meireles can be re-installed as he “does not tie his work to a specific site, seeking instead to work against the aura of the unique work of art,” while the work of the Ann Hamilton cannot be re-installed because they are “intrinsically related to the specific history of the site in their structure and choice of materials.”

While conservators, art historians and the public are not obliged to accept the artist’s sanction without question, the aspects of the work that the term represents can no longer be ignored as external to the work or removed from the initial execution. That the artist must be consulted for the conservation and presentation of a work has, in effect, transformed accepted conservation methodology.

**Intent and Sanction in Relation to Authenticity**

The artist’s intent and sanction combine in contemporary conservation practice to determine the role of authenticity for artworks composed of non-traditional and ephemeral materials. The importance of authenticity for the traditional art object is a major point of contention and criticism in most contemporary art, which tends to question or attempt to invalidate the respect paid to original, authentic material. Often for works addressing authenticity the actual art object is irrelevant, and external documentation and instructions become necessary to define the boundaries of the actual work of art and how it is supposed to subsequently conceived and presented.

Though the value of authenticity for most contemporary artworks must be considered on a case-by-case basis, the common denominator for many of these artworks becomes the evaluation of both intent and artist’s sanction; without these considerations, the natural human tendency, as reflected by the art market and the cultural standing of many artworks, would call for the preservation of all important artworks regardless of what was intended by the artist.

A classic example where the artist’s sanction was disregarded is the treatment of Joseph Beuys’s *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* from 1963 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The sculpture itself consisted of cardboard box filled with a large mound of opaque and ivory colored fat on a piece of gray felt in the corner [fig. 10]. Felt and fat themselves had inherent conceptual meaning for Beuys’s, who had created an origins myth around his work where he was cared for by nomadic peoples, who wrapped him in felt and fat to keep him warm, after crashing a war plane during World War II. Beuys utilized fat in his works because it represented the kind of transformation that he experienced during this mythical rescue, as it can be both solid and liquid and in between. When the fat began to melt in *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* due to environmental conditions, however, and to form a greasy stain surrounding it that had previously not been there, a conservator at the Stedelijk Museum decided to replace the fat with a more stable and different compound. Though it could be argued the conservator thought he

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was staying true to the intention of the work, in maintaining the state of the work when it was acquired, in truth Beuys work is explicitly about the kinds of transformations that *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* displayed while melting; Beuys himself said “my spatial designs are neither settled nor finished. The processes continue autonomously: chemical reactions, fermentation, colouration, dehydration [sic]. Everything changes.”\(^{58}\) Beuys, who was alive at the time, would have vehemently disagreed with the actions taken, as he loved the signs of aging and change and, as the art historian Robert Storr has said, was an artist who made an “aesthetic out of the idea of the relic.”\(^{59}\) At the same time, almost separate from the work, the replacement of the fat questions the fundamental authenticity and thus market value of the work. Kees Herman Aben, a conservator who worked at the Stedelijk, stated in relation to this example what the discussions of meaning and artist’s sanction in this paper have attempted to show: that “there is nothing self-apparent about the conservation of the works of art we inherit. As matters stand, material authenticity is still at the core of the code of ethics so highly valued in the profession of conservation.”\(^{60}\) While this example can be seen as a tragic failure of the interpretive side of conservation, there is something to be said for the consideration of works in the art historical canon, the rights of the public stakeholder and the role of conservation to preserve works for posterity.

**The Replica in Contemporary Art Conservation**

The ultimate dilemma of conservation, attempting to reconcile artist’s intent with the fundamental tenets of the preservation ethic and authenticity, in combination with incredulous view of authenticity on the part of much contemporary art, warrants a reconsideration of the ‘replica’ and its potential function in preserving non-traditional and ephemeral artworks. If had been Beuys’s intent that *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* be maintained at the state it was when it entered the Stedelijk Museum’s collection, could the work then be seen as the real artwork rather than a partial reconstruction? While this discussion largely relates to western constructs of authenticity and tolerance for change, a subject this paper cannot realistically address comprehensively, a discussion of the replica in relation to conservation will prove useful for later analysis and will illuminate its relevance for installation art specifically.

The replica has retained a poor reputation due to the fact that before the advent of conceptual art the material of most artworks was valued as the primary record of the artistic act through its contact with the hand of the artist. Historically, the replica has served educative purposes, so students and aristocrats could see works during times of limited ability to travel, and as a last-resort, preventative conservation method, as with the placement in 1910 of a replica of Michelangelo’s *David* in the Piazza Della Signoria in Florence to protect the original statue. Feilden wrote in his treatise on architectural conservation that “if valuable cultural property is being damaged irretrievably or is threatened by its environment, it may have to be moved to a more suitable environment. A reproduction is thus often substituted in order to maintain the unity of a site or

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 109.


\(^{60}\) Aben, ”Conservation of Modern Sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,” 108.
Replacement of individual parts, which is different from full-scale replication, is a much more common conservation practice and for many conservators constitutes a more ethical approach because the replaced parts must be integrated with the work as a whole but maintain obvious visual distinction upon closer inspection. Replacement is a particular relevant aspect of conservation for material-oriented installation works, which are created from a cohesive unity of individual parts, whose meaning can be seriously undermined by absence or malfunctioning of part. In consultation with the artist’s intent and sanction, it is not uncommon for original materials have no longer represent the intended conveyance and meaning of the work. This logic begs the question, however, of whether a work isn’t considered a replica when each part is slowly replaced to the point that every part of the original material fabric has been replaced? In such a case would replacement be considered any more legitimate than replication, as the latter would preserve the original material fabric to a greater extent?

The concept of the replica is complicated and convoluted, as it seems to both preserve material authenticity through its creation but undermine it through its presentation. When a work’s exposure during exhibition immediately threatens its lifespan, or when a work is so degraded it is unexhibitable, by logical extension the replica serves a very useful and even legitimate role. As Storr has written, it is an ingrained human deception to assume that art is in any form an undying repository of memory and that it is within the realm of possibility to preserve it for posterity; accordingly it is only nature that “every generation sees the decay or destruction of far more art than it conserves. This is no less true today than in the past.” Should society then, in the name of authenticity, allow for the inevitable disappearance of some of its most valuable treasures based on a constructed notion of inherent value? There is also the public stakeholder to consider, as the viewer and the canon of art history both crave the consumption of actual physical artworks. The author Óscar Tusquets believes, as recounted and translated by Muñoz-Viñas, that there certainly are instances where a replica has more to offer than the original, saying:

“Wouldn’t I better appreciate Leonardo’s genius by leisurely contemplating a very good life-size copy of the Gioconda, with no protective glass, which is lightly varnished, as the original was, than being in the Louvre, pushed back and forth, hardly discerning the original behind several layers of bullet-proof glass that vividly reflect the group [of tourists] who unceasingly shoot their flashes even though it is forbidden?”

The educational merit and preservative potential of the deceptive and successful replica could be debated could be logically proven the most effective and ethical method of conservation and yet, audiences would still crave the original. It is not aesthetics that

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62 Ibid., 28.
64 Storr, "Immortalité Provisoire," 35.
motivates this desire, but rather the transcendental qualities of the original and the uniqueness generated by history and authenticity.

Replication and Artist’s Sanction

A completely different situation, however, arises when the replication of artworks is sanctioned by the artist. The lack of privileged states for works with explicit or implicit degradation often prevents any definitive assessment of the proper amount of age a work should acquire, and there is thus even validity in replicating works when rigorous investigation into artist’s intent and sanction support such actions. For works where the current state no longer conveys the meaning or intent of the work, replication is considered a legitimate course of action that can even be undertaken in conjunction with the artist or actually performed by the artist. Conservator Louise Cone asks “can you recreate or reconstruct original intention, even if it’s the artists themselves who do the work? I do not see this as a problem, as long as the original authentic material holds no value or meaning for the artwork (or the artist).” As long as there is a reasoned consideration of the artist’s perspective and the particular meaning and intent for specific works, the replica can become a powerful tool in re-presenting and in ways preserving non-traditional and ephemeral artworks. Again, the artist’s sanction and contact with the living artist become fundamental aspects of this process, as the conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro at the Whitney Museum of American Art has said “it is only artists who validate art, i.e. something that stands for art in a museum … others might exercise or claim the authority – others including studio assistants, fabricators, museum or gallery staff (curators/conservators/art handlers), estates, and collectors – but, in the end, authenticity rests only with the artist.” The replica occupies a precarious place in contemporary art where authenticity and the privilege of materials is fundamentally questioned through many ephemeral artworks, as this does not mean those artists necessarily surrender connections or authority over the actual works.

There are many types and functions of replicas which affect how they are viewed by the artist, the art institutions and the public. These distinctions, concisely and comprehensively outlined by Mancusi-Ungaro in the article “Authority and Ethics,” are important in their execution and theoretical analysis:

1. Replica made by the artist.
2. Replica as documentation and didactic aid to understanding, i.e. a document of lost, irreparably damaged, never made work of art.
3. Replica as replacement of individual parts – not unlike ‘inpainting’ of damaged or lost parts of a painting.
4. Replica that gives life to a concept by capturing its magic and aura. This work might be put on public display and could potentially over time make its way to the marketplace.
5. Replica that assumes the status of art by taking something the artist made but never considered as art.

66 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 57.
6. Replica that represents something the artist wanted to make and would have done so but never did.\footnote{Mancusi-Ungaro, "Authority and Ethics."}

Several real-world examples fit these categories nicely. The artist Nam June Paik established minimal criteria for the reinstallation of some of his works, including the work *TV Garden* from 1974 (recreated 2002), which includes the juxtaposition of televisions and plants to communicate the jarring contrast between nature and technology [fig. 11].\footnote{Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 171.} The artist has widely acknowledged his approval of curatorial flexibility in regards to his works, which includes their ability to choose aspects of his works for reinstallation, in this case the plants and televisions. He has even said “I don’t like to have complete control – that would be boring. What I learned from John Cage is to enjoy every second by decontrol.”\footnote{Ibid., 171.}

There are various aspects of the types of replicas in this example, including the *Replica as replacement of individual parts* and *Replica that gives life to a concept by capturing its magic and aura*. The Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin’s lost model of *The Monument to the Third International* was famously re-created by curators in Stockholm in 1968, Paris in 1979, Sweden in 1980 and Moscow in 1993 [fig. 12].\footnote{Mancusi-Ungaro, "Authority and Ethics."} This form of replication serves a fundamentally documentative role as an *aid to understanding* and education, and is not acknowledged as an autonomous work of art. Then there is the replica as re-fabricated by the artist or artist’s assistants, as with Matthew Barney’s work *The Cabinet of Baby Fay La Foe* at MoMA where conservators supervised the artist’s studio workers in the ultimate remaking and fixing of the various parts [fig. 13].\footnote{Coddington, Jim. Interview by Lizzie Frasco. Digital recording. New York. NY., 13 February 2009.}

The varying level of involvement and sanction on the part of the artist for these examples is irrelevant if the appropriate information is made known in the appropriate circumstances, and the works are identified as ‘educational replicas,’ etc. For the Matthew Barney piece, the involvement and sanction of the artist, as well as the artwork’s conceptual nature, was enough to validate the replication of the work. To a certain extent, it does not matter who or how the work is remade, as long as it is done with the authority of the artist’s sanction. Jim Coddington, who was involved in the conservation of this work, responded to the claim that this kind of replication lacks a certain amount of transparency:

\begin{quote}
JC: It does and it doesn’t. In that we now have very complete notes in our conservation treatment files of what happened, of the correspondence and so on. It is and in that sense it is perfectly analogous to a traditional condition and treatment report. It’s just that the actual treatment was undertaken by somebody else. But the notes and the documentation of it is pretty much the same.

EF: What about the re-fabrication of elements though, is that then done . . .

JC: That I do believe potentially becomes more problematic in the future... this essentially was a work that needed to be re-fabricated. We talked about it
\end{quote}
Nam June Paik, *TV Garden*, 1974, MoMA.
Model of Tatlin’s lost *The Monument to the Third International.*
Matthew Barney, *The Cabinet of Baby Fay La Foe*, 2000, MoMA.
with the artist in his studio and decided that we were going to do a better, you
know something that was closer in appearance to the original. We were going to
change the materials, because the materials had degraded, so to remake it one-to-
one would have just had the problem back to our laps a few years later. So we
were looking for materials that would have greater longevity, that had for all
intents and purposes, had the same appearance. So that was the conservation
brief put before us, and could we fabricate this to look so much the same that it
is, for all intents and purposes, is the same object, or the original object again.

The distinction here is that the work was degraded to an extent that it required
replication, to remain in anyway faithful to the artist’s intent, and that the process was
sanctioned and even desired by the artist himself. Though she recognizes the need for
regulation and standardization of this practice, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro also believes
“what will really distinguish the replica is the intent” [Appendix A]. The potential
regulation of such a practice would then have to identify what the intent of the replica
was and appropriately designate it thusly, as commercial or educational for example.

Two examples of the artist sanctioned replica, Janine Antoni’s *Gnaw* from 1992
and Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Pins)* from 2003, demonstrate both the successes and
relative failures of the replica as currently conceived and practiced. Both sculptural and
yet clearly installed works, the works could be considered sculpture meaning they could
be considered either sculptures based on their containment as objects or installations
based on their contingency during exhibition. Antoni’s *Gnaw*, consisting of a six-hundred
pound cube of chocolate and a five-hundred pound cube of lard which the artist sculpted
into shapes with her teeth, has a fundamental contingency due to the inherent vice of the
materials utilized [fig. 14]. While the chocolate cube has survived multiple exhibitions
and is stored in specially lined crates, the lard cube decomposes and fragments while on
display and thus must be re-made each time [fig. 15]. In consultation with the artist,
staff at MoMA created an aluminum cast of the original lard cube that includes the teeth
marks so that it can be recast faithfully. The work is marked primarily by the ‘tenaciously repeated’ process of biting, which transforms everyday materials into
expressive sculptures. For Antoni, the specific materials used are wrought with
meaning, as they are “part of an intense and often extended encounter between her own
body and a particular set of circumstances,” the authenticity of the original materials
themselves are not necessarily where the meaning lies. However, the meaning of the
work does lie in the visceral experience communicated by the teeth marks themselves, as
Antoni has said through these traces “the viewer is brought back to the process I went
through to make the work.” It is questionable then whether the re-cast bite-marks have
the same expressive content and provide the same visceral experience for the viewer as
the originals, which would have had a grainer texture which the re-casting smoothes over
[fig. 16]. There is also a disconnect between the physical nature of the original chocolate

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75 In an interview with the author, Glenn Wharton said “the MoMA made molds for the Janine Antoni and
this was all developed in collaboration with her and the sculptural conservators. So we now have molds,
and whenever it’s exhibited we cast lard in molds.”
77 Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art, 137.
78 Ibid., 137.
79 Ibid., 139.
Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992 (detail), MoMA.
cube versus the re-cast lard cube. Though not necessarily a failure per se of the use of replication, especially since the artist sanctioned it, this case does show the limitations of current practice. One wonders whether the biting process couldn’t be repeated each time the work is installed, whether by the artist or not, and whether the authenticity of the bite marks recorded by the artist matters more than the expressive nature of the work.

In sharp contrast to Gnaw, Donovan’s Untitled (Pins) is remade each time due to structural necessity rather than material vice. The work consists of a large cube cast of hundreds of metal needles cast into a free-standing shape, and like half of Gnaw is fundamentally contingent on its exhibition as it cannot be moved and is dismantled when taken off view [fig. 17]. And it is in fact part of the meaning of the work that it is dismantled each time, as the artist intends for the works to be unfixed so they can ‘transcend their materiality’ and trigger “a visceral relation, not only to the elements of [their] construction but to the allusions their collective volume creates.”80 The point of the work is the coherence of otherwise loose and uncontrollable elements and the fact that “it’s really friction and gravity that bring the piece together and make it work.”81 The recasting is thus out of necessity and artist’s intent, as the breakdown of the clear outline of the square would have adverse effects on that sense of cohesiveness [fig. 18]. All this points to the fact that the original pins, while important in the execution of the work, do not carry any inherent meaning themselves. While Donovan does see the material of the work as important, as the work does not just exist on paper, the pins themselves can be rotated in and out depending on their condition without any adverse affect on the work.82

When I discussed this work with curator Jen Mergel from the ICA, she stated in relation to the specificity of the pins:

**JM:** They can be replaced. Certainly if for some reason we lost a lot of these pins, or someone stole a lot of these pins, or anything like that, her specification is that they should be flat head, not round head, we want to approximate the same length, the same metallic finish, so some are nickel-plated so they have a shininess to them. So it’s trying to achieve as close as we possibly can the originally materiality of what she had used, but it’s not, the art is not in those specific pins, it’s just in their materiality. Which can be reproduced, because, and this is the big point, Tara’s work is based on manufacturing materials right, it’s important because she knows the sources that she is using, it’s not just raw lead, it’s not just raw clay, these are things that achieve their unique qualities through manufacturing processes, and that means that they are ubiquitous, their out there.

**EF:** She doesn’t want them to become relics, the pins themselves. What would happen if they stopped making these certain pins?

**JM:** We asked her that too, if they stop making these certain pins, but say another companies makes a similar type of pin, does the piece stop existing, or do we go with the other type of pin? She is interested in, “it’s fine if there is, again another flat head pin not from that specific company, it’s not as if she’s wed

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80 Tara ; Baume Donovan, Nicholas; Mergel, Jen; Weschler, Lawrence, *Tara Donovan*, 1st ed. (Boston: Monacelli Press ; Institute of Contemporary Art, 2008), 8.
82 Mergel, Jen. Interview by Lizzie Frasco.
contractually to any of these companies, she’s just trying to do you a favor by, she’s just an easy way to get a source for these materials. So she’s done her research on getting the materials, but again she’s very practical when it comes to: “this is a manufactured item, I’ve sourced it, so you should be able to source it too, this is not some mysterious secret” [Appendix A].

Replication as sanctioned by Tara Donovan is thus completely different from that of Janine Antoni in two main ways: the replication of the work is part of the original concept of Untitled (Pins), while it was conceived of afterwards in the case of Antoni’s work, and the specific existence of the materials for Donovan’s work do not play as large of a role in her work as in Antoni’s. While much of the raw visceralty of Antoni’s works is dependent on the visibly worked surface of the lard and chocolate, which clearly reference teeth marks, the execution of Donovan’s work is not dependent on the original pins. Antoni’s work is in ways irreparably transformed by the interchange of materials for the lard cube, while Donovan’s work is not specific to any set of pins. While the replica is logical in both situations, it is clearly less problematic for Donovan’s work.

While the use of replicas for contemporary art has gained a certain amount of theoretical validation and momentum in use, the practice retains a certain amount of logical criticism beyond those perfected instances of artist and institutional collaboration. Strictly speaking, the re-making of Gnaw and Untitled (Pins) is a form of replication, especially since the re-making is not dependent on the use of the original authentic materials. The practice as exercised in these two instances, however, is quite different from the un-sanctioned replication of works and their subsequent placement on display. These kinds of replications, such as Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International mentioned above, present theoretical problems for many who see the original work of art as having that ‘aura’ described by Walter Benjamin in 1936. In his famous essay, Benjamin discusses the ramifications of the rampant and mass-production of images, where objects and images are brought into the close range of the viewer, and how the reproductions are fundamentally different from what was once seen by the naked eye. He concluded that what “withers in the age of reproduction is the aura of the work of art… by making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.” The ‘reproduction’ can be thought of as similar theoretically to the replica art as Benjamin states:

“Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.”

The elusive ‘aura’ has affected the entire twentieth century debate pertaining to authenticity in fine arts, even when many contemporary artists position their conceptual aims around the denial or destruction of that ‘aura’ of the privileged work of art by

83 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung 5, no. 1 (1936), Section III.
84 Ibid., Section II.
85 Ibid., Section III.
utilizing mass-produced materials in their artwork. The cult of the original has pull and sway encapsulated by Robert Storr, who has written that “the direct encounter with unique works of art in whatever state we find them is something that cannot be replaced by surrogate images that transforms dense visual phenomena into high-resolution counterfeits.”\(^{86}\) The fear of the replica runs deep in a post-modern society where the boundaries of art and value are continually being pushed and obliterated. Institutions collecting art, however, have the difficult task of embracing the replica when necessary and rejecting it when avoidable. Maggie Iversen, at the University of Essex, encapsulates this contradiction by asking how museums can walk the delicate line of preserving works through their replication but somehow still striving for that punch that stems from the ‘aura.’\(^{87}\) Though the replica is far from perfection, it seems its most successful use relies on the artist’s sanction.

**Conservation as a ‘truth operation’**

The de-centered art object, the lack of privileged states, the artist’s sanction and the use of the replica all question the classical conception of conservation as a method of revealing the ‘true nature’ of an object or the ‘truth’ about art objects. This is particularly relevant in the context of changing principles and practice of conservation methodology in relation to contemporary art. At an important 1994 conference on conservation entitled the “Dahlem Workshop on Durability and Change: Should We Take it All So Seriously?” D. E. Cosgrove wrote:

>“Conservation and preservation (let alone restoration) have no meaning or purpose without a concept of the real, the original, the authentic. The real in this respect may be variously defined as the initial state of the object, the state of the object intended by its creator, some intermediate state between its origin and the present: all of these and others have been taken as constituting the truth which conservation of an object should aspire to sustain.”\(^{88}\)

For much of contemporary art, and much of installation art, however, the idea or concept can take precedence over the remaining physical material, allowing for much more aggressive and perhaps drastic conservation methods than would have been traditionally accepted. Muñoz-Viñas also discusses the notion that conservation is a ‘truth-enforcement’ operation, and how this idea is dangerous. This implication, that only ‘true’ aspects of an artwork can be revealed, supports the traditional definition that the nature of an object is based on “natural features, something that pertains to the physical world, something that is external to subjects, and thus, something that is intrinsically, objectively real and authentic.”\(^{89}\) As has been demonstrated, however, there are many circumstances where authenticity is being fundamentally questioned and becomes almost irrelevant.

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\(^{86}\) Storr, "Immortalité Provisoire," 39.

\(^{87}\) Mancusi-Ungaro, "Authority and Ethics." [Quote by Maggie Iversen]


What is the ‘true nature’ then for a work like Janine Antoni’s *Gnaw*, where the work takes on a limitless combination of different states during its exhibition [fig. 19]? How would one attempt to conserve the true nature of Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Pins)*, when the material fabric of the work is irrelevant to its identity? This classical notion of a ‘truth-operation,’ where the physical nature is privileged in a highly objective way, must be questioned for works like these that necessitate a highly subjective and personal treatment based on their individual conceptual nuances and peculiarities.

**Fetishization of the Material**

The danger of the idea of conservation as a fundamentally objective ‘truth-enforcement’ operation is expressed in what has been termed in conservation literature the *fetishization of the material*. This term can be understood as a intense and almost irrational appreciation for the authentic material elements of a work of art, which are perceived as conferring it with uniqueness, to the point that it becomes a fetish or unhealthy obsession. Muñoz-Viñas says “it is because of this material fetichism [sic] that, for most Western people, the conservation of the material components of an object is a worthwhile endeavour [sic]” and that though replications or reproductions may be objectively similar they are not perceived as “real objects, or … objects whose material components are the original ones.” As discussed in the second chapter, the fact that conservators are trained to deal primarily with physical objects becomes an issue as this neglects characteristics specific to conceptual and ephemeral artworks. While this aspect of conservation education is necessary, as it teaches the respect for objects and the consideration of the parts as well as the whole, it also in some ways “fetishise[s] [sic] the material-technical side of the work of art.” What is detrimental about the material fetish is not that it devalues conservation methods such as replication, but that it can jeopardize necessary or beneficial conservation treatments because they do not view the original fabric in such an extreme manner. Because a “conservative attitude towards preservation may damage the work more by insisting on preserving rather than replacing parts,” conservation methodology and the role of the conservator have necessarily begun to evolve and changed.

**Reconsidering Authenticity**

The theoretical issues presented in this chapter form the foundation and impetus for the changing role of the conservator in the last twenty years. The intent behind ephemeral artworks has lead to a fundamental change to a profession where ‘letting material go’ would at one point have been seen, and by some is still seen, as blasphemous. By new standards, the “original (material) work should be the point of departure for reinstallation.” Sloggett has effectively described this development:

90 Ibid., 86.
91 Weyer, “Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art,” 44.
92 Cone, “Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 57.
“Preservation of ideas, per se, is not, ostensibly, the primary concern of the conservator, and the interpretation of the intellectual and historical components of an artwork has usually been considered the domain of the curator, education officer, or exhibitions staff. The issue raised by the conservation of conceptual art, however, highlight the function of interpretation as a relevant and necessary professional activity for conservators. (...) In these cases, issues of context and use, not condition, set parameters for the meaning for the object.”  

Conservator Carol Stringari, when writing specifically on installation art, has said for this genre of art “I sincerely hope that respect for the creative process and its spontaneity is not lost. The fact that art is not always created in a rational, orderly fashion is fortunate… The harmonious whole and not each singular element is what constitutes a successful work. When this Gestalt is lacking, it may be necessary to ‘retire’ the installation.” The external nature of the meaning of many installation works has called for a much more interdisciplinary methodology that considers many elements that were once considered external to conservation as a discipline.

While authenticity will always be part of the value of unique works of art, as the connection of works to their creators breeds desire for the original, further questioning of its authority and value is inevitable on the part of audiences viewing contemporary art. If the artist does not care about the material authenticity of a work, why should the audience? Why should the institutions attempt to preserve their very authenticity care? Authenticity in art implies an undisputed origin that creates a direct relationship to the original artist, who thus is an agent in conferring a work with authenticity and value. If an artist maintains the authenticity of the concept behind a work of art, a common occurrence in contemporary art, then perhaps audiences and institutions should begin to let go of the idea that works can only be materially authentic. The less artists care about authenticity, the more it is revealed as a cultural construct where “what is authentic is the tradition of maintaining it [authenticity].”

Glenn Wharton discussed this cultural phenomenon in our interview:

EF: Do you think contemporary art, with its shifting boundaries, is also going to have to change as what we define as authentic? And how we value things? Because for a video that exists in a series of six, what is the piece – is one more valuable than the other? It seems we have to give room here. Right?

GW: Yeah, we can no longer talk about the authentic object, because we know too much. We can’t say that that’s the same object that an artist originally created. It’s altered physically, and in the case of installation art or time-based media, it may have nothing to do with the original technology even. So we have to question that and we have to tease it out, or what is it then. And that’s one of the questions I ask the artists – what is it? What is this work of art? You know in

terms. And like I said I’m trying to answer questions that people are going to ask in the future, and I don’t know what those questions are, so let’s just get the artist to say, what is it? And how do you want people to experience it? So that when something happens to it and a decision has to be made, you can go back to that. I think it’s really important to realize that authenticity itself is socially constructed and cannot, can never be understood objectively.

The changing methodology of conservation reflects this kind of deconstruction of authenticity, as it places more emphasis on the *authenticity* of the artist’s sanction than on the work itself. There is also evidence that attitudes are beginning to change; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro told me that creativity is not about the physical material but about what that material *evokes*, and both Tatja Scholte and Alberto de Tagle from the ICN said that even when every part of an object has been replaced, it remains the same object [Appendix A]. Though it is not the goal of this paper to question or explain the cultural construct of authenticity, the discussion of theoretical issues demonstrates that the artworks are doing a fine job of questioning authenticity themselves.
Chapter 4 | Changing Methodology

Need for New Methods

As Jim Coddington has said, all art is at some point contemporary art. It therefore follows that all art at some point pushed “the boundaries of known material preservation.” While it could be argued that the challenges facing those attempting to preserve contemporary art are in line with the issues facing all art at one time, the previous chapters have attempted to elucidate some of the unique challenges facing contemporary art and particularly installation art, which have been at the core of conservation discourse over the last decade. A discussion of the developments in conservation methodology and practice is pertinent here in order to provide the reader with basic knowledge and understanding of a very specialized and discrete discipline. It is not intended, however as a comprehensive history or evaluation of the specific methodologies, but highlights the major thematic developments that have marked the evolution of conservation in relation to contemporary art.

Originating with the historical practice of restoration, conservation is a term that has expanded to include a variety of objects and categories, from contemporary art to cultural landscapes to the general category of ‘cultural heritage.’ It is a discipline whose techniques and principles can and will readily adapt to changing theoretical and social needs, and from this perspective the changes made in relation to contemporary art are in line with the natural growth of any discipline confronting new technology and innovations. A certain amount of compromise is inherent to conservation as a cultural construct, as museum professionals must collectively attempt fidelity to artistic intent, the preservation ethic as well as societal and cultural values that artworks acquire overtime. The decision-making process itself is marked by negotiating a balance between preserving authentic material, restoring works to their intended visual appearance and maintaining the proper amount of visual unity while differentiating between original and restored aspects. Renée van de Vall at Maastricht University recognizes three general aspects that complicate conservation: the “awareness of incommensurable values, the necessity of compromise and the historic variations in preferences [of conservation treatments].” This includes, for example, the difficulty of measuring economic and aesthetic value as opposed to functional capabilities of a work of art, as there are no common standards for measuring such variables. The methods developed, thus, are more general guiding principles that can be applied to what ends up being an infinite number of scenarios for works of art, rather than prescriptive or specific rules. The intent was to “to conceive as completely as possible the features relevant for understanding a work,

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2 Ibid., 11-17.
4 Ibid., 197.
5 Ibid., 198.
assessing the problem and weighing the likely consequences of various conservation measures,” and conservation thus remains at its core case-by-case in its application. 

In addition to the theoretical re-considerations of authenticity as a main principle of conservation, in practice the strict adherence to the original fabric is often not even a realistic option for installation art. For works that are collected and can be re-installed, there are often basic logistical problems that face such works that exist as a conjunction of objects rather than as fixed objects. In *Installations and Problems of Preservation*, Carol Stringari outlines some fundamental difficulties in re-installing installation works: often materials may have been used up, misplaced or degraded, the living artist may disagree with the institutions and desire to ‘re-conceive’ works, ephemeral materials may need replacement or re-integration into a work, presence and sanction of the living artist can create problems, and the fact that the installation may no longer be in the space in which it was originally installed must be confronted. An effective example of the difficulties of re-installation can be seen in the work of the artist Anish Kapoor, whose radiant and evocative pigment-covered sculptures often require some degree of touch-up when exhibited. The sculptures have internal bases made of porous materials, such as sandstone, and are ‘impregnated’ with vividly colored powdered pigments to create an effect of transcending the contours of the object and of inner radiance. It is important that the works be absolutely absent of hand marks and other imperfections, so they must often be touched up before exhibition, a highly ritualistic process which the artist often completes himself. The works with the most applied pigment are inevitably disturbed when reinstalled, so immense coordination is needed for both installation and de-installation. Lastly, as with the work *1000 Names* from 1979-80 owned by the Boston ICA, the artist requires the pigments be of a continued standard quality, despite the fact that their manufacture is often discontinued within the life of the piece [fig. 20]. Worse, the artist recognizes the shortage of the pigment without offering any method of dealing with the issue when it runs out, a fact which could perhaps contribute in a convoluted way to the meaning of the works. This work demonstrates clearly a variety of issues of re-installation, from the logistics of moving the piece to the difficulties of working with the living artist.

The difficulties of re-installing works often render irrelevant certain accepted conservation principles while simultaneously establishing new ones. The fact that installation works must re-installed in a layout over a space itself, unlike traditional self-

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6 Ibid., 199.
7 Urlus elaborates, saying: “Many installations involve ephemeral materials and are meant to be temporary or site specific, and insufficient information regarding the installation – on both a material and conceptual level – makes it difficult to reinstall them. It became clear that on every level problems come with the very broad and complex field of installations and environments. In attempts to reinstall, every case should be judged individually.” Ariadne Urlus, “Proceedings,” in *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, ed. Ijsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (Amsterdam: The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 346.
10 Ibid., 31.
Fig. 20

contained objects, leaves room for subtle and accidental deviation from the original presentation of the work. Conservator Ijsbrand Hummelen from the ICN in the Netherlands explains that:

“In the event of a new realization and re-installation, there is a different configuration between concept and realization. The biggest difference is that the result of the original realization is already known: a new realization always takes place later, after the first realized. (...) A new realization is a representation of a representation, and as we shall see also here many variations are possible between the concept and the realization.”

Thus, the principle of minimal intervention can be rendered both figuratively and literally obsolete. There is a substantial intervention in the state of the work by its very re-installation, and farther-reaching interventions in the material state of a work are necessary for it to function correctly in the exhibition setting. Cornelia Weyer acknowledged this commonality, saying “installation art as an object of restoration resembles objects of monument conservation: as context-bound, often physically enterable, multipart, functioning works, both obey similar constraints. Minimal interventions are in either case often not practicable.” These very same actions also undermine the other established conservation principle of reversibility, as far-reaching and effective interventions are rarely completely reversible (and need not be, because they often allow the work to continue to be presented). An indifference to such traditional tenets, however, may allow for freer interpretations with works along with the institution of additional guiding principles.

The need in conserving many contemporary artworks to consider meaning residing outside the physical material of a work has led to an evolution of the more qualitative side of preservation. Conservator Kees Herman Aben, writing in the book From Marble to Chocolate in 1995, stated that conserving modern sculpture raises new issues precisely because “the aims of contemporary artists and the materials they use are less obvious than in the past.” This is particularly true for ephemeral artworks that intentionally decay, as the appropriate amount of conservation is rarely discernible from the work itself, and for installations that require complex and unorthodox systems and elaborate documentation for re-installation. It has become common practice thus to consider every facet of meaning for a work, including artist’s sanction and intent, not simply in the conservation of a work but also in its handling, storage, exhibition and installation. Re-installation itself can have unintended interpretive effects, as the works

13 Cornelia Weyer, "Restoration Theory Applied to Installation Art," VDR Beiträge 41, no. 2 (2006), 44.
15 Louise Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art" (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2002), 8.
have relational meaning and “interrelationships are preconceived concepts that must be regained for every new installation,” and the job of the conservator thus becomes documenting the “rationale behind the relationship and idiosyncratic meanings in installations by an engaged communication with the artist.” Beyond the material difficulties facing installation art is the issue of context, which have become part of the fundamental meaning for many works of art. In order to preserve the inexplicit and non-tangible aspects of artworks, an unprecedented level of comprehensive documentation and information retention strategies have been instituted as part of the new methodology.

Changing Role of Documentation

While comprehensive documentation has been a fundamental part of more traditional conservation practice, the pivotal role it has come to play in conserving contemporary art is based on the evolution of its function rather than nature. Documentation of traditional objects was based more around the actual capturing of the state of an object before and after conservation treatments, which placed ultimate importance on historical evidence and the physical integrity of primarily self-contained objects. Documentation for contemporary art, and especially installation art, however, has become the primary means through which the artworks are re-presented and the deciding mechanisms for most future treatment of a work. Without an extremely thorough conception of the original state of the work, even when that is not necessarily the ideal state for the work, conservation as undertaken in relation to installation art becomes paralyzed. For installation art, documentation is primarily concerned with the original context for artworks in order to avoid future misinterpretation. Carol Stringari explains:

“To date, we have not been sufficiently aware of potential problems to be faced by curators, registrars, and conservators when the works are reassessed within a new and often incompatible context. Without proper documentation, one may encounter a subjective discourse between individuals who were not present when the work was conceived. That can lead to disaster for the ‘essence’ of the work.”

As Arthur Danto has written, documentation is crucial to the fundamental role of conservation, where museum professionals “have to decide what means what and why?” For installation artworks, many of which are completed for the first time in exhibition spaces, museum professionals have the privileged position of experiencing the original genesis of a work in its original context. The documentation of this first realization of a work, through video, photo, plans and drawings, has become the basic means through which conservators execute their primary roles of applying their knowledge of materials and techniques to anticipate and plan for future conservation issues.

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16 Ibid., 8.
19 Ibid., 3-11.
The ethical presentation in the present and treatment in the future of many installation works is contingent on the quality of documentation demonstrates the change in function. The indispensable nature of documentation for works contingent on the preservation of their external meaning sometimes manifests in artists presenting documentation as the work itself.\(^{20}\) Documentation has crucial and multivalent functions, filling the role of a “score or guideline for reinstallation of installations, recreation of concepts, replacement of ephemeral organic materials and electronic devices, (re)presentation of processes or re-enactment of performance.”\(^{21}\) While conservators cannot feasibly predict all the problems that might arise during future conservation treatments and re-installations, the documentation they provide allows for much easier and legitimate treatments than those works where documentation was lost or never created. The potential problems conservators identify, whether the ‘inherent vice’ of materials, structural issues or obsolescent technologies and materials, often determine the level and type of documentation. The conservator can also use “knowledge about the ageing of materials to predict changes in appearance of objects used in installations” and prepare plans accordingly.\(^{22}\) The question then arises of how this new methodology, placing primary emphasis on documentation, will be effectively standardized and applied. The qualitative research required for documentation can range in nature, from audio and video registrations to artists’ interviews to research on the sensorial aspects of the installation in relation to artists’ intent.\(^{23}\) In this sense, conservation could become fundamentally about archiving rather than treatment, though the material aspects of the art works would not be forgotten.

The documentation process starts when the work is acquired and continues during the lifespan of the work, with special attention paid to each re-installation of a work. The acquisition of a work itself is a declaration of the intention to preserve and exhibit it, and the process of documenting requires a consideration of all physical and non-tangible aspects of the work – its visual, audible and conceptual existence. Both the acquiring and vending parties participate in the documentation; the artist, artist’s studio and technicians as well as the conservators, curators, registrars and preparators. During this phase, the work can be thought of as acquiring a more ‘definitive form’ that serves as the basis for later re-installations, as the “documentalist tries to discover the thinking behind practices and working methods.”\(^{24}\) Louise Cone has identified in the practice of documentation the need for ‘information management’ strategies, where knowledge is not only retrieved from those who have it but also stored, applied and shared in an effective manner.\(^{25}\) The importance of documentation and its proper management concerns “capturing


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 5-6.

\(^{22}\) Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 42.

\(^{23}\) Scholte, "Capturing the Ephemeral and Unfinished : Archiving and Documentation as Conservation Strategies of Transient (as Transfinite) Contemporary Art," 5-6.

\(^{24}\) Hummelen, "Conception, Creation and Re-Creation : Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art," 34.

\(^{25}\) Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” 63.
experiences so that others do not have to relearn ‘what the enterprise already knows.’”26 Carol Stringari has created a comprehensive scheme of documentation specific to installation art, which includes photo-documentation of all stages of a work, a central archive for all reports, interviews with the artist, predicted conservation issues and information related to reinstallation [Appendix B].

**Involvement of the Living Artist**

Though the documentary process itself varies with institutions and nature of the artworks, the increased participation of the artist is arguably the most prominent innovation. Conservator Ijsbrand Hummelen has written that “the concept of the ‘artist as agency’ is becoming increasingly important in the conservation of contemporary art” due to the desire to capture the embodied knowledge of the artist when creating and installing the work.27 The subsequent “active participation by artists and other stakeholders” moves conservation away from the traditionally passive and detached assessment of artist’s intentions.28 The precarious nature of recreating relational meaning in what are often varying contexts necessitates some level of involvement and sanction by the artist, and it has become common practice for many art institutions to contact artists and their studios before re-installing or even conserving their works.29 Again, the level of involvement of the artist varies, with some refusing to participate while others take control of the process. The ongoing interaction with the artist, from the initial purchase of the work onwards, thus becomes the main subject of the documentation; not just artists, but also their assistants and technicians, are interviewed.30 The information collected often pertains to the specific materials used, how they will be replaced and to what degree they are allowed to age, as well as questions about the re-installation of works in different contexts. The artists are asked directly about their intentions for the work, as these are often difficult to extract from other first-hand accounts from the artist. Though the systems vary, they are also often asked to discuss the relative importance of the different parts a work, ranking them by number or other methods.31 Jim Coddington explains the main function if the interviews in relation to practice:

“This is where you take on the artist’s own statements. You ask the artist, “Is this amount of change acceptable or not?” And if it’s not, then, that’s not in and of itself sufficient evidence to go ahead and do something about it, we may feel that we can’t do anything about it, or to do anything about it would be such a large intervention that it becomes something fundamentally different, and then yes,

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29 Hummelen, "Conception, Creation and Re-Creation : Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art," 35.
30 Ibid., 34.
perhaps we entertain the idea of either not displaying it, or displaying it with some explanatory materials” [Appendix A].

The interviews are meant to gauge what the artist has already decided in terms of reinstallation protocol, including who should install the work and how, as well as how she or he would react to future circumstances including new installation spaces and the availability of materials.32 A version of the types of questionnaires used to interview artists, written by Cornelia Weyer and Gunnar Heydenreich, director and conservator at the Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf, can be found in Appendix C.

Despite the obvious benefits of the increased involvement of living artists, there are inevitable complications. Artists, like all people, grow and change intellectually and emotionally over their lifetimes, a fact which often affects their work and can lead to gradual conceptual changes in their bodies of work. The distance between the creation of the original work and the artist’s involvement in its care later on is something to be considered. The inclusion of the artist in the reinstallation and conservation process can sometimes lead to conflicts of interest, where the artist desires to re-make a work or retroactively reconsider the conceptual intent of the work, as was seen with the conceptual changes Krinj Giezen tried to apply to Marocco [fig. 7]. Conservator Glenn Wharton writes how “problems arise when artists change their mind or express interests that are either unachievable or undesirable by current owners. […] Artists claiming continued rights to alter their work can come into conflict with owners, particularly when greater values is assigned to works from an artist’s earlier period.”33 Though it is understandable for an artist’s views to evolve, the subsequent desire to re-invent objects questions our responsibilities as ‘caretakers of historical objects.’34 Museums have to be careful when dealing with these situations and decide beforehand whether they desire the work to return to the desired state, through refabrication, or whether the work is too valuable as an original record to be recreated. Glenn Wharton acknowledged this issue when I asked him whether there is an effort to get artists into publications around the time a work is acquired to further establish their sanction contemporary to the work itself:

GW: No, not necessarily, but I think it does build the case for doing artist interviews as early on as you can. And allowing the artist to speak when they’re available and they can. If you can then document that twenty years earlier you said something else, you know then everyone has to decide: is this work something that’s on-going, and should we now incorporate what the artist wants it to be, or are we going to be really rigid and say, “No, you made this in 1980, this is what you said then, and it’s more important to us that we have a 1980 work of art by you, then one modified twenty, thirty years later” [Appendix A].

Then there are instances where the artist refabricates a work without changing the concept, and yet the work is fundamentally aesthetically different from the original based on the availability of materials or technical equipment. This happened with a cardboard

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32 Hummelen, "Conception, Creation and Re-Creation : Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art," 34.
work by Henk Peeters called 59-18 from 1959, where the quality of the bunk marks and specific type of cardboard of the original could not be recreated [fig. 21].\(^{35}\) The new work was not only a different material and therefore a different color and texture, it did not burn in the same way as the original and the holes created were rendered completely different [fig. 22]. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro would call this re-creation, which risks resulting in a completely different work, commissioning a new piece.\(^{36}\) These kinds of problems are mainly dealt with on a case-by-case basis, as it is difficult to determine an overall standard for such idiosyncratic situations.

**Changes to the Decision-Making Model**

Though the conservation process in relation to contemporary art is in no way alien to the process for traditional objects, the greater involvement of the living artist and role of documentation have indeed affected the decision-making model that determines treatment and the course of actions. A more traditional approach to decision-making in conservation is embodied by the R-I-P model, or Revelation-Investigation-Preservation model, promoted by archaeological conservator Chris Caple [Appendix D].\(^{37}\) The method is characterized by exposing the original form of the object through comprehensive cleaning (revelation), scientific analysis to uncover information about the object (investigation) and then maintaining the object in its present form and preventing further degradation (preservation).\(^{38}\) While the logic behind this model is still useful for contemporary art, the focus placed on the object as a ‘truth document’ is out-dated in approaching installation art specifically.\(^{39}\) The current model for contemporary art places greater emphasis on the qualitative aspects of conservation as described above, while still following standard conservation methodology in its emphasis on “documentation, material-condition research, and identifying the meaning, or artist’s intent.”\(^{40}\) A major difference, however, can be seen in the reticence to address ageing for any work approached. For many contemporary artworks, quandary remains in the extent to which conservation should intervene in the aging and degradation of an object.\(^{41}\) While visible age is desirable for the work *Time and Mrs. Tiber* by Magor, the aging of the steels pins in Donovan’s *Untitled (Pins)* would make the piece about the aging of mass-produced objects rather than the re-invention of such objects. As described by Wharton, the process is both based on traditional conservation and more recent considerations, where the artist’s intent sanction as well as the contextual meaning of a work art considered in conjunction with technical analysis.\(^{42}\) Even with the evolution of documentation and

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36 Levin, “Time and Change : A Discussion About the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art “.


38 Ibid., 33.


41 Ibid., 173.

42 Ibid., 173.
Henk Peeters, 59-18, 1959 (original), Central Museum Utrecht.
Henk Peeters called 59-18 from 1959 (reconstruction), Central Museum Utrecht.
artist’s involvement, the process is still highly subject-dependent. Glenn Wharton has said:

GW: I think it will always be case-by-case, and that’s the way it should be. But I think there are broad parameters that we’re moving towards. That will guide us, and they’re based on the ethics, and principles for practice that came out of our profession for object based art. They need to be modified. But we are working that out. So yes, I think we are moving toward a set of broad guidelines.

While there is still no definitive methodology for the conservation of installation art, the new principles and practices are becoming wide-spread and thus prerequisites in a sense for proper treatment. These new models and principles allow for the reasoning and defense of certain practices appropriate and specific for installation art that may be considered unacceptable in traditional conservation practice.43 In such cases, codes of ethics provide ‘theoretical frameworks’ without prescribing general actions for artworks that need highly specific and often exceptional treatment.44 A common decision-making model as outlined by Louise Cone [Appendix E] does not fundamentally differ from traditional models, but does allow for more variation and qualitative interpretation on the part of the museum professional.

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Chapter 5 | Analysis of Current Methods

“It is precisely because artists continually use their imagination and creativity to add new meanings that the preservation and conservation of contemporary art should not be a static process carried out behind the closed doors of the museum: it must be maintained in a dynamic and open discourse with the world around.” (Ijsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé)

Further Debate

While the changing principles of conservation methodology demonstrate a concerted and well-reasoned approach to the many theoretical issues associated with installation art, an analysis of some current practices shows there are areas where these issues have not been dealt with in a wholly sufficient manner. The current methods are not unsuccessful per se, but still leave room for further discussion. Certain aspects of the new methodology, including the artist’s sanction, the interaction with the living artist, the increased role of documentation and questions of re-installation pose theoretical issues in addition to those stemming from the artworks themselves. The open nature of installation art, so easily affected by even the slightest contextual changes, suggests that the methodology pertaining to the genre should be dealt with in the same flexible manner. Many of the issues discussed relate to context, both physical and figurative, as the most fundamentally complicated aspect of installation art and thus merits further analysis. The issues that arise, whether dealing with “art historical or iconographic context, materials analysis context, display context, or an intellectual and philosophical context,” are basic to the understanding of the genre and meaning of the individual artworks, and need to be considered from as many perspectives as possible. The various perspectives discussed here, many of them recognized within the discipline of conservation, derive from the concepts discussed throughout this paper. These are important not only because they begin to problematize the current methodology, but also because they will help to shape its future evolution. By problematizing aspects of the current methodology, space is generated for future innovation and ‘open discourse’ with other professionals in the art world and the general public as well.

Reinstallation as Interpretive

The analysis of issues of context in this section is predicated on the notion that reinstallation as a practice is fundamentally interpretive in a manner that is often not within the control of those performing the action. As these works are dependent on multivalent spatial and conceptual arrangements, the risk of slight variations in reinstallation is almost inevitable. While context is relevant in discussing any work of art, Martha Buskirk demonstrates this specific constraint for installation art:

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“While it may be difficult to see and therefore appreciate a painting when it has been badly lit, one doesn’t tend to think that the object itself has changed, whereas works involving components arrayed on the floor or walls of a room depend on their arrangement for their impact on the viewer. How much compromise or deviation is allowed, then, before the result is a failure of the work, or of authorship? The rearrangement of components could constitute a new work, or simply no work, when their layout diverges from the one established by the artist.”

Context is not only crucial for the correct installation and presentation of a work, it is also crucial for the viewer’s understanding of and encounter with the work. The problem is compounded for material-oriented works, which still exist physically after de-installation, as conceptual works often allow for explicit and less complicated recreation by those other than the artist. For a conceptual artist like Robert Smithson, for example, the meaning of his works is constituted in the concept as articulated in the form of ‘certificates,’ which clearly sanction the recreation of the works. The ‘certificates’ state that whoever is purchasing the work owns the rights to install and exhibit the works as well to acquire more materials for replication, often natural compounds like salt crystals from the original mine. In this case, however, slight variations for works like *Eight-Part-Piece (Cayuga Salt Mine Project)* are part of the intentional meaning created by the artist [fig. 23]. For installation works where the continued replacement of the material is not built into the conception of the work, similar variations in the spatial and conceptual layout of a work can severely impair the meaning and expression.

For many material-oriented installation works, reinstallation is part of a continuing process of defining the piece through dialogue between the institutions and the artists. Since spatial expression is often carefully constructed, even with the advent of installation plans and increased documentation, “algorithms that will allow us to determine with exactitude which arrangements are acceptable and which are not are exceedingly rare.” It is one thing to have plans and documentation and a whole different thing actually to install works based on them; realizing the plans often presents issues not previously conceived of and can add unintended elements to a work. No amount of documentation can fix a reinstallation in a manner that prevents subjective input, as the reading of artistic intent even through the documentation is a difficult and highly subjective task. Martha Buskirk recognizes the interpretive nature of reinstallation:

“In the case of work made from unfixed or changeable elements, interpretation is not simply a matter of a possibly varied response to an essentially stable physical

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3 Louise Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art" (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 2002), 46.
4 Ibid., 46.
object; instead, a prior stage of interpretation can have dramatic implications for the configuration of the object to be perceived. Furthermore, the process of interpretation that shapes decisions about display as well as long-term care and preservation is frequently presented as a reading of artistic intent – a reading based on assumptions about the artist’s common practice as well as written statements and related documentation.”

When reinstalling works, the “slow embodiment [of an idea] takes place in the whole community of people who realize, record and conserve the work, so that the work is slowly given a transferable shape as unique result of the dialogue between realization and concept… [and where] embodied idea, shaped by this process, becomes part of the identity of the artwork.” Thus, the process as executed in the museum setting can lead to a new execution of the work simply based on the necessary input, physical or conceptual, of persons other than the artist.

An example of the interpretive nature of even slight variations is demonstrated through the presentation of Thomas Bang’s *Three Bag Hang, One Bag Lie* from 1969 at Denmark’s National Gallery [fig. 24]. When interviewed about the work, the artist said it was installed incorrectly, as it was not placed high enough against the wall. He informed the conservator, Louise Cone, that there was an exact intended height of the pole when placed against the wall, and that the correct placement was fundamental to the work as “the meaning of the work, the way the work relates to the room, is dependent upon the wall and the floor meeting.” The problem with installation, as it were, was due to the nature of the exhibition space, as the floor and wall did not properly meet. Though the issue was with a seemingly insignificant increase in the angle of the work to the floor, it was noticeable to the artist at first sight and thus clearly impeded the intended presentation of his conception of the work. Conversely, another artist with work at the Denmark National Gallery, Torben Ebbesen had much looser requirements for how his work was presented, saying only after much coaxing “I would like to be able to be anywhere… I would place it on an angle, so that it disturbs the room. I shouldn’t stand parallel against the wall. It wouldn’t be independent enough.” What happens for works, however, where the artist cannot or will not be asked about the work? There is arguably a certain amount of intrinsic interpretation to reinstallation, a fact that has necessitated working with living artists.

**Conservation as an Artistic Practice**

The interpretive nature of reinstallation as well as the blending of the roles of conservator and artist begs the question of whether the conservation encroaches on the artistic process in certain circumstances. The overlapping of responsibilities that required for many complex installation artworks has prompted an unprecedented amount of involvement of the artist in the reinstallation and conservation process and of the conservator as advisor in the artist’s process. The variety of materials and techniques, and

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8 Hummelen, "Conception, Creation and Re-Creation : Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art," 35.
9 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 46.
10 Ibid., 47.
a growing awareness of the dangers of utilizing some of these materials, has led artists working with non-traditional materials to consult with conservators beforehand in order to predict the ramifications of the choice of certain materials. Jim Coddington recounts how an artist recently contacted him about her materials, which include painting with watercolor on mylar, and to ask him what kind of varnish she should use to prevent unanticipated degradation [Appendix A].

Hiltrud Schinzels holds that this practice should be called “material and technical fabrication and installation advice” instead of conservation and restoration. There is also there the collaboration that occurs during the conservation process, like with Janine Antonis’s Gnaw, where the decision to recreate the work for exhibition was not an inherent conceptual facet of the work but something decided later in conjunction with conservators [fig. 14]. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro has said that the changing role of museums has made them like ‘factories’ of works of art in some ways, and noted how for some large-scale and site-specific works “conservators and curators actively participate in constructing the work – sometimes with artists on the site and sometimes without them – performing tasks in roles akin to that of fabricators or studio assistants.”

For the work Cry Dragon/ Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan by Cai Guo Quang from 1996, the staff at the Guggenheim participated in the cleaning and inflating of hundreds of sheep-skin bladders that the artist had shipped to the museum [fig. 25]. While museum professionals are often involved in the installation of works out of practical necessity, the blurring of the line between execution and preservation can present theoretical difficulties when the line is seen as being crossed.

What is primarily controversial about these circumstances is not the involvement of persons separate from the artist but rather the extent of that involvement and their lack of definitive boundaries from the artist. The artist’s intent for the work is a necessary factor for this subject, as certain artists conceive their works as open-ended, like Rafael Lozano Henner [fig. 8], while others like Thomas Bang are more particular about the presentation of their works. The involvement of museum staff is not inherently a negative thing, as they can often learn and later transmit important information about the production and installation process when acting as ‘executors’ or ‘assistants’ to the artists in the gallery space. The creation in situ of many large-scale installation works does redefine the role of the museum, but does not necessarily remove any agency from the artist. However, the intermixing of roles is not free from controversy; the artist Krijn Giezen, whose infested work Marocco was the subject of debate over treatment, argued that only he had the right to modify his works and thus “construed conservation

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intervention as creative possibilities” [sic]. Any course of action not under his direct influence could be considered, according to this logic, as the creation of a new image or work. Even the placement of the work in a hermetically sealed glass case was seen as placing the work in an ‘incubator’ and thus changing it fundamentally. While this case appears an extreme example, it does demonstrate the kinds of issues that can arise when there is a conflict over treatment.

Though conservation practice still accords a special role to artists above and beyond that of any other participant, the involvement of actors other than the artist can and has become problematic. Cornelia Weyer writes how “in the everyday work of the museum it frequently happens in precisely the treatment of installations that, when restorers are involved in interventions, e.g. re-installation, they de facto go beyond the primary concept of their role, acting, as it were, e.g. assistants of the artist.” It is not the participation of technicians, assistants and conservators itself that is problematic, but rather their ambiguous and undefined roles as ‘outsiders’ affecting the outcome of the work of art. Central to this issue then is the question of who owns the work, a complex topic which cannot be comprehensively addressed here. While the artist has certain protection of their moral rights through the Visual Artist’s Rights Act (based on the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works), where they have the right to prevent distortion or modification of their work with which they disagree, the onus is on the artist to prove any mal-intent or reckless activity on the part of the conservator. While no conservator would say that they are in the business of anything other than preserving art as designated such by artists, for contemporary installation art particularly the difficulty of separating the roles of creator and caretaker is a primary field of contention.

Artist’s assistants, existing somewhere between the status of artist and conservator, embody the issues related to ambiguity of roles. There reasons why there are a growing number of artist’s assistants pertain to the increased size of works, the increased need for the artist to be present during reinstallations, and the meticulous practices through which many contemporary installation works are installed. Tara Donovan’s installations, for example, made up of hundreds of Styrofoam cups, necessitate the presence of assistants for the work to be completed in the precise manner desired by the artist and yet still in a timely manner [fig. 26]. The position of artist’s assistant, however, did not come about with the advent of installation art. Peter Paul Rubens, for example, notoriously had a workshop where assistants helped him with his paintings, and in an infamous example, Barnett Newman had a conservator with whom he worked closely and who used a paint roller in restoring some of his works after the

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18 Ibid., 97.
artist’s death. There are also gallery assistants, who may or may have a relationship with the artist, who will accompany works to museums for direction during installation. Artist’s assistants are different from technicians and craftsmen in so far as they are involved in the reinstallation of works as well as their execution, and thus operate in limbo between creator and caretaker. Often the assistants work completely under the direction of the artist and their actions are therefore considered sanctioned, although they do in a sense constitute another level of removal from the actual artist. Mario Merz works with a permanent assistant, the architect Mario Boggia from Turin, who has and artistic identity separate from his work with Merz. While his supervision of reinstallations of Merz’s work was sanctioned by the artist when he was alive, the matter becomes different after the artist’s death. Merz, who would have often seen the works after their supervised reinstallation, is not longer able to approve Boggia’s work officially or unofficially. As with Sol Lewitt, who required that his works be re-executed by his assistants, one can question how far the assistant’s removal from the artist after his or her death is acceptable. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro believes this remoteness is an issue, as the assistants “feel they know how to do it, so they can make the work, and that’s very different for me… it’s very different when the artist has died.” The blurring roles of conservator, artist and conservation and/or artist’s assistant demonstrate that there is, in conservation literature, a further need to explore the definitions of creator and caretaker.

Managing Age

Another issue inherent in the care of contemporary art objects is the management of the amount of age the objects are allowed to exhibit, while simultaneously considering both the historical record and the artist’s intent. Contemporary art has a precarious relationship with age, as audiences often expect objects contemporary to them to appear new, while objects from the past are expected to look aged. This begs the question of when and where the process of aging is allowed to take place, and how much both the artist and the public will accept. At the Science Museum in London, for example, museum officials noticed a distinct difference in the reactions of the viewers based on their conceptions of acceptable ageing. Whereas visitors looking at expensive but older motorcars were disappointed that objects they considered contemporary to them appeared shabby and under-restored, visitors were satisfied with the aged look of horse-drawn carriages and preferred the older looking ones to those restored. And with contemporary art, the aesthetic is centered on the values of ‘newness,’ ‘freshness’ and current visual commentary. David Lowenthal, geographer and commenter about the relationship between history and cultural heritage, believes this aesthetic comes from the

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24 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 43.
economically motivated preferences for disposability, and recognizes both negative and positive implications of such a viewpoint.\textsuperscript{28} Robert Storr, writing on this subject, states:

“The modern age is really the first in which ‘newness,’ as such, has been celebrated as a primary value in art. For much of history, the alternative was either timelessness or antiquity. These were matters of canonical form. Pictures made in periods when the past was important to artists were not made to look old but rather to resemble models from previous eras.”\textsuperscript{29}

The value placed ‘newness’ becomes critical for works that age rapidly and unpredictably, especially those lacking in a built-in system of regeneration. If an installation is supposed to look current and modern, as a fundamental part of its meaning through social commentary for example, what happens when the work looks fifty years old in only ten? The newness or amount of age a work is permitted is part of the artist’s intent, as the “level of newness that is preserved in a work of art can radically alter our understanding of what we see and what it signifies.”\textsuperscript{30} The amount of age can have conceptual impact, as with the Antoine Pevsner sculpture \textit{Torso} that no longer transmitted light, as the material status is inherent to the grasping of the meaning of a work. And yet, the physical impossibilities of maintaining ‘newness’ aside, there is the audience to consider; what would the viewer think when confronted with a museum full of brand-new seeming objects? It is \textit{common sense} that art object age, and they cannot be fundamentally separated from their place in the timeline of art history. I discussed this concept generally with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro in our interview [Appendix A]:

EF: Jim Coddington said [in a previous interview with you], “Carol, not that long ago a great deal of effort was expended by you and others to get people to accept some level of change in contemporary art. In a sense, it was no different from old masters, where change was accepted. But now we’re seeing a complete acceptance of change, and even identifying the work with all of that change—thus preventing, maybe, a conservator from stepping in. Are you noticing that?”

CMU: As I said, works of art are always changing. So I guess it’s the degree to which you’re willing to accept it. I guess it goes back the degree to which you’re willing to accept aging, which is a cultural phenomenon. I mean, we have the capability of putting color back into color photographs, making something old look new again, turn black and white films into color one. We have ways of doing all kinds of things that we couldn’t do decades ago. The risk is that you

\textsuperscript{28} Lowenthal stated: “It is the exceptions to the economically motivated preference for disposability that concern us here. Museum curators, architectural preservationists, and materials conservators deal with artifacts valued not for ephemeral everyday use but as enduring cultural heritage. For historical, social, aesthetic, or scientific reasons, items felt to be heritage are kept intact as much and as long as possible. Yet such artifacts are increasingly marked by the erosions and accidents of age and decay. These marks have both negative and positive implications.” David Lowenthal, “The Value of Age and Decay,” in \textit{Durability and Change by Dahlem Workshop on Durability and Change: The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage}, ed. Peter Brimblecombe W. E. Krumbein, D. E. Cosgrove, S. Staniforth (Dahlem: Dahlem Workshop on Durability and Change, 1992), 39.


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 37.
want to make everything look bright, new and unchanged again. And maybe that makes it harder for us to accept works of art that have changed. It probably does. It probably makes it harder for us to accept water colors that have faded, cause you just want to say, well, can’t you put a little more color back in here

EF: Because contemporary audiences want things that are contemporary to them to look new. But it begs the question, of how much age is appropriate in that it gives the historicity of the object, versus how much age undermines the intent.

CMU: I know what you’re saying. I think it totally, I think it brings it back to the Rauschenberg question, when I looked at him when I was your age, they were brightly colored to my eye, and it was really radical art. My students, who look at that work, think it’s dull, faded, not radical, and they think they’re antiques. They in the interim have seen a lot of bright color, a whole lot of appropriation art from found objects. They’ve seen a lot in between that has put that in a different place. So do we go and make Rauschenberg’s combines new and brightly colored again? I think the answer’s no. I think if we do we run the risk of losing the magic of whatever he’s done in there in creating that. Rather we should educate ourselves to accept it as it was. I mean why don’t we paint Greek sculptures again?

This issue of appropriate age manifests itself in the treatment of actual artworks, thus continuing the debate rather than answering it. Despite the fact that traditional conservation practice presented works in the state closest to which the artist intended them to be seen, a certain amount of age was allowed and even desired, in the case of patinas for example. For contemporary artworks, however, a traditional management of age may not be appropriate. The question becomes how to preserve the aesthetic of ‘newness’ without dislodging artworks from their temporal contexts. Sol Lewitt himself said, particularly for his original works not intended to be repainted, “there is no reason why a piece shouldn't look as it was when it was made. I would like to have my work to always be as it was when it was made.” This can be taken several ways, as the works are not repainted to look brand new but are restored to look as close as possible to the original works. It is not clear, then, which method retains the more reliable presentation of the work and presents ‘newness’ as the work must have looked when made. A good example of these issues for actual artworks is the artist Duane Hanson’s Sunbather from 1971 a multi-part sculptural work that was very much about presenting the contemporary spirit of its time [fig. 27]. The work, consisting of a polyester sculpture of an overweight woman baking at the beach surrounded by all the typical pop culture paraphernalia one might find in such a setting, including chips and a magazines, was meant to comment on the excesses mass-consumption and consumer culture. The ageing of the sculpture, therefore, changed the interpretive nature of the work, as the fading swimsuit and disintegrating parts made the work more about a disappearing culture than a scathing

32 Ibid., 40.
commentary on current practice. In a letter from the artist, sanction was granted for aggressive restorations through the statement “I don't object to any other adjustments if it benefits the sculpture by contributing to a better-fresher-illusionism – so that paper & magazines should be replaced periodically. If any old non-faded papers & magazines from 1971 can be obtained that would be ideal. Thus, the restored version of Sunbather included a new bathing suit (that nevertheless imitated the vintage one), cap, sunglasses, snacks in the form of Diet Coke rather than Tab, and soap opera magazines rather than popular 1970s magazines [fig. 28].

Though this specific artwork is particularly complicated, it demonstrates the ongoing conflict between artist’s intent, history of an object and authenticity. In this instance the artist’s intent is quite ambiguous, as he suggests uniting replaced parts with vintage parts in a way that does not make clear which he prefers. The work was first presented without replacing the snacks and magazines, then with the clothing and accessories replaced, and was subsequently changed because the “shabby magazines and the Tab can struck a distinctly discordant note.” The reasoning behind the restoration is logical, as Hanson himself did request that the museum maintain a ‘better-fresher-illusionism,’ in from this standpoint the restorations allow for the work to function dynamically and to respond to reality throughout time rather than be frozen. Arguments could be made, however, against the restorations; in relation to artist’s intent, it is not clear whether Hanson’s sanction included updating the magazines completely, though the museum did deem the vintage magazines acquired a too aged to fit logically within the work. It could be argued as well that there is a visual discrepancy formed between the vintage-seeming bathing suit and 1970s sunglasses, donated to the effort, and the contemporary Diet Coke and magazines. Why do only half the objects resemble the originals? The artist’s statements show that he was not necessarily dedicated to the original authentic materials, but at the same time demonstrated lingering ambiguities towards complete reconstruction. This subsequent middle ground of partially updated and partially unaltered elements presents both a weird aesthetic and important conceptual implications. Inevitably, this practice is unsustainable; it is not clear how often and to what extent this work will continue to be updated. One could also ask whether the inevitable interval established between its restorations contributes meaning to the work, and whether the combination of contemporary and vintage visual symbols is true to the original conception of the work.

Separate from artist’s intent, arguments could be made for keeping the work as a historic record of a unique artwork made in response to a specific period of time. Kim Davenport, when writing about the work, said that while arguments could be made in

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33 Ibid., 41.
34 According to Davenport, “the bathing suit was now in such poor condition that it needed to be replaced, and Hanson was consulted. He was interested in the conservation of the work and reiterated his view that an exact replication of its original look was not essential, saying that the suit could be “anything that’s kind of foolish looking.” Ibid., 41.
35 Ibid., 41.
36 Ibid., 41.
37 Ibid., 41.
38 Ibid., 41.
39 There is disagreement over whether the Tab can is original, as original documentation does not show one.
Duane Hanson, *Sunbather*, 1971 (after restoration).
either direction, the presence of the living artist meant “his ideas were given precedence over concerns for the strict historical accuracy of the object.”

This work was discussed during an interview between Jim Coddington and myself on the topic of age management:

“Kim brings up in her article about Duane Hansen and a sculpture of his… a sunbather on a lounge on a beach, with all the accoutrements of lounging on the beach, but it was made in the late 60s, early 70s, and amongst these pop culture elements was a can of Tab, and that’s faded or degraded somewhat. Do you go out and find yourself a can of Tab, or do you update it to a can of Diet Coke, which is what he would almost certainly use now? One can make an argument for both: both have full elements of authenticity, one of historical authenticity, one of conceptual authenticity. Nothing wrong with either solution.”

Though there may not be anything conceptually wrong with either decision, the decision process in such cases retains a certain amount of institutional subjectivity. In my interview with her, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro expressed reticence towards this kind of replacement, saying, “if it’s visual art, then you do all you can to reproduce the Pabst can. That’s what you do. I don’t think you go to something else” [Appendix A]. Davenport even ceded that there is a logical claim that “the object's worth as an educational resource may lend weight to preservation of the work within an art historical framework, that is, keeping the signs of the object's history, rather than attempting to preserve its original condition.”

Furthermore, as defined by Sherri Irvin, the artist’s sanction is an outgrowth rather than an embodiment of the artist’s intent, a point that destabilizes the sanction in a manner that could provide for the argument that the historical importance of the work overrules the sanction in cases like these, where the artist’s instructions are given much later than the creation of the work. This example speaks to issues of historicity for contemporary art, where there is constant grappling of works of art as both autonomous expressions of the artist’s intent as well as objects situated within the history of art.

Historicity

“Devotees of decay accept the inevitability of aging as a condition of existence and find meaning and interest in its successive stages. The aesthetics of aging tempers the zeal to preserve artifacts with an informed appreciation of processes of dissolution innate to both organic and inorganic nature. Decay and demolition come to be viewed not as implacable enemies to conservation, but as inescapable adjuncts of our relations with all components of the built environment.” (David Lowenthal)

The debate over the amount of history artworks should display, as part of society’s collective cultural heritage, has been transformed by contemporary art. Historicity is a broad term describing the historical and cultural value a work accumulates

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41 Ibid., 40.
43 Lowenthal, "The Value of Age and Decay," 39.
over time as well as the visible signs on the material fabric of an artwork that clearly demonstrate its age. Salvador Muñoz-Viñas recounts how traditionally, “historical integrity describe[d] the evidence that history has imprinted upon the object – its own, particular history.” In addition to the intended conceptual meaning of a work, the symbolic and communicative function of artworks is marked by the placing of a work in the historic material culture of a given society. The amount of age works have does not simply reflect the intent or sanction of the work – it also reflects how art is seen by a particular society and culture. Louise Cone has written that the lengths “a conservator is willing to go to preserve or re-attain original condition will depend upon their standpoint in relationship to art in general. And again, how much value is being placed on the historicity of the work.” The amount of age artworks have is also a question of public knowledge and historical fidelity, as the perpetual renewal of artworks itself regenerates material culture in a manner that belies its historical meaning. Artworks do not exist in a vacuum and they often accumulate historical, cultural, political and artistic meaning external to the physical works, as is often the case with religious art. For example, Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Delights was once a didactic message on the evils and ramifications of sinning, but in the present represents a singular aesthetic attributed to a certain time period and culture. It is often difficult, when considering all the aspects of meaning as dictated by the artist and the work itself, to consider the historical context of artworks. As part of a continuation of the history of art, however, these works cannot be detached from their external contexts. A system of infinite restoration and regeneration is also not feasible for many practical reasons; the question becomes, then, at what point are the works allowed to age and why.

While the process of age management is clearer for artworks where the artist has addressed the subject, for those artworks retaining an openness the debate has become heated. Works comprised mainly of technological elements are interesting cases because the hardware becomes so quickly outmoded. The televisions often used by the artist Nam June Paik, in such works as Untitled from 1968 from the MoMA for example, age both visually and technically in just a few years [fig. 29]. In addition to the exterior, the interior parts of the televisions in the artist’s oeuvre will age and require replacement. This practice is limited by the amount of remaining and functioning vintage equipment, and is not the solution for these works in the long run. It can also prove difficult to defend the continued replacement of the televisions for works such as Untitled, as they begin to acquire an older looking aesthetic and thus historical relevance, even with the artist’s indirect sanctioning of such practices. Conservator Glenn Wharton, who cares for the work, expressed these conflicting sentiments when I interviewed him:

EF: So historicity, I guess is the term being thrown around – I found that June Paik piece very interesting because I would personally agree with you that once technology continues to be replaced, it’s just as similar you continue to repaint areas of a painting that were missing based on the style of the time. And I guess it would be interesting to think how media dates a piece, and whether the

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45 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 57.
46 Ibid., 57.
Fig. 29

Nam June Paik, *Untitled*, 1968, MoMA.
artist and the institutions owe that to the public as part of art history, to freeze objects in time.

GW: Nam June Paik is an interesting artist in that he was very playful, and he always wanted to change the technology, and was very engaged, and loved new technologies. And he did not leave us with sufficient documentation to base these kinds of decisions. In a way he was irresponsible for not giving the future the bases for these decisions, but maybe also that’s part of his art, to continue these questions, of what is it, and what should it be. And maybe that is part of his work. It doesn’t surprise me that a curator who knew him would say, “well no of course we should continue to change the technology, that is the art.” And me, who didn’t know him comes along . . . I come along later and say if he didn’t leave us with the clear direction to continually change his art, I’m a more conservative person by the nature of my profession, I would rather freeze it, let it be like 20th century technology [Appendix A].

Appropriate age will often necessitate a compromise; it cannot, nevertheless, be approached without considering cultural and historical context. How will installation artworks like Tracy Emin’s My Bed from 1999 be approached in the near future [fig. 30]? The work, like Hanson’s Sunbather, is comprised of materials easily dated by their appearance and representational content, including empty bottles, cigarette butts, stained sheets, worn panties and ‘the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown.’ The work, a public presentation of her most intimate space, is a “set of ephemeral artifacts used by the artist to evoke and capture a particular period in her life. They have an inalienable value bestowed upon them by her declaration that they are ‘art.’” While it can be intuited that preserving the original objects is important, based on the work’s status as a snapshot of a specific moment in time that is intimately related to the artist, parts themselves will age in ways that could change the meaning of the work. The work would then be connoted by the visual presence of age on the objects and the design of the objects themselves. The risk would be that the work becomes less of a jarring, contemporary snapshot and more of time-capsule marked by a certain amount of nostalgia. The conservators writing about the work said it “should not be either ‘embalmed’ or over-cleaned,” a fair assessment that nonetheless leaves room for much subjectivity and ambiguity. This area of conservation is particularly controversial, and no definitive answers exist. At some point, however, works have to be allowed to age; when and to what extent is something conservation literature continues, and must continue, to address.

Timeline of Decay

Despite the theoretical issues pertaining to the appropriate age for contemporary artworks, conservation practice must address problematic artworks in a timely and realistic manner. It is easy to debate the issues presented in practice, and infinitely more
difficult to solve them in practice. While the exhibition of any artwork can become problematic, contemporary art conservation must consider variables that exceed the material and artist’s intent, including context, reinstallation and the artist’s sanction. While the changing approach for these kinds of works, as outlined in the chapter on methodology, has successfully integrated much of the necessary information for conservation practice, there are theoretical kinks pertaining to the artist’s sanction and reinstallation that warrant reconsideration in the literature and in practice. The artist’s sanction will be reconsidered based on its relative proximity to the execution of an artwork and further consideration will be given to the relationship between a work’s contingency, relevant documentation and display during reinstallation.

The artist’s sanction is particularly relevant in practice to those artworks intended to have a timeline of decay, whereby the artwork eventually disappears or degrades until a sanctioned threshold of visible age is met. The sanction itself, however, has a rather precarious relationship to the artist’s intent. As Martha Buskirk notes, “it is only with the establishment of a market for their work that artists are forced to concern themselves with the life of the work over times, as it enters situations that the artist did not select and may not be able to control.” While it is reasonable to conceive of the artist’s sanction as existing in continuation with the intent, the two terms are defined differently; unlike intent (as captured in the initial presentation of the artwork), the sanction is subject over time to the evolving ways in which artists see and conceive their art. Additionally, the artist’s sanction is often realized much later than the execution of the work, and the method for installation often only becomes “codified once it’s acquired.” The sanction by its very nature has the power to change the basic meaning of a work, as seen with *Time and Mrs. Tiber* [fig. 9], and is therefore not a topic to approached lightly. Why are artists prevented from physically modifying their work according to their conceptual evolution but allowed to modify works conceptually after significant amounts of time? Though the evolution of artworks over time is not necessarily a negative thing, there are circumstances where artist’s sanction, through its remote yet powerful role, can be considered as an ‘after-thought’ with all the implications thereof.

A work where the artist’s sanction is clearly demonstrated as an ‘after-thought’ is Zoe Leonard’s work *Strange Fruit (For David)*. The work, begun in 1992 and acquired in 1998 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is a material-oriented, ephemeral artwork that is meant to degrade as an explicit aspect of its meaning [fig. 31]. The work consists of the installation of tens of dried-out skins of fruits and vegetables that the artist ate and then “‘repaired’ and adorned them—literally sewing up the seams she had opened—with colored thread, shiny wires, and buttons” [fig. 32]. The work began out of what the artist claims was an absent-minded practice, and blossomed into a conceptual work when Leonard decided to keep the group of fruit together as one work. She told interviewer Anna Blume in 1997 she “would love for this piece to have a room somewhere where I could install them and then leave them be. Just let them decay.” The work thus quickly evolves from process-oriented to material and conceptual oriented as well, because the physical

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53 Ibid., 46.
appearance of the fruits conveys the meaning of age, creating a piece that conceptually addresses ageing and death and ephemerality of corporeal existence. When the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) acquired the work, however, it was suggested that she consider preventative intervention with the sculpture through consolidation methods. After several attempts and relative successes in consolidation, however, the artist found herself ultimately rejecting preserving the work indefinitely as she realized that just the façade of decay would not suffice conceptually.

Though the artist’s fidelity to her original intent is laudable, the resulting sanctions can still be considered as conceptually remote and irrelevant to the original execution and intent of the work.

The question for this work is not whether it will decay and eventually disappear, but how it will decay and whether that process affects the meaning of the work. Both the collecting institution and the artist recognized and intend for this work eventually to decay beyond exhibition, and to be disposed of at the end of its ‘life.’ Andrew Lins, Chair of Conservation at the PMA, said in an interview I conducted with him that this “particular artwork was regarded as significant enough that the liabilities and risks and inevitability of its failure were still seen as an acceptable cost [Appendix A].” While the recognition that the work will disappear is in line with the original intent of the artwork, it is questionable whether the manner in which the work is degrading also reflects that intent. When not on exhibition, the work rests in a specially made, temperature controlled crate that has, according to Lins, allowed for little visible change in the work over time. The work is exhibited often, in accordance with the artist’s wishes, and experiences copious mechanical damage as it is installed on the open floor where visitors walk. When it is loaned and exhibited, however, it undergoes active conservation and is inspected for insects, mold, and other related agents of decay. Subsequently, there has been “remarkably little damage to the piece in the intervening years, and it’s going to last longer than what was originally predicted.” The insects, mold and agents of decay that are treated are the very mechanisms by which Leonard foresaw the work decaying. Although the artist never explicitly stated so, they could be considered part of the Leonard’s original intent for the artwork. The retardation of the overall process of decay, by both the temperature controlled storage and conservation treatments, begs the question of exactly how exactly this work will decay. Though both the institution and the artist recognize that the work should decay, they are in effect not really letting it do so. If decay is part of the meaning of the work of art, and decay is actively retarded through the conservation of the work, then state of the work and its treatment can be considered as undermining the original intent by the artist.

The artist’s intent for the work to decay reflects a time-line of decay that was originally conceived of as linear and which is fundamentally undermined by the conservation treatment undertaken. The artist’s statement that she wanted the work to

54 Ibid., 57
55 Temkin said “I would like to digress briefly to put Leonard’s decision in the context of an artistic moment at which it seems that much of the very best new work is explicitly antiheroic, antimonumental. Disappearance, absence, and the trace or the relic are concepts that wind a path through much current work that may seem very different—from, say, the sculpture of Robert Gober to the photographs of Gabriel Orozco.” Ibid., 47.
57 Lins, Andrew. Interview by Lizzie Frasco.
“decompose in its own time” references the natural and linear timeline of decay that is inherent to organic materials like fruits and vegetables. The manner in which the work is conserved, however, resists this initially conceived timeline. When not on display, the work is placed in a freezer in storage to retard degradation. The process of decay thus speeds up when the work is on display and slows down when taken off display, in what can be considered a rupture of the timeline of the work. The artist, in her wisdom, did consider this issue; Leonard became concerned after the work’s purchase about the museum’s willingness to display it frequently and especially after significant degradation had taken place, and in response the museum “agreed to try (although not to formally commit) to show the piece for periods of time with a certain calendrical regularity, which seemed in the spirit of the work’s sense of marking time.” While the efforts on the part of the museum and the artist show a valiant attempt at reconciling the issues inherent in the collecting of such work, these compromises demonstrate the remoteness of the artist’s sanction. When I discussed this work with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, she thought the fact that the museum was attempting to preserve the work changed its meaning:

EF: And then there’s that issue of, the Strange Fruit piece in the PMA, when it was made the timeline was set out, that over ten years it would disintegrate, and then in between exhibitions it then stops, because it goes into the freezer. And in my thinking that almost ruptures the timeline that was initially set out for the work.

CMU: Well it depends on whether the artist intended the deterioration of the work is part of the piece. I’m assuming, since they’re preserving it, that she didn’t. And they went through a complicated treatment of it, as I remember. She wanted a certain preservation of it, isn’t that right?

Even the storage of the work presents theoretical issues, as works that are completed outside the studio and realized in an exhibition space are often inherently linked to their public presentation. Carol Stringari, writing on installation art specifically, states:

“Attempts to extend the life of such works will give rise to spatial and temporal shifts for viewers, who may have radically different experiences depending on when and where the work is encountered. If the physicality of many minimalist works is only completed by the activation of the surrounding space, then this is a contingent physicality that ceases to exist when the elements of the work are disassembled for storage, and can be profoundly compromised by a careless or imprecise arrangement of elements.”

Does the decaying of Leonard’s work carry the same conceptual weight and meaning when no one is witnessing it? In this instance it would appear that the artist and the institution are aware of the changes being made to the work, especially since they first investigated consolidating the objects, but the problems nevertheless persist. What this

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58 Temkin, "Strange Fruit," 46.
59 Lins, Andrew. Interview by Lizzie Frasco.
60 Temkin, "Strange Fruit," 48.
example demonstrates is not the fallibility of conservation practice, or the futile nature of the process, but rather the power of the artist’s sanction. The sanction is often taken at face-value, as inherently valid coming from the artist his or herself, and yet it can be shown to be both conceptually and temporally remote from the original conception and execution of the work in a problematic way. This example serves the function of demonstrating the issues related to the artist’s sanction, as it must continued to be debated and explored for the future evolution of conservation methodology.

**Issues of Display: Autonomy of the Art Object**

In addition to conservation treatment, the artist’s sanction and intent can lead to complications in the continued presentation of material-oriented installation works, which questions the autonomy of the artworks themselves. As context is crucial for the meaning of many works of installation art, it is worth discussing whether context can ever be recreated in a successful way under any circumstances. Context plays a crucial role for installation art not only because the artworks are expressed in and through space, but also because many of the works are often not even fully realized until they are installed in their initial exhibition space. Ijsbrand Hummelen has termed this a ‘laboratory culture,’ where the “realization of a concept…is to a large extent determined by the artist’s intentions but also by his or her reactions to chance factors in the environment: the space, the public, those carrying out the work and the materials available.”

Many installation works are not fully conceived of before installation and even if they are can not be seen as fully realized until installed. This factor, combined with the importance of specific settings and temporal contexts, creates a pervasive contingency for many of these works.

Even installations that are constructed with the space in mind or can be installed anywhere have elements of subtle site-specificity because the cohesive expression of a work in space for the first time can affect its experience and thus interpretation. While the contingent and contextual aspects of installation art do not prevent the reinstallation of works, creative solutions are sometimes necessary that are at the same time successful and problematic.

One way artists deal with the contingency of the contextual information on the original space is to declare the object ‘dead’ and exhibit it un-installed remains instead of an installed, autonomous work. As the interrelationship of parts is the main method through which meaning is constructed for installation works, and that interaction disappears after the dismantling of the work, the change in exhibition of the work essentially creates a new work despite the presence of all the original objects and materials. The practice, as embodied by the artist Joseph Beuys, would only be undertaken with the sanction of the artist. Beuys, a highly conceptual artist who also emphasized the use of specific materials, “was not only extremely aware that the smallest nuances in context have consequence for experiencing and interpretation of a work, he

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63 Hummelen, "Conception, Creation and Re-Creation: Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art," 32.
65 Danto, “Looking at the Present Looking at the Future.”
also allowed these to determine the way a work would be presented. For example, when his work *Strassenbahnhaltestelle* (Tram Stop), created for the 1976 Venice Biennale, was bought by the Kröller-Müller Museum, Beuys declared that the work had to be ‘discarded’ rather than erected as it had been at the Biennale because of the fundamental loss of context for the work [fig. 33]. The work had originally consisted of a tall iron column, topped by an iron head, which were positioned in relation to four barrels and over-turned tram tracks on the floor [fig. 34]. The piece referred to a memory from the artist’s youth, waiting for the tram to go to school, and its presence in the German pavilion created a ‘special spot’ or ‘designated location’ that was particular to the time and place of the Biennale. After the exhibition was finished and the piece was acquired, Beuys viewed the work’s initial and intended presentation as a completed phase that could not be recreated. The parts of the work were therefore carefully placed on the floor of its new home in a manner that appeared ‘discarded;’ freed from its original context, the work took on new meaning in its new presentation as ‘remnants.’ While one could question this treatment of the work, especially as the artist fundamentally changed the work after its original conception and execution, the involvement of and sanction by the artist is what separates this instance from all other reinstallations lacking in original contextual information. In a logical extension of the concept of the ‘dead’ object, installations lacking an original performative element are currently being presented as remnants in a demonstrative rather than re-creative manner.

Approaching the ‘dead’ object is not as easy, however, in situations where the artist is not creating a new work of art. Louise Cone recounts how a work in the Statens Museum for Kunst by the artist Christian Lemmerz, called *Afasi 1* from 1986, degraded to such a degree after its acquisition that it was beyond any reasonable amount of conservation intervention [fig. 35]. In order to deal with the work, Cone followed proper protocol and inquired whether she could interview the artist in order to establish, hopefully through the artist’s sanction, a basis for future action. The artist, however, refused to be interviewed about the work and declared the work should just be ‘thrown out.’ While it is clear that in this instance the museum can no longer ethically display the work, as materials and techniques continue to diversify, there will be more and more objects that have degraded in such an irreparable and drastic state. There exists then, with these kinds of objects, the reasonable temptation to continue to present them but to

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67 Ibid., 212.
68 Ibid., 212.
69 Leeuw said the original context explained why “it is evident why Beuys no longer wished to set up this monument in the museum that purchased it. That would have meant an impossibly reconstitution of a completed phase of the process. In the Kröller-Müller Museum a new phase in the transformation process took place – the tram stop was taken apart, pulled down and discarded, as Beuys put it. The various elements were carefully sorted and placed on the floor: the long piece of the rail freed from its original context, beside it the four barrels, tilted, then the column with the head, and then the crank and the case iron bars all placed in a heap. Notwithstanding, the whole work appeared as if it were lying waiting for some future use. However, the once tense relationship between the elements created by their carefully considered positioning had disappeared.” Ibid., 213.
70 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 31.
71 Ibid., 31.
Christian Lemmerz, *Afasi 1*, 1986, Statens Museum fur Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark
modify the framework; that is, to present the works as ‘dead’ or as merely ‘documentation’ rather than autonomous works of art. This is thus clearly a problem that goes beyond cases where there is a sanctioned modification of the display of the work, de facto the generation of a new work of art, to include artworks where the answer is less obvious.

The coupling of installation artworks that can no longer be presented in their original manner with extensive documentation can be seen as undermining the autonomy of the work of art. The documentation in conjunction with the remnants of the artwork destabilizes the work of art in a way that is similar to the contemporary artist’s de-centering of the autonomous artwork, which would ascribe artistic agency to the practice. The practice is sometimes carried out for educational purposes and sometimes done as part of the basic presentation of the work of art, often in the absence of original elements such as the performance by the artist. The autonomy of the artwork stems from its relationship to the viewer, and as Louise Cone states is “based on the Kantian notion of freeing aesthetic judgment from the world surrounding it, allowing for the sublime experience of entering into and being absorbed by the artwork one on one.”\footnote{Ibid., 14.} While the theory behind the autonomous artwork presupposes a visual hierarchy that many artists are working against in the very creation of installation works,\footnote{Claire Bishop, \textit{Installation Art : A Critical History} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.} this practice as expressed in the presentation of art should stem only from the artist and not from the conservator or museum professional. The presentation of documentation, in the form of videos, photographs or drawings, in addition to material remnants is problematic in that the conjunction itself de-centers the objects, as the viewer sees the work of art displayed as one would functional objects in an ethnographic museum. Robert Storr discusses the ramifications of such a practice:

“Thus, a situation is emerging in which works of art… will bear a resemblance to their original form that may be uncanny but at the same time lacking in vitality, rather like the naturally pickled Iron-Age bodies that were dug up in the Danish peat bogs, which briefly look lifelike before one comes fully to terms with the fact that they are utterly and completely dead. In such circumstances, we will have to exhibit much of the modern era as if it were evidence in an anthropological or forensic study of Modernism, rather than the direct presentation or vital incarnation of Modernism and the Modernist spirit. Museums of this sort will, not doubt, be interesting places to visit, providing us with many ways to look back in time and rethink what we have been through, even as we wonder at the ruins they contain.”\footnote{Storr, "Immortalité Provisoire," 38.}

The recent presentation of the cage used by Tehching Hsieh in five \textit{One Year Performances}, done between the years of 1978 and 1986, demonstrates this type of anthropological display of artworks [fig. 36].\footnote{Deborah Sontag, "A Caged Man Breaks out at Last," \textit{New York Times}, February 25 2009.} The cage is displayed in a gallery with hundreds of photos documenting the performance of the artist utilizing the cage, and is thus more an exhibit of \textit{documentation} than an artwork despite the presence of a
Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performances*, 1978-86 (original performance photograph), MoMA.
fundamental part of the original work [fig. 37]. While Hseih’s works largely consisted of performance, as the artist locked himself in the cage for five different one-year intervals, the significance in the action and presentation of the cage element clearly relates this example to works that are primarily material-oriented and that have limited performative or contextually contingent elements.

**Autonomous Art Object**

Two major conceptual issues discussed in this section, the idea of the ‘sanction as after-thought’ and the anthropological presentation of incomplete works, threaten the idea of the art object as an autonomous, self-enclosing entity that does not rely on the artist for meaning. In aesthetics, the autonomous art object is created through the process of *distanciation*, where art productions “transcend their native circumstances, moving beyond them into territories where they are circumscribed by new horizons.” It is through distanciation that the artwork becomes autonomous from its creator. The idea of the autonomous artwork deals with the entrance of artworks into public discourse and establishes them as separate and aesthetically arresting from both the viewer and the artist who created it. This process is established by four separate occurrences: when a work of art meets with the viewer and is “emancipated from the immediate references and shared reality of live communication,” when works of art become decontextualized both spatially and temporally, when this decontextualization allows for their presentation in foreign circumstances, and when the artworks leaves the hand of the artist and becomes “eclipsed by its self-evidence.” One does not need to understand this complicated aesthetics discourse, however, to understand its impact. Distanciation suggests that autonomous artworks present accurate and available information about the artist to the viewer. The importance of distanciation in conservation is “the suggestion that the aesthetic effects of an artwork can function independently from the artist’s intent while at the same time locating the ground of reference for artist’s intent in the artwork at hand,” and is seen as an alternative to dogmatic anti-intentionalism. Steven Dykstra believes this means that the viewer is free to investigate the aspects of the artist’s intent within the work without allowing for their full authority over the aesthetic perception and interpretation of the work. It is then the *autonomy* of the art object that allows “the sublime experience of entering into and being absorbed by the artwork one on one.” An historic quality expressed by many authors, the sublime as undermined here is best understood through the writings of Immanuel Kant on the judgment of taste.

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76 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 212.
79 Ibid., 212.
80 Dystra writes “the ideas of distanciation and autonomy suggest that the authority of the artist’s role is inexorably relative to concurrent roles played by media, by art historical contexts, and by beholders’ apprehensions. Interpretations of emotional, psychological, and intellectual meanings and purposes in art have only conditional associations with the artist's intent in these respects. Any apparent communication along these lines happens between the artwork and the beholder.” Ibid., 213.
81 Cone, "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," 14.
Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performances*, 1978-86 (exhibition photograph), MoMA.
Explanatory and demonstrative documentation, as used for the work of Tehching Hsieh, undermines the experience of the sublime by rupturing the limitlessness of the work of art and appealing to cognitive rather than subjective judgment. For Kant, writing in the section “Analytic of the Beautiful” in the book *Critique of Judgment*, the judgment of taste for anything is primarily subjective. This means that it is driven not by logical and cognitive judgment, but imaginative and aesthetic judgment. The feeling of either displeasure or pleasure, part of this judgment of taste, is not and objective sensation and is a “feeling which the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected by the representation.” While the subjective refers to the purely aesthetic estimating of an object or representation, the objective estimation refers to the cognitive processing or logical assessment of an object. The aesthetic judgment, a judgment of taste, refers to the beautiful and the sublime, ‘whether of nature or of art,’ with the latter ‘springing from a higher intellectual feeling.’ The sublime, the quality of greatness and extreme excellence, when applied to the aesthetic judgment of objects refers to the inspiration of awe by those ‘systems’ or concepts that are beyond the human faculty of understanding. While beauty stems from the limited form of an object, the sublime is “found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes a representation of limitlessness, yet with a superadded thought of its totality.” Contemporary art, tied up in an ‘agreement with nature’ according to Kant, often aspires to communicate grandeur that extends beyond the judgment of the beauty of its material form (beauty in the colloquial sense being an already undesirable quality for such works). The sublime, thus, is a quality often applied to artworks, as they aspire to the kind of limitless, vastness and greatness that is beyond comprehension in nature. The documentation that is exhibited alongside Tehching Hsieh’s work presents information appealing to the cognitive analysis of the object, disrupting the initial subjective, aesthetic experience of the work of art. The documentation also serves to define the work of art and to make explicit what was implicit, quantifying and confining the interpretations and experience of the work and thereby severely restricts its limitlessness. While arguments can be made for the idea that context-based artworks can never communicate that sublime in their reinstallation, there is reason to believe that even the remnants of the work of art are more sublime than their combination with what is essentially demonstrative documentation. A possible critique of the argument against the coupling of explanatory documentation with artwork is the idea that works necessitating such documentation are missing an element that renders them fragmented and unable to communicate feelings of the sublime. For performance-based installation artworks, this would be the idea that the missing original performance prevents the artwork from ever being considered in its total, sublime state regardless of the documentation present. For material-oriented installation artworks, this would be the idea that an installation can never be represented in its original context, both spatially and temporally, and is thus complete and lacking in the

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83 Ibid., 19.
84 Ibid., 15.
85 Ibid., 41.
86 Ibid., 40.
sublime regardless of the documentation. Both lines of argument would imply that the loss of the original artwork justifies a representation that is both informative and demonstrative, and should be presented in a similar way to archaeological or educational objects. While this argument is valid, a response is generated from the literature on the relationship of the sublime to skepticism. Kant’s assertion in his *Critique of Judgment* that sublimity depends less on the object than the viewer is used as the foundation for the argument in skepticism that doubts the capability of human comprehension by taking the “defeat of understanding by the sublime as a sign of human incapacity for knowledge or morality.”\(^{87}\) In the journals of Michel Montaigne, a Renaissance essayist, proponents of skepticism have identified the author’s disappointed reaction to the ruins of Rome as proof that skepticism renders the past incomprehensible or inaccessible.\(^{88}\) David Sedley, of Haverford College, argues in his essay “Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne” that the fragments of the ancient city of Rome inspired sublimity, in addition to skepticism, in Montaigne.

Sedley is able to posit this unity through the demonstration that the ruined state of Rome communicated just as much magnificence and power as the original city through what he terms “a series of impasses to grandeur erected by skepticism.”\(^{89}\) The flourishing skepticism at the end of the Renaissance was in response to the era and the movement’s attempt, through visual and actual reconstruction, to apprehend and learn from ancient civilization.\(^{90}\) The tension between the ‘threat of fragmentation and the hope of recollection’ in the archaeological and artistic record led to a growing belief that the past was not only inaccessible but also incoherent.\(^{91}\) Montaigne’s skepticism has been historically located in his ‘refusal’ to meditate on Rome’s ruins, stating instead that “one saw nothing of Rome but the sky under which it stood and the plan of its site.”\(^{92}\) As the might and visual grandeur of Rome had been exaggerated to create high expectations, by the likes of the famed poet Petrarch, Montaigne was understandably surprised and perhaps disappointed, as the reference to a ‘plan’ rather than ‘ruins’ has been interpreted as a slight. In the same paragraph, Montaigne’s journal goes on to say “those who said that one at least saw the ruins of Rome said too much, for the ruins of so awesome a machine would bring more honor and reverence to its memory: this was nothing but its sepulchre.”\(^{93}\) Sedley grants that these two statements demonstrate Montaigne’s skepticism and in effect declare the absence of the ruins. Sedley believes, however, that this absence itself inspires the sense of grandeur in Montaigne, as the traveler goes on to wax about the once awe-inspiring power of Rome, saying “because, even though quite dead, overthrown and disfigured, it still terrified the world, the world had buried its very

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\(^{88}\) Ibid., 1081.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 1088.

\(^{90}\) Sedley wrote how the paintings, writings, drawings, treatises of the time “assumed that no matter how mutilated the ruin, one could refer to its original status and make available to the modern world the exemplar of antiquity and thus that the scientific recovery of the past grandeur of Rome might contribute to the city’s rebirth.” Ibid., 1083.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 1081.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 1083.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 1084.
ruin. As Montaigne saw it, the absence of ruins and the fragmented remains of something that was once so large and powerful are actually a testament to Rome’s greatness, as it was this very quality which led to its destruction and concealment. This testament was thus more powerful than any reconstruction in the literature or art of the time. Sedley concludes that “in addition to inspiring skepticism, sublimity is inspired by it: Montaigne uses his doubts to fashion an aesthetic category for the grandeur that he feels.” The ruins reference the ‘infinite greatness’ of Ancient Rome, and thus inspire a feeling of the sublime despite their fragmentation.

This idea of sublimity in absence or fragmentation can be applied to works that acquire incompleteness over time. For the work of Tehching Hsieh, the remaining Cage itself might communicate more grandeur in the state of a remnant than when coupled with documentation as a way of reconstructing the original. That a work is important enough to be presented even in its incomplete state communicates magnificence not necessarily attainable through the reconstructive nature of the documentation. The experience of cultural ‘ruins’ as they can be called requires the same re-categorization as the experience of ancient ruins:

“While Montaigne’s skepticism may invalidate Renaissance knowledge of antiquity and thus reduce the authorship of antiquity as a collection of moral and epistemological exemplars, it also fashions for antiquity a new notion of aesthetic authority, and authority requiring a special category – the sublime – to accommodate it.”

An object that is left alone, allowed to be fragmented, becomes the subject for meditation on the intangible, conceptual aspects of the work that continue to exist fully despite the incompleteness of the physical aspect of the work. After all, the sublime as defined by Kant has a boundlessness and infinity that is “absolutely (not merely comparatively) great” and that requires in its contemplation a “faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense.” If art attempts, through its aspiration to the sublime, to a transcendental nature, then surely the contemplation initiated by fragmented objects is more desirable than that imitated by both the documentation and fragments. Documentation becomes a distraction to the contemplation and immersion in the work’s concept and physical ruins that in turn generates a feeling of conceptual boundlessness and thus the sublime. This discussion is at its core one of the nature of art– are art objects intended for aesthetic, cognitive or educational purposes? If artists are satisfied with their works being shown in an educational context, then maybe the explanatory and demonstrative documentation is welcome. For those artist aspiring to the transcendental, the limitlessness in conceptual content and the experience of the sublime, this kind of documentation simply is not an option.

The Role of External Information

94 Ibid., 1084.
95 Ibid., 1085.
96 Ibid., 1082.
97 Kant and Meredith, *The Critique of Judgement*, 45.
Both the presentation of Tehching Hsieh’s *One Year Performances* and Zoe Leonard’s *Strange Fruit* undermine the experience of the autonomous work of art. In the case of Leonard’s work, the meaning of the work as transformed by the artist’s sanction is hidden in a way that prevents the distanciation and decontextualization of the work through its ‘meeting’ with the viewer. The meaning in Leonard’s work is impacted by the specific practices of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the absence of such information prevents both the full conceptual and decontextualized understanding of the work. Concealing information about the artist’s sanction prohibits the work from becoming autonomous from its creator – a fundamental aspect of the work’s meanings lies with the knowledge of the artist and never becomes independent of her. While the importance of the artist’s sanction could be construed as affecting the autonomy of meaning for any work of art, the presentation of such information in the public sphere helps to establish a work’s an independence from the artist by providing equal and free access to that meaning.

For Tehching Hsieh’s work, the autonomous experience of the work of art is also ruptured. The concomitant documentation appeals to cognitive rather than subjective apprehension, and limits the possibilities even for incomplete artworks. This ‘cognitive’ definition of a work prevents the total immersion in the work, and undermines the overwhelming impression of greatness, which is characteristic of the experience of the sublime. As a ‘formless object’ represented by a certain ‘boundlessness,’ the sublime cannot be faithfully communicated through such an anthropological or ethnographic framework. Our discussion of the problem of installation art and the changing conservation methodology has demonstrated the need to seek artist’s intent externally to the work of art, yet the undermining of the autonomous artwork highlights the need to consider methods of presentation that encapsulate the requisite external meaning without completely undermining the status of the objects as works of art.

As not all art desires to attain a ‘sublime’ experience, and as the writings of Kant remain controversial, other ways in which documentation remains unsatisfactory need to be addressed. The discussion of Kant’s ‘sublime’ was included to address and use as a rallying point an historical concept that has been used over and over in explaining what it is exactly that makes art so powerful. There are many artists, however, who are not interested in achieving the sublime or who disagree with the term altogether. There are artistic movements such as Fluxus art, characterized by a matter-of-fact and anti-spectacle sensibility, that seek more to ignore or undermine the historical notion of the ‘sublime’ in art than to employ or appeal to it. In fact, installation art as an ‘umbrella’ genre can be said in many cases to employ attitudes and forms that detract from the experience of the sublime through a de-centering of the privileged position both of the viewer and the art object itself. Many artworks also shun and disdain the experience of beauty or enjoyment that Kant identified as being part of the judgment of taste (lying with the viewer and not with the object according to him), and may are “not always created exclusively for the purpose of... being experienced aesthetically.”98 These objections are reasonable and I concede that in many cases the ‘sublime’ is not

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applicable. However, it is possible that the qualities of ‘emotion’ and ‘imagination’ that can be extracted from Kant’s theory of aesthetics, through a potent reduction I might add, might still apply even when the ‘sublime’ does not. While Kant’s experience of emotion is incidental to the judgment of taste, as simply an byproduct of the experience of delight, other theorists have designated it a much larger place in aesthetic judgment. According to the art critic Clive Bell,

“The starting point for all system of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. (...) I do not mean, of course, that all works provoke the same emotion. On the contrary, every work produces a different emotion. But all these emotions are recognizably the same in kind; so far, at any rate, the best opinion is on my side. That there is a particular kind of emotion provoked by works of visual art, and that this emotion is provoked by every kind of visual art, by pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, carvings, textiles, etc., etc., is not disputed, I think, by anyone capable of feeling it. This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion.”

While Bell thinks “it is the mark of great art that its appeal is universal and eternal,” even work that do not aspire to or desire such transcendental qualities can still appeal to human emotion. The feeling of absence or emptiness that such artworks might engender, or the experience of not feeling anything, is still an emotion despite its nontraditional character. For those works where not a single drop of emotion is fostered, there is still the element of ‘imagination,’ which according to Kant arises from within the ‘free play of the cognitive faculties’ in aesthetic acknowledgment. In such circumstances,

“understanding is repeatedly challenged by the imagination to provide the concepts which imagination keeps challenging. One might therefore characterize this free play of the cognitive faculties as a dialogue, rather than a harmony, between understanding, which at the request of imagination furnishes certain determinate concepts, and the imagination, which keeps disobeying these concepts’ application by providing ‘a wealth of undeveloped material.’”

The imagination thus defies the fixed understanding of something by creating and suggesting new ideas, new alternatives – in the absence of any emotional response, the viewer is at least inspired in such a way by great art. Neither the experience of emotive or imaginative content need rely on an aesthetically pleasing or beautiful experience, and thus is still relevant for many contemporary deconstructive and decentered art objects. It would be hard to argue that any art, even when attempting to, can successfully suppress any element of subjective experience in the viewer. The discussion is thus brought back to Kant’s idea that the judgment of taste is primarily subjective, which remains in conflict

100 Ibid., 50.
101 Robertus van Gerwen, Art and Experience (Utrecht: The Department of Philosophy of Utrecht University, 1957), 82.
with demonstrative documentation. The experience of the ‘emotive’ and ‘imaginative’ faculties could indeed be disrupted by documentation, which takes away from the drama and the subjectivity of the experience by presenting fixed and unwavering information. The objective nature of documentation itself interferes with the ‘free play’ of imagination and sterilizes the highly personal emotional reaction. To those theorists who believe aesthetic judgment is not subjective, I have no response. It does appear quite difficult to argue, however, the constancy of taste or beauty or of any aesthetic judgment, as evidenced by Bell’s statement that “any system of aesthetics which pretends to be based on some objective truth is so palpably ridiculous as not to be worth discussing.” While I am not dismissing this perspective, it is a seemingly rare one that is not within the purview of this paper to debate.

The problem with too little or too much documentation, as evidenced by the work of Leonard and Hsieh, is that it prevents the work of art from remaining a ‘source about itself.’ This terminology distances this critique from the potentially controversial ‘autonomous art object’ by simply referencing the totality of the finished state of an artwork without designating where or by whom meaning is created. The art historian Bernard Berenson captures the sentiment behind this expression:

“In a sense, the works of art themselves are the only materials of the student of the history of art. All that remains of an event in general history is the account of it in document or tradition; but in art, the work of art itself is the event, and the only adequate source of information about the event, any other information, particularly if of the merely literary kind, being utterly incapable of conveying an idea of the precise nature and value of the even in art. An art that has failed to transmit its masterpieces to us is, as far as we are concerned, dead, or at the best a mere ghost of itself.”

An artwork functions as a ‘source about itself’ by communicating just as much information as is needed for it to be understood as an art object, which may change depending on the intentions of the artist. However, this necessary information is determined by the artist, and should not thus be a function of presentation after its conception and creation (except by the artist as part of the artist’s sanction). While this does not mean that the object as a ‘source about itself’ need be approached as an ‘historic ruin,’ meaning it should not be touched or interpreted by anyone or any manner external to it, this argument does reveal how documentation takes away from the communicative ability of the work of art. By revealing too much or too little information, the fundamental definition of an artwork as such is undermined. If documentation can serve to disrupt the imaginative and emotional content of artworks, as well as undermine its independent status as an art object, then perhaps it is not the ultimate answer to all conservation issues.

Chapter 6 | Conclusion

The Problem of Information Management

It was the futurist poet F. T. Marinetti, in a moment of prescient wisdom, who warned against art institutions becoming what he termed “public dormitories where you sleep side by side for ever with beings you hate or do not know.”¹ This sentiment encapsulates the problematic aspects of conservation— the presentation of works in a lifeless manner through too much information, or the presentation of objects the viewer does not know through a lack of knowledge. The display of the physical remnants of artworks, as demonstrated by Beuys’ ‘dead objects,’ does not have to be problematic in itself. The conception of the artist’s sanction as an ‘afterthought’ is not problematic unless the presentation of the work equates the sanction with the initial intent of the work of art. The problematic aspect of presenting too much information through demonstrative documentation remains the destabilizing of the autonomous work of art, or alternatively the rupturing of the subjective aesthetic experience. These two issues demonstrate the risks of improperly managing information in the presentation of a work, as the framing of objects within the art institution has become crucial to their understanding and perception. Cornelia Weyer encapsulates this issue when she writes how “at the moment when an installation is included in the display collection of a museum either the…museumisation process switches in and the installation loses its effect or the museum is called into question as an archive and treasure chamber.”² The proper activation of art remnants requires the revealing of just enough information, and conservators and museum professionals must then find a way navigate the delicate space between what is too little and what is too much. Inevitably, the debate over the amount of knowledge that should be revealed transforms into one concerning the most authentic presentation of the work of art.

Even without documentation, conservation has a troubled relationship with ‘vision’ due to the nature of the art objects and their interactions with the human gaze. While museums function as intermediaries in the intellectual processing of artworks, the interaction between the audience and the works is primarily visual and primarily internal. When one looks at an artwork, one primarily sees the formal and visual characteristics, and is not necessarily aware of all the external information related to that piece. Installation artworks thus require an activated viewer, as the audience must be willing and engaged in order to seek out the external and intangible information requisite for the understanding of many of the works. Museums aid this process by presenting the necessary information in a broad spectrum of ways, the most common being a label and wall text, and the task is thus both difficult and crucial. With Time and Mrs. Tiber for example, one would not necessarily know that some of the jars were found in Mrs. Tiber’s abandoned shed unless explicitly told so. The presentation of knowledge related to conservation is as complicated as the presentation of such external and conceptual meaning. When viewing a work, a person has no conception of the amount of information that exists concerning the work and its conservation, preservation and management.

Though some of this information is important and relevant, there is no definitive system for determining what kind of information and how much of it the public should or needs to know. The artists’ sanction and intent function, in an open-ended manner, to help define this process, by designating what kind of information is meaningful and necessary. As Jim Coddington said in our interview, the museum is not trying to fool the viewer that the information does not exist, but is also not trying to make it the center of discussion. When it is supposed to be the center of attention, however, he did say that it should be put forth as ‘front and center.’ In such cases, often with ephemeral works such as with Zoe Leonard’s *Strange Fruit*, information regarding the artists’ intent and sanction must be present as it plays a role in how the viewer understands and interprets the work. While the viewer may not chose to pursue such knowledge, it is important enough to the meaning of the work that it should remain available regardless. These kinds of issues concern the management of information, and demonstrate how conservation needs to evolve beyond simply ‘seeing’ the object as it is.

The conveyance of information to the public occupies a gray area in conservation methodology. If a viewer desired, as evidenced by the research presented in this paper, he or she could through dedicated research to find out a substantial amount of non-concept related information about the work of art. That viewer, however, will rarely, if ever, encounter such information about the conservation, maintenance and reinstallation of artworks on the wall labels in an exhibition. This kind of information is generally considered by many museums to be strictly internal; it is kept from the public in order to preserve the experience of awe and reverence when approaching the uninterrupted and coherent work of art, characteristic of the ‘aura’ of such unique works. There are other aspects to the secrecy, including the protection of the museum’s image in the event of conservation mishaps, etc., but the prevailing attitude largely stems from the protection of the experience of the work of art. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro recounted how she recently interviewed a famous American artist who said “if I wrote extensively about the work that it would be demystified.” As the conservation of a work has been shown, however, to have fundamental conceptual impact for contemporary works, as in the case of *Time and Mrs. Tiber* or *Gnaw*, this perspective could be considered outmoded and misleading. An excerpt from my interview with Glenn Wharton contains a discussion of the presentation of other documentary evidence with artworks:

EF: So does that then take away from the autonomy of the artwork when you have the two versions, because then it almost seems to piece exists somewhere in the middle?

GW: Yeah, I think there are many people who feel that it’s the art professional’s job to negotiate these things for the public, so that someone from the public can come in and experience the object the way the artist would’ve wanted it to be. When you transfer it to a museum it becomes the museum’s responsibility to decide what it is and what it should be. And it’s too messy to present this as contingent and controversial. I don’t agree with that point of view.

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EF: When you look at artworks now do you find yourself analyzing them technically or do you still . . .

GW: Enjoy them? I think I enjoy them more because I can look at them technically, I can read into the history, wonder if they’ve been restored or altered by people, or time. Anthropologists talk about the biography of things, the social biography of things, and I would add to that the material biography of things. Objects, works of art, as they travel through time and space do change, inevitably, and their contexts change. You know an archaeological object may have been a household, utilitarian object, then it broke and got buried, and dug up by archaeologists so . . .

EF: And why is that interesting in ethnographic studies but not available information for art now, and in ten years this will be part of the historical discussion and they will be looking back and saying, oh what did they do?

GW: And that’s interesting, I like to think that conservation and the kind of work we do is a really interesting area within museums, and I think the public would be interested if it were presented the right way [Appendix A].

While there are no definitive answers to the management of appropriate documentation, a reconsideration of its role in the issues of display and artist’s sanction has been outlined in the previous section. While too much documentation can have the effect of undermining the autonomous art object, a lack of information can be shown to be similarly problematic. In the case of displaying too much information, the documentation can begin to constitute the meaning of an artwork in a manner that weakens and impairs the viewer experience. While this is often done for works with a substantial performative aspect, the practice still demonstrates the risks in presenting unnecessary information. Though it is not currently a widespread practice, it is conceivable that demonstrative documentation would be used for installation artworks that are fundamentally defined by their context and cannot be reconstructed in a way faithful to the original intent for the work. These works, however, are meant to be expressed in three dimensions and are undermined by the additional presentation of information in the two-dimensional plane of photography or video. The exhibition of the various phases of Tehching Hsieh’s performance piece presents multiple realizations of the same work which are nevertheless conflated in one exhibition space, such that the kind of situation “arises in which interpretation upon interpretation becomes the reality” [fig. 38]. In such a situation, the photographs are utilized to supplement information about the conceptual aspects of the piece that are not effectively communicated in the presentation of the actual physical remnants of the work of art, which itself does not entirely coincide with the artist’s original conception. Jim Coddington said in our interview that “our documentation is in an ideal world sanctioned by the artist, but not really the same thing as what the conceptual artist was doing.”

Fig. 38

Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performances*, 1978-86 (exhibition entrance), MoMA.
such instances, external documentation replaces the materiality of a work with its primarily conceptual nature, and “the physical object may remain mute in the absence of instructions about how it is meant to address its audience.”9 And this issue is not confined to work with a large performative component, as the same question arises for the presentation of the failed restoration of the Henk Peeters work [fig. 22]. While the ICN and Centraal Museum Utrecht in this instance decided no longer to display the work, as it now constitutes material remnants rather than an a source about itself, not all institutions may be as fastidious about the integrity of such works.10 These issues of display are theoretically applicable to material-oriented installation works which have degraded to a point beyond repair and for which there are no appropriate measures of recreation or reinstallation in place.

In the same way that the display of too much information for Tehching Hsieh’s work undermines the autonomy and integrity of the work of art, the lack of information presented with Zoe Leonard’s Strange Fruit (For David) is also detrimental. The presentation of the work of art as an essentially decaying entity, without an explanation of the modifications from the artist’s sanction, creates a false continuity between execution and reinstallation. While the presentation of this kind of information would be an abnormality in fine arts exhibition, it is not unfathomable. Jim Coddington, in discussing artist’s questionnaires and the questions pertaining to degradation, said in our interview:

JC: This is where you take on the artist’s own statements. You ask the artist, “Is this amount of change acceptable or not?” And if it’s not, then, that’s not in and of itself sufficient evidence to go ahead and do something about it, we may feel that we can’t do anything about it, or to do anything about it would be such a large intervention that it becomes something fundamentally different, and then yes, perhaps we entertain the idea of either not displaying it, or displaying it with some explanatory materials [Appendix A].

While museums are usually ‘not trying to fool people’ in keeping information regarding the artist’s sanction internal,11 they are indeed obstructing access to important information that impacts the work conceptually. While Leonard’s work will at some point decay to the point of disappearance, a fate communicated by the state of the artwork during exhibition, it will do so in a much slower and controlled manner than is intimated. A viewer stumbling on Strange Fruit in the gallery might be prone to think that the work is even site-specific and, like Carol Mancusi-Ungaro thought, that it cannot be conserved because it fundamentally concerns the natural process of decay. The sanction affects the meaning of work, though in a lesser manner than for Time and Mrs. Tiber (which was to be placed in the research labs), as it is no longer about the chaos of degradation but rather about the creation of controlled decay that perhaps speaks to the innate human desire to extend the life of such works.

Information management is not a new problem for conservation, though installation art does pose more issues in the managing of the information which is presented. Artists’ interviews, information sharing networks such as the Committee for Conservation of the International Council of Museums and others, the various decision-making models and the fundamental practice of documentation are all aspects of the current conservation methodology for contemporary art and traditional art as well. As the excerpt from my interview with Glenn Wharton shows, conservators are also actively thinking about the presence of information external to the work in the exhibition and therefore comprehension of the work by those outside the discipline. This issue of managing information is relevant to almost every work discussed in this paper, as many of them have been the recipients of decisions that affect their meaning, however minutely. For Janine Antoni’s *Gnaw*, the replication of the lard cube from a mould could be considered information that the public needs to know [fig. 14]. Otherwise, they might be inclined to think that the artist had just made the teeth marks and incorrectly interpret them as fresh or recent. There is also a logical and reasonable argument against the public knowing such information, as the temporal relationship of the teeth marks to the exhibition of the work may not form a conceptual facet of the work as determined by the artist’s intent. With the work of Tara Donovan’s *Untitled (Pins)*, however, there is a similar and yet more complicated questions. Inside the work, which appears to be entirely made of pins, there is a wooden box that is visually concealed from the viewer [fig. 17]. I discovered its existence when discussing this work with Jen Mergel, who described it as a pragmatic decision Donovan made when creating the work in the studio, as it would have otherwise been too heavy or dense.¹² For this work, it could be argued, this information is best concealed from the viewer, though the decision is still tricky. Mergel elaborated on this difficulty and the questions the museum had for the artist:

EF: So is the box something that she would be ok with the viewers knowing or is that something . . .

JM: She doesn’t forefront that as part of the work, and she’s actually very, she wasn’t very specific about that when our education and interpretations came, and our guides have asked about that, should we tell them about the box inside? She said that’s really not the point of the piece, I mean really the point of the piece is the coherence of these loose pins and just the fact that their head and their weight, it’s really friction and gravity that bring the piece together and make it work. So she wouldn’t want to distract from that magic. With the fact that practically speaking it’s too heavy, and then there’s this long parenthetical explanation about why there’s this little hollow inside so it will be a little less dense on the floor, so she doesn’t ask us can you tell people about that. Obviously if somebody were to say, “Is that solid pins?” We would not lie to them. We’d say, you know ‘there’s actually one hollow form in the center to sort of evening out the density of the material. But if someone were to say “Is there a magnet inside?” No “Is there any glue?” No. And if they ask how it’s made, we can tell them, and this is again how the materials came in: she gave us the four sides, the interior frame, and then it’s boxes and boxes of pins.

While this approach is effective in keeping just enough information from the public without lying, it is easy to imagine how the informality and ambiguity of the dissemination process could become problematic. It is still unclear how important such information is and to what extent it should be known (for example, should it be included in an auction catalogue but not in a pamphlet on the exhibition?). There are rarely any definitive answers to the problems concerning information, and it is much easier to identify examples in retrospect where information has been mishandled and misrepresented. What this discussion does definitively demonstrate, however, is that the increased emphasis on documentation and information acquisition in new conservation methods is simply not enough for objects to be successful within the museum. That information has to be stored, shared, and above all managed correctly in accordance with its relationship to the meaning and understanding of a work.

The question with increased usage of documentation to constitute artworks with physical remnants remains whether this is an authentic presentation of the work of art. While the authenticity of materials themselves may be a highly destabilized conservation tenet, the authenticity of the idea or conceptual nature of the work of art remains a consistently important one. While documentation seeks to maintain these conceptual facets of a work, it does so in a way that recontextualizes and reformats the meaning of a work and how it is communicated to the viewer. It becomes a middleman between the original artwork and its understanding by the public, and begins to play a demonstrative and educative role. This possibility is, to a certain extent, more dangerous than the undermining of the autonomous art object; without recognizing this changing role, and presenting the artworks with such copious documentation in art settings as the artwork itself, the ‘hi-cult’ meanings of artworks are undermined in favor of more sentimental meanings. Muñoz Viñas defines Hi-cult meanings as those which “those meanings which are regarded as such by, or useful for, those disciplines of science and art considered as elevated by most members within a society.”¹³ Is the informative aspect of the work of art, privileged through documentation, really considered more important than the ‘hi-cult’ or avant-garde nature of that work of art? And can that ‘avant-garde nature’ really be appreciated through the middleman of the documentation? These are questions that conservation methodology will have to continue to confront, as even with all of the theoretical difficulties, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro is right when she said “I think that leaving a pile of rubble goes counter to our whole profession. We’re here to preserve, in some measure, what we have.”¹⁴ By problematizing the presentation of documentation, space is generated for further innovation. Mancusi-Ungaro herself suggested alternative ways of presenting art remnants. For the presentation Caulder’s Circus, which was exhibited in 2008 at the Whitney, she recently conceived of including sound, through the original music, as a way to activate the work in a more lively and realistic manner than through the inclusion of video footage (which was deliberately separated from the work in another room) [Appendix]. Even with the issues of documentation, it is not the job of conservation to transmit decontextualized fragments into the future. Conservation is thus

made inherently difficult by all the stakeholders in the shared cultural heritage, and by the natural human desire to save and preserve in whatever form and despite the stakes.

**Thoughts on Future Developments**

The major difference between more traditional and newer models of conservation lies in the type of change that is addressed. While both methods address the physical and chemical changes in an object, the conservation of installation artworks requires the confrontation of changes incurred by the reinstallation and storage of a work, by the evolving intentions of the artist as communicated by the artists’ sanction, as well as by the changing meaning of a work as it ages visually and representationally. In traditional conservation, age can be seen as less problematic as it often increases the value of a work and places it within the history of art. With contemporary art, however, as illustrated by Duane Hanson’s *Sunbather*, the presence of aging in the materials and representational content of a work remains problematic and sometimes undesirable. All of the variables that must be considered render the process of conserving contemporary art highly subjective and irregular, and make overarching standards in practice impossible. After all, the conservation actions for *Sunbather* were perfectly logical and defensible at the time they were undertaken, but are rightly criticized in the present. This criticism is common and expected, as conservation is specific to the time and place of its undertaking and as Barbara Magnum from the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum has said, “in fifty years, someone is going to call us bad restorers.” This fluctuation in values and ideals over time is unavoidable and will eventually leave many practices outmoded and shortsighted. Combined with the interpretive nature of reinstallation, the practice of conserving installation art and contemporary art in general appears to be unavoidably flawed. Does this imperfection have to be a problem, however? Perhaps it would be profitable to accept the interpretive and subjective aspects of conservation instead of attempting to force objective values on the process, and thus to focus primarily on the cultivation of the expertise of individuals.

While ‘expertise’ is already an important quality in the conservation discipline, there remains a substantial emphasis on objectivity that is impractical and unrealistic. As described in the section on the tenets of conservation, the discipline arose out of positivistic ideals and scientific advances. Prior, it had been too irregular and idiosyncratic to function effectively or accurately, as was seen in the recreative restorations performed by Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc. While it is arguable whether any artwork can be evaluated objectively, even with the use of scientific instruments, it is certainly clear that installation art specifically requires the subjective influence of conservators who is capable, based on personal experience, of making the difficult

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16 Albert Albano wrote in relation to this: “Finally, why have we, as conservation professionals, not come to accept the physical changes in twentieth-century art with the same objectivity we use in the evaluation of art from earlier periods?” Albert Albano, ”Art in Transition,” in Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price, Talley, Mansfield Kirby, Melucco Vaccaro, Alessandra (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 179.
decisions and compromises necessary for the continued survival of a work. Conservators are involved throughout the entire practice, having become active rather than passive agents with contemporary art, and their presence is neither neutral nor insubstantial. The personal investment that generates the desire to preserve works which defy all conventional tactics has by its nature a highly subjective character. Rapid and debilitating change is an inevitable outcome for many contemporary works, so why not accept that conservators must act mainly based on their intuitions, emotions and individual expertise in order to create the most appropriate methods for the best possible results? This concept is already evident in many of the current decision-making models for contemporary art, where general guidelines are drawn with the given principles. This development is crucial to the evolution of the discipline, as it would be much better to have conservators who display a “readiness to engage with…perhaps puzzling idiosyncrasies”17 than those inclined to simply follow the rules both steadfastly and conservatively. In order to prevent carelessness and the gross mistreatment of objects, systems of review and analysis would certainly employed to regulate and standardize practice to a reasonable extent. This idea of embracing subjectivity and interpretation as a fundamental aspect of conservation is by no means intended to challenge the usefulness of abstract ideals in conservation, and mainly concerns the general attitude towards conservators and the expectations placed on the discipline as a whole. As the changing methodologies and the continued emergence of new issues demonstrate, the discipline is transforming and the way it is perceived will undoubtedly change as well.

The existence of certain issues in the presentation and management of information does not detract from the significance of the current and evolving conservation methodologies, which, unlike prior models, concern the specific needs of contemporary art. The kind of analysis and proposals presented here is only possible because of those concerned professionals who worked to highlight the unique issues confronting non-traditional twentieth and twenty-first century art in the first place. Many of the problems in conservation practice relate to the already controversial debate over the ownership of information, which concerns the role of the audience and the transparency of art institutions. These issues of the management and presentation of knowledge, while important to the understanding and authentic presentation of a work, remain secondary to the fundamental tenets and basic practices of conservation that keep many installation artworks and sculptures from becoming extinct. That conservation and reinstallation practice for contemporary art has reached the point of theoretical debate demonstrates how far it has evolved. It must continue to evolve, with the input of many perspectives and disciplines, in pursuit of the most dynamic management of contemporary cultural heritage.

Bibliography


Conservation, American Institute for. "Definitions of Conservation."


Appendix A

Interview with Jim Coddington

Interview with Richard Leventhal

Interview with Andrew Lins

Interview with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro

Interview with Jen Mergel

Interview with Glenn Wharton
Appendix A

Lizzie Frasco Interviewing Jim Coddington, Chief Conservator at MOMA

February 13, 2009

EF: I brought some different works I am interested in. I spoke with Glen about the Gary Hill piece, because he was talking about the different migration they were doing. I was particularly interested in the Anish Kapoor piece that there’s no picture of on the website.

JC: That’s the blue one?

EF: I assume.

JC: I guess since there was no picture . . .

EF: I assume, it’s a sculpture, right?

JC: Basically it sits on the floor and its covered with raw pigment. It’s ultramarine, it’s a brilliant, brilliant blue.

EF: And every time you install it do you order more pigment, or do you have . . .

JC: No. Enough of it seems to be sticking on it that I don’t think we’ve had to replace much.

EF: I thought there wasn’t an agent on it?

JC: I’m looking at these realizing that I can speak to some extent about some of these but Linda Zikerman, our sculpture conservator, has worked on several of these. Some of which, for instance, Glenn I think can tell you everything you need to know as much as . . . The Matthew Barney. The Cabinet of Baby Fay La Foe, we did a fairly substantial treatment on, several years ago, and really what that treatment involved was corresponding and ultimately working with and supervising Barney’s studio assistants in the re-fabrication of parts and fixing the various parts.

EF: See that becomes so interesting to me because that knowledge basically becomes sort of oral history. You know?

JC: It does and it doesn’t. In that we now have very complete notes in our conservation treatment files of what happened, of the correspondence and so on. It is and in that sense it is perfectly analogous to a traditional condition and treatment report. It’s just that the actual treatment was undertaken by somebody else. But the notes and the documentation of it is pretty much the same.

EF: What about the re-fabrication of elements though, is that then done . . .

JC: That I do believe potentially becomes more problematic in the future. And again, if you want a reference on re-fabrication of Matthew Barney, three of my colleagues here did a article that was published by the Tate, it was conference last year . . . Plastics, is the name of it. And essentially this was a work portions of which needed to be re-fabricated. We talked about it with the artist in his studio and decided that we were going to do a better, you know something that was closer in appearance to the original. We were going to change the materials, because the materials had degraded, so to remake it one-to-one would have just had the problem back to our laps a few years later. So we were looking for
materials that would have greater longevity, that had for all intents and purposes, had the same appearance. So that was the conservation brief put before us, and could we fabricate this to look so much the same that it is, for all intents and purposes, is the same object, or the original object again.

EF: What about having it known to the public that . . .

JC: This is where you take on the artist’s own statements. You ask the artist, “Is this amount of change acceptable or not?” And if it’s not, then, that’s not in and of itself sufficient evidence to go ahead and do something about it, we may feel that we can’t do anything about it, or to do anything about it would be such a large intervention that it becomes something fundamentally different, and then yes, perhaps we entertain the idea of either not displaying it, or displaying it with some explanatory materials.

EF: But then if it were to be visibly different, say you did the sculptural equivalent of in-painting the Italian method, the crosshatches, if you did that, then the unity of the piece would be compromised.

JC: Yes. This is certainly not a conversation, an argument unique to contemporary art. You cite the perfectly fine example of doing *tratteggio* for retouching, where if you stick your nose to the picture you can see where it’s been retouched. Some people simply will not accept that, they think the work of art should be fully integrated to best of one’s ability so that there is at no point any sense of the intervention of somebody’s hand other than the original artist. That’s what you should be doing. This is a longstanding debate in our field, and it will never go away, because there inevitably will be change that happens to objects, and how you deal with that change, in restoration, and presentation, and inevitably this is a discussion about what is the most authentic presentation of a work of art.

EF: I thought it was really interesting in the book where you said something that Frank always says, we talk about it in relation to buildings, that for contemporary pieces the audience always want it to look new, they can’t accept a certain amount of age. Whereas Piero Manzoni, or some other older avant-garde artists, like Naum Gabo and all these foam sculptures, their work aged rapidly and highly visibly, and that’s ok. And this is a really interesting argument, because you have the public stakeholder wanting it to look a certain way because it’s contemporary, but then you have this idea that objects are historical – what about their historicity, you know?

JC: My guess is that in Frank’s course, you’ve read Alois Rieg’s *On Monuments* – for me, being close to 100 years old, maybe even more, it’s a really thorough presentation of the problem.

EF: It’s so interesting. With Ruskin too, and Lowenthal, I was thinking ‘these are on monuments,” but are really applicable to my thesis as well.

JC: If you’re also looking for these kind of historical examples, that issue of the *Art Journal*, will have stuff on Morris, William Morris, and you know that you can’t reconstruct these Gothic monuments and so on. He aestheticizes decay. And that is sort of the same argument.

EF: So how do you, and you can speak for you, or the department, how do you deal with this idea of gradually letting objects look older? Or is it something you face case by case?

JC: As a conservator you know things are not what they once were. We know this as surely as the sun rises in the east – it just does. We know it better than anybody else. We’re not trying to fool people that it doesn’t exist, we’re just trying to not make it the center of discussion. Now, when it’s supposed to be the center of discussion, when the fragility and ephemerality of the object is part of the intention then yes, let’s put it front and center. Here is another very good example … minimalist painting. Which are typically monochromatic surfaces, very matte, like the Kappor, that are extremely delicate, and extremely
difficult to restore. And the discussion was all around...well do you try to do anything about this? At what level can we educate ourselves to accept more change in these things than we have to-date.

EF: Things of your own time you want to look a certain way.

JC: And Andrea Kirsch did a summary of this online discussion in the Ad Reinhardt exhibition catalog published last summer. There was an exhibition at the Guggenheim that was an outgrowth of a collaborative project between the Guggenheim and us on Ad Reinhardt’s paintings, painting technique, and how to restore essentially over-painted Reinhardts. Works that had been made to look new again, which is extremely problematic.

EF: It’s interesting how if you don’t know that that’s happened the value is one thing, but then as soon as you know the value changes... and that’s kind of what my thesis is about – addressing authenticity. I know it’s a tired subject, but looking at authenticity in terms of installation art and knowing that I’m never going to argue that in a western art market people should ignore authenticity, but that in terms of installation art we might really just have to completely stretch what we think of as...

JC: People have been doing installation art for centuries. What is the best example of it? Triptych paintings for churches. Now you go up to the Met and you’ll find bits and pieces of those installation art works scattered on the walls completely ripped out of context. So when you put it in that kind of context you say, the changes that we might be making to these contemporary installation works don’t even register comparatively. And everybody’s fine with the changes... I can use stronger words, to these early installation art works, works that were made for the churches.

EF: I agree with you when you said in the article that all artwork is made to be ephemeral. Do you watch the Colbert Report? Because the director of the Whitney was on last night, and it’s really interesting because they’re discussing that Obama poster and how the AP is suing, and he’s saying “It’s all about intent” and trying to explain to Colbert that intent is what matters.

JC: I can just see Colbert say what his intention is towards this art, and well let’s honor those. He’s incredibly smart. Very well-informed on so many issues. I can’t wait to see this.

EF: With intent, with ephemeral art works I understand that, because you know I study art history, that’s what we know right? But then I think about the public stakeholder, and I think about my fellow students, and institutions owning a work and it starts to become a little more complex. This idea of buying a work and not necessarily being sure and knowing to some extent that it is purposefully ephemeral, because of the deliberate use of materials, but not being sure whether they wanted it to fall apart, and then ten years later you ask them and they’ve changed their whole concept.

JC: Yeah, it’s a moving target. That’s part of why it’s so interesting because it’s a moving target but you’re always searching for core principles by which whatever action you take or don’t take is ultimately explained. Yeah, contemporary art, I think one of the things that has further complicated this discussion even in the ten years since that paper was published, though I think I allude to it in that paper, is the commodification of art. And when money becomes part of the equation, it becomes... the kind of abstract and philosophical elements take a back seat.

EF: Do you think that these artists who say they specifically want their works to degrade, I’m thinking of the artist Xu Bing for example, and he uses silkworm trees – you know the tree will die in a small container in a museum, and I’m wondering then if all the museum then has are the photographs and the rights to the image, and showing the image. Is that the work living in the documentation?
JC: I think there are going to be examples where the work lives in the documentation. And that from the artist point of view this is the way part of the unforeseen and therefore planned life of the artwork will be. The artist has turned it loose on the world, and the world has they currently understand it the way an artwork will travel through this world, and they want to turn it over to the world and say it’s now yours, I’m not in control of it anymore.

EF: But doesn’t VARA (Visual Artists’ Rights Act) then really complicate that issue?

JC: If may, and when you start to, it’s probably always going to because this is more about the commodification… like how Disney wants to control Mickey Mouse forever. These reproduction rights become part of the discussion, and they really should never ever be part of the discussion. At least they shouldn’t – the fact that we’re almost 100 years out from the creation of some works and they aren’t in the public domain is wrong. It’s just wrong.

EF: There is a pretty interesting case in Modern Art, who Cares? I’m sure you’ve read, the case where the artist Krijn Giezen had this sort of mixed-media tapestry work called Marocco at the Franz Hall museum, and I think it was ten or fifteen years later it became infested with bugs, and they wanted to tell him that they were going to kill the bugs, and he told them they couldn’t cause it was his intention for the work to degrade over time. But the committee then did the research and decided that he had changed his mind, and that originally the piece was supposed to be a souvenir rather then a document of decay, and they exterminated the bugs, and published it, and it, you know, seems ethical to me.

JC: But at the same time, yes, an artwork rarely ever lives in isolation. So lets say we had an infested work of art in our collection. We’re not going to put other parts of the collection at risk just for the sake of that one. We’ll either fumigate it or isolate it depending on what we think would be the most appropriate for that work. But you know that is why when you hear people say the artist is always right, those people are wrong. The artist is not always right, there are always going to be contingencies, that’s just the very nature of things.

EF: Have you had pieces in the MoMA where the intent is for the piece to actually be destroyed?

JC: Yeah over time, but not yet. Of course then there are the works that are truly ephemeral, the one-time installation, or that you can repeat and repeat and repeat, you know putting candies on the floor. You take these and you remake them. There are specifications around what we’re supposed to be putting there for people to take away, and sometimes they are more specific, for instance the printed posters, the weight of the paper is pretty similar, if you took one away today and compared it to one you took ten years ago, they’d probably be pretty similar other than whatever aging went on in the ten years. Whereas with the candies I think there’s a greater latitude and it’s sort of very generic.

EF: What happens if the producer of those candies goes out of business, is there a stipulation that another candy, a similar candy can then . . .

JC: Well a good analog to this one of the things that Kim brings up in her article about Duane Hansen and a sculpture of his, where a sunbather on a lounge on a beach, with all the accoutrements of lounging on the beach, but it was made in the late 60s, early 70s, and amongst these pop culture elements was a can of Tab, and that’s faded or degraded somewhat. Do you go out and find yourself a can of Tab, or do you update it to a can of Diet Coke which is what he would almost certainly use now? One can make an argument for both: both have full elements of authenticity, one of historical authenticity, one of conceptual authenticity. Nothing wrong with either solution.
EF: But when the MoMA buys pieces they usually have these contracts that stipulate all these instances of . . .

JC: Well some things will have contracts, but you buy a painting, you bought the painting. That’s not complex. But a piece of installation art . . .

EF: It’s interesting how the artist becomes so much part of installation work.

JC: And they do need to give us some guidance on these, but they also need to fulfill some, again with the digital media and so on, and I’m sure Glenn explained this, getting exhibition copies, masters, etc.

EF: He said you guys have been collecting old technology in order to have a stockpile of . . .

JC: Yeah, eventually that’s a solution that doesn’t work, but you try to make it work that way for as long as you can. It’s called punting. We just punt the ball and let somebody else deal with it.

EF: Basically yeah. Well the idea of having a work degrade as part of the concept – if it’s degrading in storage and no one sees the process of degradation, and the work is supposed to eventually disappear, but it almost seems that if it’s not in front of the audiences’ eyes then . . .

JC: Right but this is also true for works that aren’t meant to degrade. Again, the artist David Nobrooks (sp 23:28) said this, and this is a mind-blowing concept to conservators. He said, “My work will be preserved by being seen.” Which essentially he’s saying it really in the end does not have to exist in the flesh, it can ultimately degrade, but as long is has been absorbed into, and been referred to and understood by the next generation of artists and the next generation of art, is has this sort of immortality. And that’s in a certain way, it’s incredibly optimistic.

EF: That’s the thing about the public stakeholder, art history students, think about certain artists, is it better for them to see recreation of a certain installation, and know how it worked, or to see it completely constituted in the documentation? I think that would be a really interesting question to pose to artists, right? Yes you don’t want to acknowledge your art is part of some movement, but in twenty years it will be, and in order for you to live as an artist it will be discussed and looked at. I just think that’s an interesting proposition, you know, how the public then becomes part of it.

JC: There are lots of different ways that an artwork gets defined. The reception of it by its various audiences is part of that definition. And part of the ongoing redefinition of the work, whether that is through art history or, David suggests the re-interpretation, or re-invigoration of a work in somebody else’s work.

EF: Glenn mentioned several media artists, who some were willing to give the code for their program and some who weren’t. And the artist with the LED screens, he said the work . . . all the LED screens were installed in the galleries and there were questions and random words . . . oh, 30 Questions per Minute, Rafael Lozano Henner, and he said the piece could be reinstalled and they had that documented, and so then that leaves open that ability for other works to be reinstalled.

JC: I think it really is interesting though to again situate things historically and it seems so simple to us, you know, Velasquez makes a painting and this is the way it will be displayed, and we think that’s well understood, but if you go back and read the art theorists in Spain in the 17th century there is this incredible amount of detail and theory behind what each different kinds of brush marks mean, what
developing a composition one way versus another mean, and you know these are sort of the theoretical constructs of that time, that are analogous to the same theoretical constructs of our time.

EF: And those paintings don’t seem to pose a problem to us now.

JC: Right, cause we simply have chosen to forget those complications.

EF: I think you put it nicely in the book when you said “there’s an inherent tension between preservation and presentation of art that is brought into stark relief by contemporary art.” That’s why installation art is so interesting, where does art go from here?

JC: I think people said the same about minimalist art or conceptual art, you know conceptual art is just destructions, how much more reduced can it get than that. Well it didn’t get more reduced, it got more complicated. The artist will keep it interesting. I don’t know where it will go. All I want to do is make the effort to articulate the principles of preservation, whether they are the set of instructions, or the set of documentation, one step removed from a set of instructions.

EF: The issue of use is interesting because if you can preserve a piece of art in a freezer, that’s all well and good, but if you can’t re-present it then …

JC: One thing that has been occurring to me is that the idea of documentation as sufficient to be the nugget from which you see the work of art can spring, you know how much are we given license to even contemplate this because of the advent of conceptual art, where again, it was a set of instructions, granted given by the artist, whereas our documentation is in an ideal world sanctioned by the artist, but not really the same thing as what the conceptual artist was doing, or would this idea of documentation as being in some measure sufficient have never flown without the advent of conceptual art?

EF: That’s a really interesting idea because while many works are still being made by the artist’s hand, like you said you have Matthew Barney’s assistants coming and doing the work. These assistants, these artists, they recognize your staff will be doing what these assistants do now, right?

JC: Donald Judd is a very good example here, where one of his assistants has made a career of the restoration, fabrication, re-fabrication of his works, and one could argue the merits and demerits of this endlessly and we tend to, but these become industries themselves.

EF: Does it in any way seem like the fact that they’re not tied to a particular institution places them more in the role of artist than conservator?

JC: That’s why we work with them. Rather than just say bring it back to us in two weeks, whatever you got that’s good with us. It’s where we try to enter that dialogue between what constitutes, respects the historical aspects of the work as we now define it, and yet also tries to improve upon, usually are aesthetic problems with the work. To restore or remake parts so that they integrate as a whole.

EF: Except for the Janine Antoni work, where I think after the lard is shown, it is then disposed and recast next time.

JC: Yeah, but that’s not the way she originally conceived it. She originally conceived it as staying, but it didn’t work, so she thought up…

EF: But she was part of that process, so that makes it different.
JC: Oh, yeah it makes it hugely different but stop and think about the possibilities here. Let’s say Janine were not here, and the problem was a slow work but still inevitable one, but let’s just say this was a degradation process that took decades instead of a shorter period of time, and Janine was not here to instruct us on this, might we not come up with the same solution? It would not have the same sanctity. I can’t abstractly think of any other way around this problem, whether it’s her posing it to me, or a curator posing it to me because she’s not here to pose it to me. It’s a logical solution.

EF: I was interested at this point because I think this is something that might develop over an artist’s life – you said, “the use of ephemeral materials doesn’t always mean a lack of interest in having your artwork be preserved.” I would be interested in that claim, just as artists become more aware of conservation if conservators reach out to them, although they’re probably slightly aware, and then they choose to continue in the same materials, it does pose this question of, even if they’re not saying they want their works to disappear, their actions kind of speak that they do, right?

JC: Yes, yes and no. If they’re asking a conservator what to do, they’ve got longevity to some extent. I was speaking to an artist yesterday, she works with watercolor on mylar, she stretches it, this is an inherently fragile way to make paintings, and one of the things she wants to do is put a varnish on these as a means of stabilizing them. And yet she doesn’t want to, the varnish will alter the quality of the watercolor and she wants to minimize that. So she wanted to know what material do I use? I said the more important question is use the material you know, and are comfortable with, cause you’ll be able to manipulate it and achieve the effects you are satisfied with. It’s not a matter of material; it’s a matter of your understanding of your work, and your hand, making those decisions. It’s not a material question.

EF: Even if the varnish doesn’t change the look of it, the tension between the varnish and the vinyl, they stretch at different rates.

JC: Yeah but that’s probably the least of the issues. I think that if she succeeds she’ll be fine. The work will be out there for a good long time.

EF: One more question, what would you say to someone who speaks to the intentional fallacy when discussing artists intent at the center of conservation?

JC: It is a loaded question. Have you read Steve Dykstra’s intentional fallacy paper (yes). I would say there are you know, it my sort of wise ass response is, you hear art historians, art historians will sit around and talk about the intention of the artist, they tend to be talking about the state of mind, what was going on. Conservators sit around and talk about the artist’s intention, but you better watch out cause something’s going to happen, cause what we mean by intention is a vehicle towards making real world decisions. This is not an abstract argument, and it is a tool to arrive at decisions. And so of course it’s easy to say, you can’t know anybody’s intention. That then denies the very fact of art. Cause you can’t know the intention, and you can’t guess at it, not even guess at it – this bring lots of information to bear to understand what it is, but it doesn’t even exist, it just doesn’t exist.

EF: If you’re not going to look at intention then you might as well just say these works are ethnographic objects, in the same way you would show a bowl in a museum.

JC: Why don’t we just make up some even more, it just entered from some other dimension momentarily and then it was gone.

EF: I think that’s really a wonderful explanation. I’m just always curious because what a lot of people that I’m working with are saying to me. Lastly does the museum show objects that are visibly degraded?
JC: Oh sure.

EF: Does the museum consider showing the object with photograph of what the object used to look like?

JC: No, um, I think that that is, it’s not an impossible thought, it seems to me that it’s just way too problematic, when you think about it in terms of the collection as a whole. Because when you select out a few, it’s sort of like saying, “Well these are the best illustrations of what’s going on everywhere.” And it’s really not the case. I think that by the same token one does not want to make the public believe that everything is in mint condition, when we all know it’s not, the art certainly is in varying levels of condition, but I think in a very subtle way that kind of information is transmitted to the public when we put the painting behind glass, that says fragile. When we put works on platforms that says fragile do not touch, things like that make it clear that these things do change over time, and we institutionally make an effort and commitment to try to minimize that.

EF: I agree if you had an object how it once looked and currently looked, it’s confusing for the viewer.
Lizzie Frasco interviewing Richard Leventhal. Curator in the American Section of the UPenn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Professor in the Department of Anthropology

February 19, 2009

RL: I would say that you do need to differentiate between conserve and preserve, and you do need to differentiate in some sense the ideas behind conservation, preservation, or whatever word you want to use, and the actual doing of it. And the first question that one I think has to ask with cultural heritage, and if you ask me what heritage means I’ll shake my head, because it really comes down to in some sense, heritage is very much the concept of things of the past that we identify as being important to us. And what it really comes down to then, and in fact I’m writing about this as we speak, what is perceived to be important and how does one determine what is important. And why do we want to save it? And we also always destroy things of the past, it’s a process that goes on, anytime you build a building you’re destroying something that was there beforehand. So the question really comes down to knowing what was there beforehand, assessing it “value” and then being either willing or understanding the implication of that destruction.

EF: What’s so interesting for contemporary architecture and contemporary art as well is because they’re of our time people expect them to constantly look new. There’s a sense that contemporary artwork should not have a sense of age. Which then speaks to this concept of historicity, that’s a term that keep popping up in my reading, I’m not even sure it’s a real word, that idea of well, if it’s a piece from the 1960s, that’s 40 years old, so it should have some sense of age.

RL: At the same time it’s also very interesting that people say well we can destroy something in 1960, but of 1860 we shouldn’t destroy. And so you have this sort of question whether it’s new, whether it’s old, does it mean something. It’s very interesting. There’s a discussion going on right now in Berlin, but in Berlin, right now because the center of Berlin used to be identified by a very old Chateauxed, huge building, I forget the name of it, and then when the city was divided they destroyed it, and the Russians built a 1950s. I think it was, it was low building, gorgeous exterior of this sort of bronzy glass type stuff, really very much of a beautiful architecture of the 1950s 60s not really fascist as much as this modern architecture of the time. And Berlin that old building was full of asbestos, it was a disaster, really not in very good shape, it was recently used by artists as lofts, but most importantly, the city decided to destroy that and rebuild this old Slosh Chateau. It’s actually a new representation of the old, bringing back the old city but in fact they destroyed what I thought was a very beautiful, I never was inside it, a very beautiful building.

EF: I’ll have to bring that up to Frank Matero, because I take a few classes with him.

RL: This is a really good example of this. There’s a lot of stuff online about this. SO here is just a good example of the past, the present, the relatively recent present, the looking into how to make it look old.

EF: Well managing the age of objects is quite a difficult task, right?

RL: What do you mean by managing it?

EF: Distinguishing between the age it has when you acquire the object and the age it has as it has over time in storage?
RL: Understanding age is an important part, but it shouldn’t be the only thing. As I said a 1950s 60s building can be as important historically, culturally as an 1860s building. It’s hard to say that it all relates back to community, but it really does relate back to what a community is.

EF: I’m really interested in the public stakeholder, I guess, because I feel in conservation a lot of the times certain, I was just meeting with some people at the MoMA the last two weeks, you know they still don’t distinguish visually or verbally through the labels, what has been reconstructed and what hasn’t. And a lot of that is about addressing the unity of the art, but I think that it’s interesting to find that in relation to ethnographic objects, when you have that very clear distinction, they’re just sort of the polar opposites, and it’s weird because I consider both of them cultural heritage.

RL: It’s also interesting I think when you look at the Met’s Greek and Roman galleries where there’s been, with some of the Greek and Roman stuff was in different time periods, the convention was to do much more reconstruction and development and so on, and that is part of the viewing process, is understanding what is real, and what real means, and so on. Some of the reconstructions were done 300 years ago, but it is that question of what is real, what isn’t real, how you determine it. And a lot of curators, and I’m not saying this not so you can blab it all over the place, but curators are very tough because they do set the standard, and therefore the perspective they oftentimes have, and I do sometimes, is that what I think is important, is what I think is important and therefore it is important. And sometimes that viewing process is a critical one.

EF: Well it’s interesting because conservators, and especially with contemporary art, become more than just scientists, or sort of craftsmen, they’ve had to step over into this realm of theory and in order to fight back, a lot of times there’s that tension there between how the institution wants the object to be displayed, and how the conservators think it should be displayed.

RL: And I think conservators more and more need to think about themselves as two things: one as being an integral part of preparation and presentation, but also, and I’m sure with your stuff it comes into play, the not causing a roadblock for the display of these things. You know there’s the whole question of with contemporary art, and new material and different materials, one hopes that the materials and the conservators say it gets to the point where it can’t be on display, and has to be preserved. The whole idea is that it has to be on display. The public is in fact the integral part of the piece. What was I reading this morning, I can’t remember, talking about Western museums as white walls where you put art, whether that’s ancient art or modern art, in contrast to a much more contextualized concept of what it is, and you don’t have white walls, and you don’t have the sort of clean space, and you put it into a much more contextualized framework of what it is, and it’s at that point that you don’t want any roadblock. You want to preserve it, but you want to move forward. And a lot of times conservators do put up roadblocks, and say, “you do that, you’ll lose some of it.” Well the losing is part of it.

EF: I think in 50 years the white wall museums will have evolved even more, so the museum as we know it now, will then be you know almost historical. Almost sort of like the Frick, or the Barnes, these sort of house museums, we now think of as historical. When they were first built it was a similar thing to an art space now.

RL: The question is what are they going to evolve in to? Are they going towards, and obviously I won’t be around in 50 years, I’ll be well over 100, but what is it going to evolve into. Does it evolve more and more into a black box or a white box, even more so than the Louvre, or does it evolve back into something else, more contextualizing, more of a framework. I mean the interesting thing about Barnes, or the Frick the Morgan Library, these places, well not the Morgan actually, created a new context for the objects, it was not an old context, but a new context and a very acceptable context but still new. It wasn’t a church, the laymen collection of the Met, for example, these were some early Church art that was in the
guys home. And the recreation of his home was not a recreation of its original context, but the creation of a new context. And the Met’s preserving the new context not the old context.

EF: Someone at the MoMA, one of the conservators, Jim Coddington, he told me that he thinks with installation being all relational. You know church art was originally all the same way, everything was planned specifically, so even when we consider more traditional cultural heritage that we already know how to deal with, in itself hasn’t been thought about in all the complexities.

RL: In some sense it comes down to even that art was taken out of context and removed from its context. And it really does come down to the fact that even contemporary art is very much contextualized in terms of more so than just the physical space that’s around it, and more so the personal space, I think, that’s around it. Meaning it was a performance art, you need a person sitting in the audience, you need someone looking, you need somebody standing there. In some sense church art requires that be doesn’t require that, because it creates the context associated with God, the Madonna is there, you don’t need someone to be looking at the Madonna to understand the Madonna is there. But you sort of do at the same time. Christianity is sort of participatory and not participatory.

EF: Do you think, speaking of installation art, is art that’s being made right now, literally in the last ten years, is that already cultural heritage, or is there some transition point where it becomes cultural heritage, because it hasn’t necessarily been parsed out yet, we haven’t had the time to choose what we’re going to say and not, I mean to some extent we have, but not in the same sense say than we did for Baroque painting.

RL: The question is what you’re asking is when does something become heritage and when does it not? And I think the answer to a large degree is I think heritage is more community based, meaning it tends not to be an individual saying “This is important”, it’s a community saying something is important. And let me just give you an example in the past: was the Eakins painting that caused the controversy, the Gross Clinic, was that heritage before the controversy occurred? And the answer was yes, but in some sense, it had not reached the point of the community actively saying it was, though it had acquired it in a way. Was the Gross Clinic heritage the day Eakins finished painting it? Probably the answer is no, because I don’t think the community was involved in that point. And at some point the community says “This represents us.” And I think that’s sort of what heritage is, the representing of us, the acknowledging of it, but it is not necessarily that is definable as saying, “this is of the Gross Clinic that was in Philadelphia”; Philadelphia heritage includes things that were made in other places and ended up here. I mean in a very same way the Rocky statue is Philadelphia heritage today. While people fight over whether it’s on the steps of the Art Museum, it’s not art, but it’s heritage, is part of how Philadelphia sees itself. Rocky is. So the answer is no, but yes it can be.

EF: That’s interesting because you could say there is and there isn’t a difference between ethnographic cultural heritage objects of our culture, and then you have avant-garde highbrow art, which you can argue when that really come into play, there’s a meshing, a lot of ethnographic art, objects that are used everyday, they also treated as art, they treated them as both.

RL: Art, although I would say art is a very tough word, because I’m not sure what that means within many societies, treating it as it was treated in a respectful, whether that was part of the religion, part of the, so I wouldn’t say it was art, but I would say that these were seen as being part of their heritage. Avant-garde art today we acknowledge that that’s part of our society, I mean no not everybody. Well maybe not, if you stop somebody on the street and said, “A Jeff Koons piece, is that, either pornographic pieces or not pornographic pieces, is this great art of our society?” And he says “no, give me a break.” But maybe you might say, “yes, this represents us, this is who we are.” But having a community of people say that, it doesn’t mean there has to be agreement on it, heritage doesn’t mean that everybody has to
agree. Heritage in my mind is simply a statement of saying “The people within that community look at that and say that represents us.”

EF: Well there’s that interesting dual role of the curator to put art out there that challenges people, but then also to put art out there that they’re going to recognize to some degree. They want to see art that they appreciate, that represents this highbrow part of our society, but if it walks that line and it’s too much over the line, I think it’s questionable.

RL: Absolutely, I see that with Symphony orchestras all the time. There’s this great pain with orchestras who want to do new music, and new material, but they know that if they do it, a whole concert of new material, people aren’t going to show up. And the people who come tend to be traditionalist, they want to Mozart, the Beethoven, the Shubert, and if they mix it up a little bit they show up, and if you put all John Cage, they get really nervous. Particularly the atonal stuff of the 80s and 90s. And I think it’s the same with curators in art, it’s this attempt to do two things; which is to define what is good art, and to also define a taste in some sense, and to think about buying this stuff so it’s part of a collection, and it’ll be of value. It’s interesting because it both defines it and makes it at the same time. By MoMA buying something moves that artist up a notch.

EF: That’s also what conservation does. There’s a hierarchy of things that are worked on in the museum. I mean this museum too, right? I mean I volunteered in the conservation with Lynn and Ginnie for a semester and it was really interesting to me to see a lot of the collection, the Greek and the Roman stuff is slightly more attended to, whereas a lot the sarcophagi. I mean they’re stone, but they’re covered in dust. They’re not in any danger, but it’s just interesting that you can see by what’s clean and what’s not, what is given that kind of attention.

RL: I would also argue, and I say this in my class that I teach on cultural heritage, I mean just look the physical layout of this building and you can see what are perceived to be the important cultures of the world, and what are the less important cultures of the world. And I think that’s part of the conservation side of things, but just the way the building’s laid out. The big beautiful rooms the Rotunda are Upper Egypt, the Greek and Roman galleries, big ceilings, I mean go to the second floor where you have MesoAmerica, the Oceania, the Southwest – low ceilings, very different environment.

EF: It’s strange, it seems these designations have been around for quite some time, but they could change?

RL: They can change. It’s not a matter of changing, but I think it comes down to two pieces: it comes down to curators, and conservators, and so on, but the museum establishment. And they can defy taste. I mean what did they decide to show at the Met of the Greek and Roman stuff? What did they decide not to show? Some of the most important objects are not necessarily the most beautiful. I mean Indiana Jones was a very strange movie and so on but the third movie was quite fascinating when they’re looking for Jesus’s cup, the Holy Grail, and he walks into the back where these 500 year old guy is protecting it, and in fact Jesus’s cup is not the most elaborate and beautiful, that you would want to put in a museum, it’s actually one of the more simple cups. Which you probably wouldn’t put in a museum unless you knew it were Jesus’s. It’s the cultural context of Jesus that makes that cup important. Not it’s beauty or value.

EF: I was just thinking as I was walking down here and watching them destroy the South Street Bridge and I was thinking: is anybody going to save a piece of it? It’s not going to be attractive.

RL: I hope so. I’ve not really studied this, but I was brought in when they tore down the Convention Center, they kept some of the sculptural elements, and if you walk over under the corner of Convention Ave, you know where the Penn Tower is, and the new building, the Molecular Science building, and if
you walk along the right hand side, it’s right over there, some of the original Convention Center sculpture that they incorporated into the side. It’s in an area where no one’s going to walk, it’s not a walking part of the campus, but if you drive, they’ll be a few people walking. But they did try to save it in a way that’s not bad.

EF: I also wanted to read you this quote. Last summer I went over to the ICN in the Netherlands and they did that book Modern Art, Who Cares? And they’ve done a lot of interesting stuff, and one of the articles by one of the people I interviewed, the two authors compared the investigation of installation art with archaeology, by saying that, “In both cases the interaction between the various parts expresses meaning, but that these relationships will disappear after the dismantling of installation or the excavation of the site.” And I was just thought this was really interesting because it brings up the documented meaning, not just the object.

RL: Documented context. I mean the context is the critical piece in all this, it’s the Jesus’s chalice. Without that Jesus statement, I mean throw it away, who cares?

EF: This museum has always been a proponent of . . .

RL: In a strange way, in natural history museums, which are by themselves very strange, because that includes cultures that in the 19th century were perceived as part of nature, not part of culture and society. I mean art museums have the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Chinese, but Natural History museums have the New World, a bunch of different places. So there’s a distinction, so even in natural history museums again have attempted to create the context of the natural history, whether that’s of culture, whether that’s of the environment, so they put, where are you from?

EF: New Jersey.

RL: New Jersey, ok, so you’ve probably been to the American Museum of Natural History many times. When you go into the African animal exhibit hall, they’re sort of trying to create the context of the animals in their own environment, next to animals that they might have seen. They’re all dead of course and stuffed, but that’s the attempt to create that culture. You don’t put a central American jaguar into that hall, you put it in the hall of the Central American animals.

EF: But then certain objects, dinosaur skeletons, are in the main hall, sort of isolated, it’s interesting then how they . . .

RL: Right, but then you go up to the dinosaur hall and it creates more context. The question is: what is context for a dinosaur? What is the concept of context? We’ve talked about cultural context we could even talk about environmental context. Is it other dinosaurs of that time period? I have a 13 year old son, so we’ve been many times to the Museum of Natural History. And the typology of dinosaurs is to me the most strange thing you’ve ever seen because it’s about the way the pelvis is shaped, the way the pelvis is arched, makes no sense to me at all, but it all makes sense to curators. So they’ve created their own context within which they will classify dinosaurs and put them up, and it’s about dinosaur evolution.

EF: In installation art there’s a question of how it was installed. If you take it from the Mass MOCA, a giant giant warehouse, but you take it down to the Met where there’s half the space, fewer windows, and then you get the same thing, because there’s the context within the object, which every time it’s reinstalled, I mean can you move things around slightly if the proportions are still maintained. Or there’s also a context to the corner, or to the blank wall.
RL: So you have Richard Serra at Mass MOCA where I think he was there, the big big sculptures and they fit in the space beautifully, and in Bilbao, you take them to MoMA and they’re just so big for the space, and you put them outside of MoMA and maybe it fits a little better, but it’s different. The answer is context always changes when you move things around, and with installation art, or large scale art, or any art, Monet’s Waterlilies at MoMA clearly didn’t work in the building because the wall overtook them, so that context, they had to get rid of them, put them somewhere else. The answer is context always is changing. One of the difficulties we have archaeologically, as to understand that the moment we excavate, the moment we have found the last context in which these objects were placed, and that could be the context of the ancient culture, that could be the context of destruction, that could be a variety of other contexts.

EF: Thomas Tartar (sp?) he’s just always talking about how archaeology is destruction. And that’s so important, for me, I study mostly contemporary, or Renaissance or Baroque art, like Modern, so I was always thinking, why do you have to go there for two months before you even start digging in the ground?

RL: Because you’ve got to set it up, and think of the context. But even the installation art, to a certain degree, understand, I mean, it would be fascinating to take a particular installation piece and to see how the context were different in different places. And to understand that, would take you a period of time when you are surveying that, you’re mapping that out in your head. Whether that’s a physical map or intellectual map I don’t care, but before you even interpret the stuff you think what was the context of this at MoMA and have photographs of that. How would you know what it looked like? Where are the photographs of the MoMA installation versus the Mass MOCA installation versus the Bilbao installation.

EF: I went to the PMA and talked to one of the conservators there, and I was trying to do some talking to them about how they’re going to install different works, but you know a lot of museum information is kind of sensitive, right? One of the pieces that they had that I’m really interested in they told me that it was in a freezer and it was going to stay there until they had the whim to . . . .

RL: And that just shows you they decided to put it in the freezer, and they were going to be the roadblock. But PMA’s interesting because look at their attempt to put architecture up, you know the Japanese gardens, but this architecture, buildings inside buildings at PMA, and so they’re creating this context. But installation art is fascinating because to me it’s so involved with the viewer. And so yes different contexts of installation are different frameworks for documentation and different perspectives of what is valuable and what is important.

EF: So we talked about preservation versus use, I mean that was a sort of another thing cause ethnographic objects the way they were perceived was not in a case, but actually being used, a lot of the objects, and then installation art, when it goes up someone walks through it, and now there’s this question of: if this piece degrades over time, do you then have the right, maybe in several years after the artist has died, to exhibit pieces of the installation, because it’s so famous and so historical that you want to exhibit some of the actual piece, it’s kind of a similar thing.

RL: And then the question is how do you show the original piece? Do you show it in movies? Do you show video? Do you show photographs?

EF: I personally think that showing pieces of a work and showing documentation of the original work, the option is there to show a photograph right, but then you are saying the piece is somewhere in between. This isn’t the piece, the photograph is obviously not the piece . . .
It’s fascinating again, the Whitney recently had the Calder sculpture of the Circus, and various things, they had the pieces that hadn’t degraded, made out of metal, but they did have them going, and so they showed film and still photographs of the pieces with the trapeze artist and with this and with that, and of course they could have taken the originals to show this, but they didn’t want to, that would degrade the original. SO they show the photographs, of the piece in action.

That’s a great example. Was that really recent that that was shown?

The exhibit I just saw was in the fall. I don’t know if it’s still there. And this is stuff they had, and this is not something . . . , they were filling out space, I think this was on the Third Floor, over Christmas probably. So it’s just interesting, showing the piece in use. But you’re right, installation, I mean some of the new technology with digital representations, and earlier video tapes and they’re showing people living in rooms and the rooms are left behind, all this stuff is fascinating. Where was I? I was in Dublin, and who was the artist. I’m blanking, very famous artist, we went to the museum, it was in a small private museum. But they moved this artist’s studio, a contemporary artist, I think he was Irish, and it was part of one of these small museums there. But they had taken his studio which was just he was shoving stuff in the corner, building up all this extra stuff he wanted to keep, so they moved it as a complete mess as it was, and what you could do is peer in, and see this, along with some his art around it.

That’s an interesting situation, because the artist never meant for the public to see his studio, his process, it’s almost like saying that if you read a philosophical work you have to read it along side of the author’s diary, because you know it’s interesting like Rousseau, who had such a different life than in his philosophy, it’s the same with artists, really that artist, maybe he left his studio, so maybe he meant it.

And I think more and more people are interpreting what people do based up their writings and their diaries. I was reading an article that Darwin’s diaries actually tell more about his abhorrence of slavery, and how evolution actually argued against the concept of slavery are blacks being of a different species. And what he was going was actually part because he was interested in abolition. But it doesn’t come out in his writings, it comes out in his diaries. But that’s beside the point.

That really speaks to the intentional fallacy, whether this is even not legitimate, but a useful pursuit, because even if you know the interworkings of their mind, you never know the process is still clandestine.

That’s interpretation, so what you’re going to do is interpret, and that’s your interpretation, and the artwork may survive but your interpretation may not.

How is it that curators and conservators, in this particular setting, how are those objects interpreted? The meaning.

Very differently. And what’s very interesting about a museum like this is that you know down the hall you have Egyptologists, who are not anthropologists, who interpret things very very differently with archaeology and anthropology, and so there isn’t really one framework whereby you can say there’s an interpretive structure here. The good potential of this museum is the coming together of many different viewpoints. The difficulty of a place like this is that you have so many viewpoints that in fact everyone goes off in their own corners and doesn’t talk to each other.

It’s interesting to me just walking through because say in the Egyptians galleries, a lot of the labels actually discuss the history of the object, but in the Etruscan galleries, there’s a lot more formal discussion of the work based on the materials and the actual craftsmanship.
RL: It varies based on who’s curating the exhibit. And who’s doing it, are you going to tell a story? Is it a civilizational story, is it the story of one archaeological site, is it the story of the work in Egypt. In some sense any exhibit you have many many storylines, and the question is how you use those storylines to move forward what you tell the public.

EF: What is the mission statement of the museum?

RL: This museum? It’s to present and to preserve information about the great cultures of the world. But you’d have to go to the website.

EF: Ok, but it doesn’t mention the word art?

RL: No. I is probably avoided, but art’s a tough word to understand.

EF: This is completely hypothetical, but if the collection were ever desacessioned, or sold, the Met would want to buy a lot of these objects, so does that then change the context I guess?

RL: It changes the modern day context. I don’t think it would change the context of whether it was art or not. If we see art as simply, it’s the question of what is art? Art, again is very much in my mind, very much representative of culture and society and ideas that are being discussed, whether that’s contemporary art that’s being discussed today, or the art of the past that’s being discussed, both of it’s passed and of it’s position and context of it’s present day world. Much of what happens with the ancient stuff here, or even the stuff at the Met is, why do we have it there? In the context of why the Greek and Roman are even in the Met, now they’re trying to do Africa and Native American stuff. Why? This universal museum concept.

EF: This guy, Cuno (James) who’s coming, he’s going to be arguing very much that museums should have Greek and Roman. The reason that I think . . .

RL: But if it’s Greek and Roman should you also have Native American?

EF: Yeah, well that’s an interesting point. Thank you for sending me the email, I’m going to try to go to the talks. The thing is I’m supposed to have an interview in New York in the morning, it’s a question of whether I can get back in time. It’s interesting in the United States especially as a land that was colonized by Europeans, it’s not that same idea anymore. So you have a lot Italians in the country. I mean I’m Italian but don’t even look Italian, so it’s just interesting then us of trying to collect objects from all around the world. But in Europe it’s a different sense of nationality, and what art is desired.

RL: Yeah, very much so. And again it comes down to heritage, what the community perceives as being important and part of their past.

EF: But a lot of the things at the Met like the medieval collection, that was left by Morgan, and no one though it was valuable until he left it and people realize it’s one of the best collections in the world.

RL: But because the Met does it and displays it, there’s a sort of sense both culturally and monetarily in the material. One of the things I keep coming back to is this President’s House downtown. Have you heard it? Cause I think it’s very very important. Not in and of itself, but the fact that the community decides that this is important, and it represents something. And it’s not about the present, it’s more in terms of slavery issues. Of the dedication of a monument to slavery, and people who were slaves. But this very much, the concept of the Universal Museum, that one shouldn’t have this stuff, I would argue, Jim and I disagree on all this stuff. I didn’t invite Jim Cuono (sp?) here because I agree with him, I did
because I disagree with him, he’s a very smart bright guy. But the interesting thing is to say it’s not a problem of what people perceive as being important in terms of their heritage, it’s the question of do you respect the laws of these countries, do you respect the desire to preserve some of this material, and can we work around that or as opposed to through that? And through that meaning, to just like a bull in a China shop, just to decide to destroy everything just because you want the stuff at the end. As opposed to respecting laws, acknowledging the value of protecting within these countries. And one of the arguments that’s made all the time, and I was reading about it the other night, there are not Etruscans alive today, so Etruscans should be able to be anywhere in the world because there are no Etruscans. But it doesn’t matter. If you as an Italian living in Italy or living in the United States, think that because Etruria is part of Italy today, it’s part of the Etruscan culture and is part of your heritage, we don’t need to test your DNA to say that that’s part of your heritage, that’s part of your brain, you decide that yourself.

EF: But a lot these umbrella laws actually encourage, well smuggling then becomes that much more lucrative if it’s not done legally under the supervision of the state.

RL: Sure. You can steal the television out of my house. It’s more lucrative to steal stuff out of Bryn Mawr, than out of University City.

EF: But what you were saying about the Etruscans not being alive anymore, it’s really interesting because it is relatable to contemporary art in the sense that we have laws in this country, saying that 50 years after the artist dies, or 90 in Europe, where their cultural property is considered part of the community’s. Does that mean that installation can be reinterpreted? There’s a really interesting example, you know Christine Poggi in the Art History Department, she studies Picasso, and she studies his guitars, and there’s one at the MoMA, the famous guitar, and what’s really interesting is she has seen photographs Picasso took in his studio where he had the guitar, and he had a table that he had constructed that the guitar hovered over. And the guitar is exhibited at the MoMA without the table. She went to the MoMA and spoke with one of the conservators, and they went and looked in the box where the guitar was, and they found the table. And I kind of feel like if you find the table, you’re sort of required to then, not required, but it’s part of the artwork. But the public sees it as the guitar, and that’s what’s on every postcard, and every book, and what are going to do, rewrite all of that?

RL: She gets to rewrite it, number one, which is nice for her, but it’s also a question of context again. Do you have to recreate context? We have said in some sense in museums we don’t have to recreate context. Now the question in some sense is, is that table context, or is that table art? And I’m not sure there’s a difference between the two, but if it’s part of the art they should the hope is that if this is what the artist wanted as part of that art, they should recreate that. If it’s part of the context, i.e. the studio within which it existed, maybe you don’t. So you get into that conundrum of do I or don’t I? Where I was before this, I was a UCLA for about 12 years teaching I was running an institute there and we had some space, and I wanted to do some mural art, I had a muralist coming, and some people said to me, be very careful because after the mural goes up, you can never over paint it, because at a certain point the artist has rights that you can’t destroy that art. And so what they were saying was don’t put it on a wall, put up panels on the wall that the artist paints, so when you take it down you take the panels down you don’t have to destroy the wall. And I never looked up the law, I don’t know what the rules are, but it’s just very interesting they were saying was you don’t even though you own it, have a right to destroy it even if it’s on your property. And I don’t know the details.

EF: I think that’s the Visual Artist’s Resolution Act, it’s complicated because I think you can interpret it different ways. You know the artist owns the image, but the museum owns the building and the wall. It’s really complicated. I’m actually really really really interested in cultural heritage law.
RL: That’s some of the most interesting law out there right now. Do you know this woman named Patty Gursten-Blyth? She’s probably the expert on, she’s at DePaul Law School in Chicago, she is probably the leading expert on cultural heritage law. And she wrote the book (shows the book). This is a tome, if there ever were. I gave mine to the Minister of Culture of Honduras, so I had to go and buy this one. You can get it on Amazon. But this is, she is a research associate at my center, but she is in Chicago. She is by far the expert.
**Lizzie Frasco interviewing Andrew Lins**, Head of Conservation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

October 27, 2008.

LF: So I brought some interview questions, but really what I’m intending to focus on with my paper is installation art and sculpture, mostly since 1990, more modern, contemporary stuff. I’m particularly interested in the Zoe Leonard piece, that did the museum borrow it?

AL: It acquired it.

LF: Ok, so what happened to, or happens to a piece like that that includes organic material and is this kind of difficult to preserve?

AL: Well, in a situation like that, the museum typically buys ephemeral material with the understanding that there will be some requirements for special measures to be taken to preserve the materials as far as possible. But that in the end, the material may not be able to be sustained indefinitely, just given its nature and preparation it’s received in advance of coming to the museum.

LF: The museum though, is still willing to collect ephemeral artworks…

AL: Yes

LF: Despite the fact that there may be no material left. Is there sort of an inter-museum policy of how the work is documented or the work is used in other ways?

AL: In this instance in particular, because of the nature of the piece we told the curator that if she purchased the artwork that there would be a limit to how many hours and how much effort and how much expense that this department could go through to sustain the work of art. And she was ok with that, and so were the people who were putting up the money to buy the art. So that particular artwork was regarded as significant enough that the liabilities and risks and inevitability of its failure were still seen an acceptable cost.

LF: Well are there other installation works in the collection that are not currently making the rounds on display due to their material constraints?

AL: We have a number of pieces by more than one artist that were made of Latex, rubber, and depending on its preparation and stabilization and then its application and the subsequent amount of light and other environmental factors that determine the way it fails, some of those pieces are very difficult to display.

LF: Is there any Louise Bourgeois in the collection?

AL: Yeah but this is Louise Bourgeois that’s her work or not (he trails off).

LF: I guess there’s also the Bruce Nauman, Neon Light, pieces that require some kind of methodological approach.

AL: They do, those pieces of course have their own special fragility as a function of how they’re made. But they have the inevitable ultimate failure of the electric components, ultimately, and of the gas within the tubes, since the tubes can never perfectly be sealed, the problem is that eventually the gas will leak out, and mostly it’s a small amount of mercury in the tubes that cause the lights to glow. So over
time the loss of gas and then the mercury vapors which tend to accumulate on the tubes and form a semi-solid residue, those inevitably affect the appearance and the performance of the work, cause it’s electro, essentially an electrical device.

LF: Is the museum then willing to replace?

AL: Yeah, actually we’ve even, we’ve had to move that piece, cause it isn’t always on display on the wall, and as you can imagine it’s not without its hazards to move a bunch of teeny tubes with kind of unevenly soldered connections and so on. We actually have had the technicians who work with Nauman to manufacture that particular piece of art come and help us move and partly repair a couple small components of that system.

LF: Is there a contract with Nauman?

AL: No, not a contract per se.

LF: And in the future, for example, after god-forbid after Bruce Nauman passes away…

AL: And his technicians pass away then and when this form of lighting may be more regulated in the future since it does contain mercury, as you know fluorescent bulbs are supposed to be now specially disposed as hazardous waste. While the manufacturing has not abated yet, it could be in the future that it has an effect on how available replacements are. It has something that has a predictable longevity, not quite at the moment, as things go forward, that’s an issue for people like Flavin and a whole bunch of other people, that the devices that they use to create their artwork are not necessarily replaceable.

LF: Does the museum have a specific policy towards creating replicas or replacing parts? I mean the Bruce Nauman piece.

AL: If anything we have a policy about not making replicas, the world is already full with many replicas.

LF: What about with the Bruce Nauman piece using technology to replicate the piece exactly with a new tubing.

AL: If we want to get into the realm of speculation about how that could actually happen, there are undoubtedly we could find some means to give the same effect without having the same components, from a technical point of view being involved in the display itself.

LF: Without using the same exact materials, giving a similar effect.

AL: Right right. This is the issue we have with videos made 40 years ago to be put on TVS manufactured 40 years ago, where components of the TV some of them are vacuum tubes even, you’re just simply going to have a hard time finding exactly the right tube to replace the one that was part of it. That’s what I mean you couldn’t find something similar to make it look the same. But it’s the point, if you take away the guts, at what point is it no longer the work of art.

LF: Right, that’s why I’m so interested in this topic because it raises issues of authenticity and value, and originality of an artwork.

AL: They are very significant, and obviously they are very significant in the marketplace as well.
LF: So do you think the market would distinguish between a Bruce Nauman that had been replaced albeit in situ, you know the lighting had been exactly replaced, and a Bruce Nauman that had never been replaced?

AL: Yes, I think there would be a distinction made, yes.

LF: And for certain pieces that are degraded to a certain extent to the point where they are no longer displayable, are those pieces still valuable, in a sense? Are they still worth anything, or is their lack of display value…

AL: That’s always a question. We have a piece that was manufactured in the late 30s, from plastics made from that time, and it was put in a case after it was brought here and it’s lived in its case for many years, and suddenly people started looking at its surfaces because it was going to be in a prominent display, I guess, and they opened up the case, when they opened the case the plastic sides that had formed a kind of gooey material on the surface because plastic wasn’t very stable, a lot of it actually evaporated and the piece began to disintegrate, and it is now in a state of total disintegration.

LF: But the museum still holds on to it, right?

AL: We have the piece. But they are never going to be displayed, and frankly the model that was made of it at the point when it started to disintegrate, that model that was made by a local person, not the artist, that piece has never been displayed.

LF: For example, with the Zoe Leonard piece, are the remains still here?

AL: Oh yeah, the Zoe Leonard piece, and we made a number of jokes about it being unappealing, and it being a rather slippery slope to negotiate, with respect to the various components, that piece has actually been admitted to quite a few shows: it’s been to Israel and back, and elsewhere, and we are actually finding that its rate of disintegration is considerably slower than we had anticipated. We do treat it when it goes in and out of the museum for insects in particular, mold, and related agents of destruction, but at this point while there has been some mechanical damage, because it’s displayed by putting it out just as the artist asked on the floor where people are allowed to walk, we’ve had a remarkably little damage to the piece in the intervening years, and it’s going to last longer than what was originally predicted.

LF: Is each fruit drawn on a map or cataloged in a certain way?

AL: It’s photographed for installation, but because not every floor that it’s displayed on is exactly identical, some is left out a little bit. It can’t be mapped out absolutely precisely. And she didn’t provide a map of it to start out with. She came and helped install it the first time it was brought here. Very nice person.

LF: Does she speak with anyone on the staff about the fate of this piece?

AL: She talks with a woman who’s not here today about the installation, she understood and appreciated that we going to take as good care as we possibly could.

LF: Does the piece physically look…

AL: It hasn’t changed too much. Maybe some of the pieces that were initially very brittle from the desiccation they had received are maybe a little more brittle, but it’s not a massive change at this point.
LF: Is there any color change?

AL: No, not much.

LF: Is it stored in a…

AL: A specially built, temperature controlled crate.

LF: The museum it’s great that the museum is willing to collect ephemeral materials, especially when it seems that installation art and the use of non-traditional materials only continues to become more popular…

AL: It seems that way, yes.

LF: I guess I’m also interested if the museum, basically the disposition towards contemporary art right now, is it a concern, I mean what kind of efforts are being made to address certain issues, for example, when I visited the Netherlands this summer I visited the Cultural Institute, and they are now doing artist interviews, hours long, that they ask all these questions about the importance of certain parts of the work, and try to gauge how the work could be interpreted later by a conservator when it begins to degrade.

AL: Yeah, there’s a similar thing that’s been done here for quite a number of years through the FAIC, Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation where artist interviews have been conducted. You’ll see, they are located in Washington, and they have a website. The American Institute for Conservation is the mother organization

LF: Do they choose the artists to…

AL: They choose artists often it’s done in relation to a show, or sometimes it’s a more general interview, artists and what he’s doing. There’s a variety of artists who have been involved.

LF: Does the PMA ever request that an interview be conducted with a certain artist that they’ve acquired a piece from?

AL: Well normally they interview and discuss the piece with the artist before purchasing so that there’s an agreement and understanding in advance, especially when it’s ephemeral, as to what are the limits of intervention that the artist anticipates, what he would tolerate, and frankly between you and me we don’t let artist’s do repairs, because artists, first of all it’s not their property, and secondly they typically have a very different attitude about keeping things as they were, than the people who have purchased the art work. And they often don’t have the tools or the skills or have developed the skills to do an effectively invisible intervention that sustains something that otherwise would be lost.

LF: And they also might have changed conceptually as an artist about

AL: Absolutely right. We had a piece that had been damaged when somebody did some photography of it, and we took it to the artist’s studio and the artist put the head on, and did an amazingly clumsy job, and then repainted the whole thing, and that was not actually a piece that the museum owned, because we would not have allowed that to happen, it was somebody who’d leant something, and what they got back was way different than what they had let out the door. It was a George Segal. There’s a lot of plaster people, subways, little everyday vignettes.
LF: Would the museum ever draw up a contract with an artist cause I know there must be some contract.

AL: Well the sales agreement, in fact. If you want to talk about contracts you’ll probably have to go and talk to the registrar in terms of the details you might want to pursue.

LF: I’m just curious if there are ever certain stipulations about longevity, or you know reinstallation.

AL: Certainly the Zoe Leonard piece was one where we all discussed, the director and the Board who were very approving of the purchase, to the curator, the artist and then ourselves, in so far about being predictive about what the actual yearly cost to the museum to maintain this because obviously we’ve got plenty of other things that are going on. Maybe it’s something that will fail over different parts of the year, that’s not a reasonable equation.

LF: Well speaking of artist’s changing their conceptual attitudes, when I was in the Netherlands I discovered this piece called *Morocco* by this artist Krijn Giezen that was at the Franz Hall museum, it was a sort of mixed media tapestry, that had been infested with bugs, and when the museum consulted with the artist, he basically said he didn’t want them to kill the bugs, because he felt that time and process of decay was part of his work. Well a committee was formed and basically did research into what the artist had written and said about the artist at the time and concluded that he originally intended the work to be a document or souvenir and that it wasn’t originally about a process of decay or time, so they ignored the advice of the living artist and decided to kill the bugs. And this is in that book, *Modern Art, Who Cares?* And I guess I find this a pretty interesting case where the artist was consulted and wasn’t listened to, but it was also very effectively done, they had very strong logical reasoning for why they didn’t listen to the artist, so I guess are there…

AL: If you’re an artist if you want to stay alive, you have to sell your works. That’s part of the business of negotiating. And once you sold it it isn’t yours anymore, you can’t do whatever you want to it. And the owner frankly has the right to do with it what they want, you know some people have melted down to base, shown no respect whatsoever to the artist, you can’t sell that. That’s just like, that’s where it is.

LF: Isn’t there legislation in the United States that protects artists after they’ve sold their work that there is a certain amount of…

AL: Yes, there is legislation that says the intent of the artist has to be recognized and honored up to a point.

LF: And “up to a certain point” that’s arguable…

AL: That point, yeah, there’s always the ebb and flow of court.

LF: So how do conservators here at the PMA, what’s their…

AL: Well we do we’re concerned about what the artist’s intent was. We look carefully at things, as you can imagine we have all this equipment to look at things quite carefully and analyze them down to the sub, micrometer level. And you can tell by the way something was finished what the artist’s effort was to a degree, and what his intent was, in terms of getting a particular look or a particular appearance, and so we use that in part. But also we obviously look at what the artist was saying, writing, and doing at the time.
LF: What about for example the artist Xu Bing he did a silkworm series in the late 90s where he had silkworm plants and silkworms. In a case like that the piece eventually dies, the tree eventually dies, the worms eventually dies. Well I guess what I’m interested in if the artist intended for the piece to eventually degrade, would that be something the museum would take into consideration when…

AL: Yeah, and that would all be explicitly understood whether it be a memo of understanding, or whether it would actually be in a contract under those particular circumstances. I’m not sure, but whatever the museum would want, it protects the artist, the art and the institution that’s supposed to be in charge of preserving it.

LF: So basically there just needs to be dialogue?

AL: Yes, a clear understanding.

LF: Which is something that wasn’t always…

AL: No it wasn’t that’s quite absolutely right.

LF: Because there have been Joseph Beuys pieces that have been messed with. Does the museum have any pieces where the intent was for the piece to eventually degrade or disappear? Because I didn’t find any in the collection when I searched online.

AL: Not inevitably and obviously, no. Zoe Leonard is probably one of the closer ones.

LF: Did she see that piece as something that should have disappeared eventually?

AL: I think her expectation is that at some point those dried fruit skins would eventually are gonna go. They can’t last forever. But they’ve already lasted sort of longer than people expected, you know what so it may be one of those situations where that’s not gonna be such a bad problem as predicted. Why can’t I remember his name? It was a work done with the people of the Chinati Foundation in Texas, part of the Donald Judd Foundation. He set up a museum in a small town, Marfa Texas, there’s the Judd Foundation has a website, so does the Chinati Foundation, they’re kind of set up by different groups who knew him and loved him. One was his family and the other was his mistress for many years, a very able woman. She set up a museum for him to display his art as he wished under his own terms. And those of his friends included Flavin and others, there’s a display by a Russian artist and I just cannot … like a 30s-40s, 50s-60s, well we could find it out. But he set up himself, set their own terms, set their own standards, set their own controls, lack of controls, this that and the other, and what he did was set up some school rooms in a small village in Russia to look like it did when the buildings were sort of abandoned in the Second World War, I’m missing some of the basics here I’m sure, but if you’ll check the website you’ll find the stuff. The problem is that he had school books, scraps of newspaper, all this stuff sort of left around to look like an abandoned place, and the conditions there, the sun, the light the heat the dryness, and frankly the local varmints, have conspired to render the setting that he had created himself not sustainable. The paper only has so long they can remain in the sun before it crumbles and fades, so the issue is that while this was done, it can’t sustain itself. What do you do? Do you just say, “No” and we’re just going to let it go? Then when it all turns to dust, that’s that, or do you want to keep it looking kind of like what it did. And the effort right now that they’re trying to find similar journals, newspapers, images, to what was there and putting them down, rather than Xeroxing, putting replicas. It’s a replacement. Cause you know what we were talking about before, the consumables in these thing, the art is going to run in the materials that it was manufactured, and there’s an inevitability about the need to replace what’s been consumed that has to be part of the discussion with the artist.
LF: Has the museum ever had to go against the wishes of a living artist?

AL: I can’t answer for every, I haven’t really come in contact with. Prince Strong’s photographs or paintings…

LF: But the museum contacts the living artist…

AL: Oh yeah for sure, when there’s a restoration that has to occur, we absolutely do consult with the artist. Invite them actually, to be part of it, and some people want to participate, and others are happy to let us do whatever it is.

LF: Well how recent has the museum start consulting living artists?

AL: Well I think we’ve been involved pretty continuously, the director who just died, was for many years the curator of 20th Century art, and she was involved with every artist from whom she purchased something. And that tradition has persisted in that department, obviously. And we have two people right now who are sort of co-chairing that department, and they are very involved with the artists from whom they purchase their, yeah no there’s definitely a dialogue there.

LF: So I guess through this discussion you’ve sort of answered this question, but I guess do you think museums and curators and conservators in general consider ephemeral art to be valuable?

AL: I’m just gonna give you my opinion using one example. We had a Sherri Levine show here several years ago, Brancusi’s reproduced in glass that went on pianos. We made a replica that we shipped to the glass makers who cast the heads of the new born, and Sherry came in and put them on top of the piano, we made them all in a replica. And there was an installation, I don’t know if there’s been any demand for it, but you see to have remembered this.

LF: My professor Christine Poggi, at Penn, she discussed it in one of our classes.

AL: Here’s the case where the artist has nothing to do with the art, hardly even installs it for that matter. The cast she paid for she retains them we have the mold, but the mold and the pattern if you want to call it, but that could be reproduced indefinitely. And, what is it? You know? So there’s installation art, there’s an idea, and image, a feel about it…

LF: And you don’t think that work was as appreciated?

AL: I don’t know how appreciated it was, it had some visitation, but…

LF: Because authenticity is still such an important part of contemporary art. You know the hand of the artist still matters.

AL: I think it does. This isn’t really quite the same thing, but at the front of the building when you come in the West entrance, there’s a Nevelson (Louise) sculpture in corten steel that we spent a couple of years restoring, because literally the joints between the plates of core-ten had created such rust that the whole thing had jacked apart, only held together by screws and bolts, they actually snapped because the rust grew between the plates, whacked them all apart, and actually got to be a hazard. We don’t own that piece, Fairmount Park owns it, but people thought we were the ones neglecting its care, so we usually brought it in, it was a hazard with some funds the government helped supply, and we put it back. Now that piece was made by Lippincott foundry. Was Nevelson involved? She was a bystander, she came and
saw it be erected, not by her crew, but by an outside contractor, rigging crew that came to put up the stuff with the Lippincott’s present, and you have to, but I’ll tell you what, we could have, what some people do, taken the plates that were damaged. Let’s say they were plates like this table, and they lost their edges, and the edges are where all the screws go, so a lot of people, when they see that we’ll just cut a new piece of core-ten and it’s gonna look a little different for a while, but eventually it’s gonna get to the same condition as everything else that’s around it. We actually saved the pieces, and we welded or screwed things back on, they are mostly in places where you can’t see the repair, which is a good thing, but instead of replacing, even though it’s not, Nevelson had cut the pieces at the Lippincott foundry, we had nonetheless repaired and saved what was there originally as far as we possibly could. And it’s gone back out, many people said we should just take it down and rebuild it entirely, but frankly we restored it at a fraction of the cost of refabricating it. Without much likelihood that it would have been made as well as it had, cause it was 35 years ago. So we retained as much of the original as we could.

LF: So the museum as a policy still values highly the original material?

AL: Oh yes, without a doubt, absolutely. Insofar as we can maintain whatever we’ve been given for the public to see and appreciate. We try we make every effort possibly to sustain the works of art. Even when they’re making it from ephemeral materials. And sometimes they’re made more ephemeral by the artist not paying enough attention to the properties of the materials that they are using.

LF: So do you think artists are aware of the properties of the materials they are using?

AL: Some are, some aren’t. Just like everything else. Some care enormously, some care not much, more the effect or act.

LF: What do you personally think of literature coming out of places like the ICN that wants to focus less on the material and more on the conceptual aspects of a work? As some have put it, that the material is somehow “fetishized” to some extent that might you know rupture the unity of a piece, because the material is somehow more important…

AL: Yeah, it’s the same thing that’s been going on in anthropology, cultural anthropology, there’s nothing new here that isn’t old, division between people who think the ideas are more important than the actual artifacts. You know it’s the chicken and egg issue, for us you can talk about an artist, you could describe beautiful and spectacular piece of art that only exists as a descriptive text because you let it disintegrate. How do you really then know how good or bad the thing was, what it’s real visual or emotional or other impact is if you don’t have it there in front of you? So there’s lots of art, it could be made of sound, other things that isn’t really but we would call … and that’s a whole other issue.

LF: So I guess some of my last questions are, I just wanted to talk about ethics a little bit, what you see as maybe being some of, cause there’s really no codified methodology for conserving contemporary art, there’s really no set, for example at the AIC there’s some set principles, some of them don’t necessarily apply to contemporary art, so what kinds of things do you see as being central to the ethical treatment of contemporary art? And what do you see as being the antithesis of that?

AL: Well, what I would say is we look pretty carefully at how things are made, and what’s causing them to fail. And quite often we can intervene in a way that’s really not visible to the average viewer to sustain a work that might otherwise not last. And I think that remains our typical approach to works of contemporary art that may not have really such viability for display. That we affect subtle and largely invisible improvements that don’t in any way alter the visual impact or emotional value of the art.

LF: And in cases where that’s not quite possible, it’s the same idea applied.
Insofar as it’s feasible to the point where the intervention is what you see instead of the art. I mean just as a practical matter, you wouldn’t go up to the galleries to see a 15th century altarpiece, the amount of alteration that you are not seeing right away cause you don’t have all the right equipment, is enormous, you’re looking at something that quite often is a third gone or more, and it’s been reconstructed with great attention without over-painting the original material and it still has an impact and a visual meaning, that if you had left it in its decayed state and put it out no one would look at it. Does that sustain the museum’s mission? Well not really. It certainly doesn’t help the artist reputation etc, by not putting out the art.

Does the museum ever remove prior repairs?

Yeah, when they’re clearly not the intent of the artist originally. We’ve got a lot of dead artists and dead restorers that we’re talking about whose works have been changed. We always remove the bad repairs, and some good repairs are left, sometimes when you’re not going to improve it by removing it. Let’s say there’s a 18th century chair that was repaired skillfully by an 18th century craftsman, even though it broke earlier on, that’s part of it, at some point when it becomes so integral to the art that it becomes part of its history. And that’s the thing you see in archeology and sometimes in anthropology, that you don’t take off things that are added, like repairs to a 3000 year old ceramic that were done out of reverence to the ceramic itself rather than throwing it out, it was repaired, that you don’t get rid off.

So for historical repairs it makes more sense, what about a repair that was done by an 18th century restorer that may have been a misinterpretation but has now become a historical element on its own?

Those are the more problematic. Because you want to bring piece, say it’s a painting, back to how it was originally painted, and if somebody, it’s like putting on the fig leaves and stuff like that, some things are not what you need to...

This will be my last question, do you think there is any methodology for contemporary installation art and sculpture, or will there ever be?

Well, no what I think is that a lot of museums that have been putting up that art for a long time, like SF MoMa, in the Los Angeles, and places in New York and ourselves to a degree, we I think we’re pretty tuned in to what the artists, hold on for a sec let me just show you... (someone walks in to the room, and gives you something) ... So here’s sort of a thing how it’s laid out ... because as it goes through an exhibition...

What artist is this?

It came in ten giant crates, there’s boxes, lighting devices, this is one installation, and all the elements have been catalogued and saved.

Is there a schema drawn up?

It’s the photographs for all of that, we couldn’t actually get a design that could have done that. They did it in a general way. I shouldn’t say that, we have actual sketches of where stuff should go, it just isn’t in this particular ... no cause there’s a schematic for the layout, and it goes on and on. It will eventually be reinstalled, and that’s part of what this is, to record the condition, to see how fast it’s changing, so those are part of what we do on an everyday basis.

We’d be glad to have a copy of what you write. My email is alins@philamuseum.org.
**Lizzie Frasco interviewing Carol Mancusi-Ungaro**, Head of Conservation at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Monday March 2, 2009

EF: You do mostly video interviews, right?

CMU: I do, I do. Because it’s important to do them in front of the work of art. It’s much easier for the artist to speak in front of the work of art, it’s easier for me to speak in front of the work of art, and we can look at specific issues.

EF: So you work here at the Whitney but you were working at the center at Harvard…
CMU: I direct it.

EF: Oh, ok. Great. And the Fogg museum is getting renovated right now, right?

CMU: Right, it’s called the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art. And it’s one of the research centers, there are four research centers, at the Harvard Art Museum, which is what the Fogg is now called, and it’s one of them. So I founded it in 2001, and it’s still in its early stages of development, and its very much interested in the area between art history and conservation. Kind of technical issues that have to do with modern art.

EF: Yeah, I interviewed Glenn Wharton, who I think you’ve done some conferences with, and I also watched some of the videos from the Object and Transition conference, that was really great.

CMU: Yves Alain Bois and I taught together, as he referenced – we taught courses together at Harvard, our relationship evolved when we traveled around the world looking at Barnett Newman paintings together, for the Barnett Newman catalogue, and that’s how we started.

EF: You published something about that, right?

CMU: I did. He didn’t for various political reasons, but he will be coming out with a book on Newman, I hope. Cause he’s really wonderful on Newman, he has so much to say.

EF: So you deal with modern art, but you also deal with contemporary art as well. I mean the Conservation program here is in charge of all the…

CMU: There was no conservation department here either, so when I started the center at Harvard, I started a department here. I chose to do that here, I chose the Whitney, because the Whitney had no center of conservation, so I could really shape it in any way that I wanted. So we really took advantage of the necessity at the Whitney of treating Le Chaise standard, bronze sculptures to Cory Arch Angel Nintendo work. It was such a range and a variety – I love being faced with the newest problems that artists are coming up with. And the Whitney, the nature of the Whitney is to work with young artists. The Biennale is the perfect example, the Whitney is not afraid to expose itself and put itself out there. We don’t have so many rules and regulations that the life blood of the work is taken out of it, which I completely understand. I’m not criticizing institutions that do, and I’m not just being politically savvy or diplomatic – I understand why they do, believe me, but it’s also important, meaningful that there’s a place where artists get to do a little more than they might elsewhere. We take a little bit more, a little edgier.

EF: Yeah, and the thing about starting a department from scratch is that you can infuse it with new methodology rather than it changing slowly over time.
CMU: It’s not so much the methodology as it is the thinking. The methodology is not always even in place yet. It’s how we think about preserving these works of art is what interests me the most. And here, of course we’re doing it day-to-day, and unlike other institutions that are working with edgy artists we have a collection. I mean the new museum has a collection or has plans to have a collection . . .

EF: The ICA in Philadelphia doesn’t have a collection.

CMU: Right, and Boston, and so on, so the Whitney has a really fine collection because it kept buying the works of these young artists who then became really famous. So we have a collection to look after, so it’s not only just thinking about the stuff, and it’s also not just getting it in and installing it and shipping it out and not having to worry about it again – it’s also having to be accountable for this over time, which is the heart of what a museum is, as well as trying to support and be faithful to the artist’s intention when they install it. So it’s tricky business. I think it’s the most interesting business that’s going on right now, and I have the most interesting job in the whole world, that’s because it’s always interesting and it’s always about the future.

EF: That’s so great to hear.

CMU: I’m very passionate about it.

EF: The reason I chose installation art for my thesis is because Tatja Scholte at the ICN gave me Sherry Irvin’s article on the artist’s sanction in contemporary art, and I’m not a trained conservator, so I decided not to focus on the actual technical ability of conserving the fabric of the installations and instead discuss the re-installation and re-interpretation and all the elements that go with these artworks made of relational parts. I printed out your list... you were in the Getty newsletter also, and you did an interview with Jim Coddington, and Kirk... but this is a different article, I have that one too, but this is a list of different replicas that you identified and ways you can think about the replica.

CMU: Oh, this was the Tate, I was actually on the organizing committee of that symposium, and when they decided to divide up the program to different members, they gave me ethics and authority, and I thought, “Oh great, why did you give me a very small topic to discuss.” So that was unnerving as I remember. So what did I say?

EF: Well you just had all these great identifications of what replicas are, you had the one made by the artist, a documentation, one where individual parts were replaced. One that has such a magic, an aura, that it takes the status of the art, and one that represents what the artists couldn’t make. Which are all being done right now.

CMU: They are, and they’re all being called different things. They all are being done, and there is absolutely no consensus though about them. In fact I can say that that list came out of hours and hours and days and days, two years of discussion among the organizing committee about what is the replica, what are we dealing with, and when we realized how broad that topic was, I think we were unnerved, and it was for that reason I thought it was important to list them to try and think them through. The examples I gave in my talk, which may have been in there, the Eve Clark, they were like the poles of this, there is no regulation. It’s not even a question of regulation, as I said, not the methodology, it has to do with the thinking about it. And in the end, I think what will really distinguish the replica is the intent. And maybe that’s where the law comes in, I don’t know. I think it will really be the intent. If the intent is more scholarly, academic, or non-commercial, I think the criteria for it will be quite different, the license for it. Not the legal license, but the cultural license for it will be much different if it’s commercial.
On the other hand, with copyright, for example, our worlds are becoming so confused with commercial and non-commercial, I’m not actually sure that’s where it is going in ten years, I’m really not.

EF: What interests me, is that something like the David in Florence can have a replica out on the square, and then you go to the museum and you see the real piece, and that’s kind of an accepted way for that work to be presented. Although I think that still begs the question, what is the art? How many people who see this fake statue think it’s real? It concerns all these questions. And then you have these works and collections, I’m thinking of Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, they’re so degraded that they’re kind of being declared dead. And for me, as an art history student, I would almost rather see a replica. I mean, tell me it’s a replica but . . .

CMU: Well that’s a big statement right there. Make sure they know it’s a replica.

EF: Yeah, so how much should the audience know, because how much does that take away from the autonomy of the work?

CMU: Well, it’s a hard question, a big conflict. It’s one thing to know it’s not the original, I think, But the hard one that kept coming up in our discussions was, how do you can make a replica that is totally devoid of the magic of what it is, you know when I first started out writing about techniques of artists, the first time I published anything on it was Eve Klein, and this was I think 1983, or 2 maybe, in Houston. It was way before the Menil collection. But it was Dominic that did the first American Retrospective of Yves Klein’s work. And I did a very short publication, one page or two pages, of what basically was in IKB, International Klein Blue, which was the pigment paint he was using, and the Raw Institute of Fine Arts, at Rice, and they published that in the catalogue. The estate was furious. They felt I had diffused the mystery of Yves Klein by putting out there how he did it, what the paint was. It wasn’t even about technique, but about material. And they felt that the mystique had been de-mystified by that, and they were very upset by it, which I felt that very odd and very interesting, because I would never think that by knowing more about anything you would lose the mystique about it. Recently, as recent as two days ago. I heard that same attitude voiced by one of the most famous American artists today, who I’ve interviewed many times, who was saying… that if I wrote extensively about the work that it would be demystified. I really don’t see that at all. Because just making a replica, let’s put it this way, I maintain that when the artist says it’s done, it’s what makes the work of art final, and it is the work of art. That’s it. And there’s some institutions that go into that moment. I think making a replica can be important, but I think it’s also important that it be distinguished as a replica. And often they don’t capture the aura, it’s better than a photograph, but they don’t necessarily catch it. But let’s go one step further, what do you do with something like Calder’s Circus, where Calder was the machine, he was the engine for the Circus, and he performed it, he’s dead. So now we’re left with all these little figures, and what’s moved, still can move, but no one would dare do it cause they’re all fragile and falling apart. We’re not letting anyone do it. The original things are falling apart and very fragile. But how then what do you do? We display them as we do in this museum, and just showing what’s left of the figures. And we show a 20 minute or 45 minute film of Calder doing it, and you’re supposed to make the leap. I’ve also written about this. And it’s very hard to make that leap. So I don’t know how you do that. But we’re working very intently on that very topic. How do you enliven the Circus when the engine has died? The engine was the artist. And I’m beginning to realize now, since I’ve wrote about it, that it has a lot to do with the context in which you see it. And we are restoring all the music. I mean the performance was two hours, the longest film is 45 minutes, so there’s an hour and fifteen minutes that we haven’t even a clue about, we have some idea about the circus from the 78 records, and how they’ve been worn, the grooves in the vinyl, to know what parts of it he was playing, so we have some idea of what the two hours of
music was. I mean we’re investigating this, we have a huge grant from the Getty Foundation to do this, and we’re investigating this, and re-recording this, and recently I was in the sound technician’s studio. He played some of the music, and I was completely transported. I could envision the figure. It was really interesting. And I thought to myself, maybe we have to re-enliven this, is to recontextualize it, with the music, with the object, and let the imagination make believe. So I wonder if that in part is what you do with a replica as well. You encourage the imagination to make the leap somehow.

EF: Do you think, though, that some of the works being shown this way, and I’m thinking of the Cage being shown at MoMA, where you observe some remnants of the piece, and some can be documentation, you know be borderline…

CMU: You mean borderline art and documentation?

EF: Yes.

CMU: Ok, go on.

EF: Well, so then if these are becoming natural history-like exhibitions of the works, so that the genealogy, or what you would see in an ethnographic museum, is being shown – well there is, there is something different about the remnants of a work than the actual work. But it’s so hard to define what the work is.

CMU: It is.

EF: Cause a lot of people compare working with installation art to working as an archeologist.

CMU: I see that differently. How do they make that comparison?

EF: In that you take a work out of the storage facility, you have all these different parts, and the same way you reconstruct it is the same way you reconstruct meaning in an archaeological site.

CMU: So you reconstruct an installation is like archaeology. Ok.

EF: Re-presentation, of like this Cage piece.

CMU: Right, that I understand. Well, that’s the challenge. That really is the same challenge of the Calder Circus. Except the artist is still alive, that’s the difference. It’s the same thing though, it’s the fluxus material. And we haven’t answered it. I mean I saw an exhibition and the fluxus material I just really thought was not very, it’s great to see the stuff, but it was hard to get the excitement. That’s another topic, aging of art is something else. I brought my students to see, um, Robert Rauschenberg’s combine show at the Met, and they were your age, and I was teaching undergraduates at that point, and they just thought it looked like old stuff. They didn’t get the excitement that I did when I saw it at your age. Because it was all new, shiny and bright. That’s really another topic, about the aging. But I think the real challenge is taking inanimate art, that was once moving, or once part of a motion, part of something that was enlivened, that’s no longer – how do you restore the life to it? That really is the crux of it. And I’m beginning to see that it’s all these other clues that go to our senses, all these other sensory clues, that help do that. That we might now being aware of when it’s happening. I guess that’s where I’m coming to. And this is very new, I’m just coming to this in the last couple of weeks. But I’m beginning to see that we rely on the visual, but performance art is a lot more than the visual, so now I’m beginning to think that in order to really enliven this stuff, I have to go way beyond thinking about art as visual, and all the other components need to weigh in on it. And maybe we really can do something about making a jump,
allowing people to make the jump. And maybe that is what art is, maybe the art is the imagination, and it always was the imagination. I mean, maybe that’s true. I was just having a big dinner conversation with a friend over what’s creativity, and that got off to a rocky start when I started talking about it’s not the physical material, it’s what the physical material evokes. And he goes oh, Carol, now you’re on a slippery slope. And you know slowed me down.

EF: That’s what I love so much about your writing and your ideas – I agree with that. That’s almost like Plato’s form, it’s the form behind the actual object – that has this idea, even for works that aren’t conceptual. And that’s almost to the point of what conservators are now working with. More, cause the material . . .

CMU: But no, artists, should have always been working with. Because, let’s take, the Rubin’s painting that has half the face missing, or something’s missing, it’s easier to know what to put back because it’s representational – ok, so that’s easier than what we’re dealing with. But, what you have to do is put it back in a way that works, that the image evokes something in you. That you respond to it. That’s the whole thing the restorer is supposed to be doing. So it is the material, but what you’re really restoring is the immaterial. And I’ve written about that a lot. And when restorations go wrong is when they’ve been superbly restored physically, but somehow they’ve lost their magic. And that often happens when they get put in plexi boxes, behind walls, however they get shown or restored. The perfect example is the Declaration of Independence. It is not a work of art, so it can be put in a sealed case with gas that protects it, and it has yellow plex so it eliminates UV light and is protected forever, fine. But you can’t do that with a work of art.

EF: What I’m also interested in, younger artists that the Whitney collects, when they first make their art, I’m thinking of Janine Antoni, or Felix Gonzales Torres, they’re really using their works to challenge and de-center the self-contained object. And I’m not so sure, but once their works become acquired, they start to develop methods for how the works should be reinstalled. And I question how we perceive that. Works were made several years ago, but once they’re acquired, they are re-installable.

CMU: Well, it becomes codified once it’s acquired. You have to ask yourself, we do as restorers, when a work of art enters a museum, generally there’s a rule, and I speak for this institution, that is the moment the state at which you always preserve the work of art. Not the moment that the artist created it, but the moment it enters the collection. Now that’s not always true, with our collection of modern art it is mostly true, but with older collections you could get a work of art down in the 16th century that’s been repainted, so you get it and want to strip away, but with modern art it’s not necessarily so.

When the artist is alive we ask them to participate in reinstallations, that also can be tricky. Because artists are constantly moving on and thinking. We often rely on documentary photographs of the initial installation, and we often ask the artist to work with us with that, because we can’t allow the artist to rethink it every time, and change it. And they’re moving on to something different.

On the other hand, a work of art can evolve.

EF: Does it have to be sanctioned by the artist?

CMU: Yes, if it evolves I would say yes. But it’s the institution’s responsibility to record and respect what the initial installation was and to record that history, record that evolution. The institution at any time could choose, with the artist’s permission, to do the new evolution of it. We’re certainly do it with digital, I mean with emulation, from videos, digital, and we’re going to keep doing this as technology changes. So we’re already accepting that there is going to be change.
EF: Well, with specifically the technology example, I’ve also read about it in other circumstances where it says “originally this artist had a Pabst can, but now they would have a Budweiser, if it’s up to them cause the art is supposed to be relative to that time (Kim Davenport article).” But specifically with technology, how can it be updated so it can move, or should the aesthetic change?

CMU: Well I think you’re talking about two different things. If a work of art starts as a Pabst can, I don’t think you replace it. The visual aspect is the most important thing. If the idea of it being a found object that’s being thrown out by society, and you’re recreating something else. But if it’s a visual art, then you do all you can to reproduce the Pabst can. That’s what you do. I don’t think you go to something else.

With a case of tar-based art, you may not have the hardware to play the art. You have to emulate it. You have to think about what that’s going to be. And ask the artist, because every time you do that, it’s a step away from the original, so the artist has to be in agreement with what you’re doing. And there is something called the Variable Media Project, where they’re interviewing artists, and we’re participating in that, because you know the Whitney has examples of almost everything that they’re looking at. And we’re actually putting there precepts into practice, to see if they actually work.

EF: So if you had an old, 1950s TV, this is an example that Glenn Wharton was telling me about, Nam June Paik, I think his name is, and they try to replace the internal workings of the television, but the exterior stays the same. But what you’re saying there will come a point where that’s impossible.

CMU: No, no if it’s important to keep the exterior then they could just change the interiors and keep the exterior looking as it does. They can do that. But the presumption there, is that that exterior is important. Now, you could talk to Cory Arch Angel and feel completely different about that. The actual monitor is not important.

EF: That was one of my main questions for you, because I read artist surveys, but how can artists really say what is privileged in their work? What if an artist doesn’t have answer to that question?

CMU: They all have an answer to that question. They are often intimidated by the question, they’re often intimidated by the entire interview, until I explain right up front that what I’m asking you is your what is your opinion about this work of art today? It maybe different tomorrow, but I want to know what your opinion of it is today. And that immediately enables them to have the conversation. Because otherwise it’s impossible to know what the option would be, and what they’re thinking would be five-or-ten years down the road. So what value is that to us? It gives you some idea of what their opinion is, and then you have to look at the work. And see how it’s changed, and hopefully the artist remains alive, and keep asking, and keep recording that. There comes a time when the artist dies, and you have to make decisions. I don’t know what Calder would want us to do, cause nobody asked him. So we have to guess, based upon what we know about him, and what we know about, Thursday night I saw a new film that was put together about him, and it was fascinating to see him, and the way he thinks, and hear what he thought about his work. It really brought it alive for me by helping me how Circus should be restored.

EF: Do you think that installation works, or even contemporary or modern works generally, particularly challenge current methods, methods, and preserving works? Or sort of, later 20th century works, installation works themselves, as a genre, as a form of art.

CMU: Um, yes. They do. Maybe it’s because of the performance element of it that is so time-bound that introduces the other dimension of time. Time in a different way, it introduces a dimension of time in creation as opposed to what we normally do which is address the issue of time in history. How do we preserve this over time, we’re talking decades. Maybe with installation art your dealing with time in the creation of it. And how do you preserve that, I don’t know what the answer to that is. That’s really
interesting. That is what it is. And by us doing the technical research we do on traditional materials, we’re trying to get at how it was made and what the artist was doing with those materials to get that final effect. In a way that’s the same thing as installation art, except the doing of it is part of the work. So it’s not just writing it down, I haven’t thought of it in those terms, comparing it with stable art if you will, or non time-based art as opposed to time-based art.

EF:  What about works that lack an initial reference, or privileged state. There are definitely installation works that address time explicitly in the way they look and work, but there are also works that doesn’t address time explicitly, the material doesn’t degrade by the nature, there wasn’t intended by the artist, but does address time.

CMU:  All art will do that. But installation will be presumably particularly quick. But all art ages. All art ages.

EF:  And then there’s that issue of, the Strange Fruit piece in the PMA, when it was made the timeline was set out, that over ten years it would disintegrate, and then in between exhibitions it then stops, because it goes into the freezer. And in my thinking that almost ruptures the timeline that was initially set out for the work.

CMU:  Well it depends on whether the artist intended the deterioration of the work is part of the piece. I’m assuming, since they’re preserving it, that she didn’t. And they went through a complicated treatment of it, as I remember. She wanted a certain preservation of it, isn’t that right?

EF:  I think in the end, she actually, they’d done something where they were going to us consolidants. That was in the book Mortality, Immortality, and what the book wrote is that Ann Temkin said that didn’t end up happening. So it’s interesting she wants the work, once it’s finally gone and no longer displayable, because it’s so disintegrated, I guess that’s when the work ends. But in between, she worked with the museum about having the work in a collection, because she wanted it to be acquired. And that was again my idea that maybe some of the methods of reinstalling are more afterthoughts. And how those get reconciled.

CMU:  Again it depends on the artist. There was an artist at Harvard, I’m trying to remember her name, Sonya Altheimer, where she made the exhibition cases out of popcorn and chocolate and she fully expected Harvard students to eat it all. And they did. And what, in her mind, lasted were the drawings. Preparatory drawings for it. And she just stood back at the opening and watched them. And then during the course of two or three months they ate the whole thing.

EF:  Some of this knowledge I guess is tacit knowledge, or some is tacit some is not I guess, But when you think over time, after the artist passes away, and then his assistants pass away, are the assistants going to train more assistants, or eventually the process of those people fall on the museum staff. And is it really that different. I recognized the difference between someone trained by Saul DeWit, and someone at the Museum, but if they’re both using the same exact methods. And the knowledge has been translated.

CMU:  Well, Sol LeWitt’s complicated. First of all, the intent was to set up at Yale a fellowship that his current workers would train the next generation, so a system, a process was set up there, or at least that was his intention that would be passed on from generation to generation.

EF:  So the authenticity lies in that the information originates from him.

CMU:  I mean his people were making them even while he was alive. So he’s already once-removed.
EF: It’s interesting that the work itself undermines the idea of authenticity, but there’s still a certain amount of authenticity. As you said in your article, I mean Donald Judd is ok with someone fabricating from his drawings, if it’s done by someone he designates. And the systems are so unstable, manufacturers and assistants are so . . .

CMU: Yes, of course. And then the artist died. And then something will happen that I don’t always approve of, is that those assistants feel they know how to do it, so they can make the work. And that’s very different for me. It’s very different when the artist has died.

EF: In this interview in the Getty, Jim mentioned how you’d worked really hard, this is kind of an off-hand comment, that you worked really hard to accept change in contemporary art. I guess it’s something in the past, but could you elaborate on it?

CMU: What context was he saying that?

EF: Jim Coddington said “Carol, not that long ago a great deal of effort was expended by you and others to get people to accept some level of change in contemporary art. In a sense, it was no different from old masters, where change was accepted. But now we’re seeing a complete acceptance of change, and even identifying the work with all of that change—thus preventing, maybe, a conservator from stepping in. Are you noticing that?”

CMU: As I said, works of art are always changing. So I guess it’s the degree to which you’re willing to accept it. I guess it goes back the degree to which you’re willing to accept aging, which is a cultural phenomenon. I mean, we have the capability of putting color back into color photographs, making something old look new again, turn black and white films into color one. We have ways of doing all kinds of things that we couldn’t do decades ago. The risk is that you want to make everything look bright, new and unchanged again. And maybe that makes it harder for us to accept works of art that have changed. It probably does. It probably makes it harder for us to accept water colors that have faded, cause you just want to say, well, can’t you put a little more color back in here. Last night I had the experience where someone was showing an iPhone to me, and he had an application on the iPhone where he could play the flute through the phone, he’s one of those creative genius types. The other person who was sitting at the table, my age, said, can you do the cello. And he said, I can’t believe you’re asking me to play the cello. It’s phenomenal that I can play the flute. But I think that’s very human. You could put color into this, and if you can put color into that, why can’t you put color into this? So that’s the risk of living in a time when your capable of making things look new again.

EF: Because contemporary audiences want things that are contemporary to them to look new. But it begs the question, of how much age is appropriate in that it gives the historicity of the object, versus how much age undermines the intent.

CMU: I know what you’re saying. I think it totally, I think it brings it back to the Rauschenberg question, when I looked at him when I was your age, they were brightly colored to my eye, and it was really radical art. My students, who look at that work, think it’s dull, faded, not radical, and they think they’re antiques. They in the interim have seen a lot of bright color, a whole lot of appropriation art from found objects. They’ve seen a lot in between that has put that in a different place. So do we go and make Rauschenberg’s combine’s new and brightly colored again, I think the answer’s no. I think if we do we run the risk of losing the magic of whatever he’s done in there. In creating that. Rather we should educated ourselves to accept it as it was. I mean why don’t we paint Greek sculptures again? Harvard had an exhibit that’s going around the world of painted Greek sculptures, I don’t know if you’ve seen it, I was just so blown away by it. It was really shocking – scientists had taken all the archaeological information
all the samples they could, and recreated using the same pigments what they thought these things looked like.

EF: But at the same time, some works lose their magic in their aging, so I guess it’s a sense of balance.

CMU: That’s true. That’s true.

EF: You mention in your article the difference between a Rauschenberg and a monochrome painting by Newman, or Rothko, maybe. So it would be interesting in the different genres. It comes back to the decision model you’ve been talking about.

CMU: It is. Every one’s different. There isn’t a, a methodology is different. The respect for what it is, and it’s time is not different. And that’s what’s so hard with contemporary art because it’s very hard to define your own time. It’s very hard to define what your time is going to think was important about this work. It really is. Cause we are so shaped by each other in our time. Which is how forgeries exist. Forgeries under the great story the Han van Meegeren forgery story after World War II he was forging Vermeer’s. People really thought they were Vermeers. We look at them now and go they don’t look at all like Vermeer, because he was able to embody in his time what his time thought of Vermeer. And that’s what he sold in his time. And so in our time it’s kind of hard to know what we think about this maybe. So there is a movement in conservation that has been criticized and applauded of just sort of not doing much, just kind of letting things be the way they are and the conservator not interfering too much. Just waiting and seeing how things go.

EF: Stabilization rather than . . .

CMU: Right, recreation, restoration, per se, active.

EF: But like you said, the job is not to leave behind rubble, piles of rocks. In the decision making model, you said that the word “intent” is complicated, and I completely understand that, how then would you respond to an intentionalist, or someone who argues against the intentionalist standpoint?

CMU: Well, artist intent is one part of it. One part of the information that drives a decision of how to treat something. What the artist has to say is really important, but we also do scientific analysis, we also look at the work in its time, and within the artist’s career. We look at all these other facts, its history, its condition history, what happened to it, in the case of a modern piece it might be looking at how many times it was displayed, and where it was displayed, and how it was displayed. Kind of taking into account all of those things. The artist’s voice has always been a big factor for me, but it’s not the only one.

EF: Do you ever find yourself completely disagreeing with the way the artist wants . . .

CMU: No, I’ve never had that experience. I’ve started out disagreeing, but we always come to an agreement. I’ve never felt compromised so far. It is surprising.

EF: Cause there’s that example in the modern art book about the Krijn Giezen’s Marocco piece, maybe ten years after it was created, and he wanted them to keep the bugs because it was a piece about time and degradation. And they did research and a committee came to the conclusion that the original piece was meant to be a souvenir. Rather than a piece based in time. So they then gassed the bugs and . . .

CMU: And how do you feel about that?
EF: I think he completely disagreed.

CMU: Would you feel it was his work, still, after?

EF: I don’t know. It didn’t say. Well because VARA (Visual Artists’ Rights Act) sand user and the law makes this interesting. I guess it’s really funny to me how it speaks to the intent of the conservator. Right, malfeasance you know malpractice that was applied you have to prove that that conservator was not using best practice. Doesn’t mean they know the intent of that person, which is sort of funny because that’s the job of a . . .

CMU: Well, that’s what law is. So much of it is intent.

EF: But I guess the point would be to avoid those situations where living artists are disagreeing how their works are being treated.

CMU: Well it’s interesting. That’s the second question. It’s seems like we’ve forgot to ask the second question. The first question is ok we disagree with this but we’re going to do that. The second question is how would you feel about that? And these are our reasons. I mean I never, I mean I’ve disagreed with artists but then I give my reasons and they give their reasons, and you reach some understanding it’s like a cycle you get better understanding by incorporating different points of view. If you don’t, then its then you’re more likely to make a mistake.

EF: Are there works at the Whitney that have been de-accessioned that have honestly just degraded to a point beyond repair?

CMU: Not de-accessioned. We have de-accessioned work, but not modern or contemporary, the Whitney collection, the Whitney sold its 19th century collection a long time ago. There have been works of art that have been declared unexhibitable for reasons related to their condition, and we have worked, when I came here, I made that list, and I’ve worked to get those back, get those exhibitable again in different ways.

EF: Well, thank you. I just have two more questions. What would you define as the preservation process? Because I’ve been trying to define my parameters in writing my paper, and I read Theories of Conservation by Salvador Muños Viñas, and he defined preservation as the specific technical aspects, and conservation as the larger process. Which I thought was different from how I was talking about it generally.

CMU: It sounds like it’s semantics to me, and whether you call it preservation or conservation, and I’m not dismissing it, I just haven’t read it so I’m not informed, I think it goes back to where we started, the methodology, the technique sets one thing, but equally important is your understanding of what you’re doing. You really do, and every time you work you have got to preserve or conserve you have got to think about what is it, what’s your goal, what are you preserving, what is the work of art, what is the wonder in the work of art you are preserving, and that’s a very hard thing to teach. I was just having this discussion recently about conservation education that’s very hard to teach, and I think young people learn it most, frankly, by exposure to people who are doing it. So it’s a question of judgment. But every profession is based on judgment. You go see a doctor, the skills are a given, the vocabulary is a given, those are the words you need, what you are paying for, what you should be paying for is the judgment. And I think science is important, but too much reliance on science can be a bad thing, in a sense that it has to be taken in light of other criteria, it has to perform, it has to be interpreted in light of other criteria. And that’s true of conservation treatment. You need to have all the information from science that you can get, and fortunately we’re at a stage now that we’re getting that information, but you have to put that in
the context of what the artist says. What you think about the object, the history of the object, all these other things. So there is no one answer. So conservation, it’s not just the doing, it’s the deciding what to do, is the challenge.

EF: That’s why the decision making model, and decisions are so important I guess, the cross-continent...

CMU: It’s relatedness, and the interdisciplinary approach that’s really important for that reason. You know because art historians come to an artist with a completely different set of questions, than a conservator.

EF: And it seems like conservation as a career is changing, specifically related to contemporary art, because of all these larger issues that seem to challenge more the emphasis on material.

CMU: I think that’s true. I mean when I was your age there wasn’t any conservation of it, because it was all so new. So no one was thinking how they would conserve it or preserve it.

EF: I’ve heard this phrase, as sort of the fetish of the material.

CMU: What does that mean to you?

EF: It means to me that there are times when a person’s training might get in the way of their ability to conceive other aspects outside of the material of the work. Clinging to it more than they would maybe you know sort of a western conception, going back to relics, and idols, and going back to the material having so much meaning.

CMU: Barnet Newman used that phrase, I used that in my piece about Newman, and I think what he was talking about was that one could become so in love with the material, so absorbed with the nature of the material itself that one had a hard time then using it for some, making it a tool of yours. It became your idol in and of itself. I think that’s what he was talking about. Actually I think he was talking about that as he was criticizing Yves Klein, artists are great at doing that. Well I don’t think that’s any different today. I think people working with technology and all kinds of time based media, it can be a fetish. It’s just a different material. It’s what they do with it that’s important.

EF: Well, do you think conservation is in this gradual shifting back and forth about how much change is acceptable, is moving away from the material?

CMU: No, I think we’re still very much dealing with the material. What we’re doing is we’re seeing the materials that are being used just changing rapidly. Technology is on some level part of it now, and it wasn’t so much. I mean oil paint was discovered centuries ago, and is still used. It's more that the technology is changing and we’re seeing materials we’ve never seen before. I think that’s what’s broadening, and that’s what’s humbling in a way. And that’s what makes it more difficult, but also makes it more interesting. Not more interesting, I mean I’m still interested in oil paint, it makes it engaging.

EF: Thank you so much.

CMU: The hard part for you is to take in what everybody is saying, and then decide what you think. I mean you may in the course of your work, say this person thinks that, and this person thinks that, but in the end, the hard part, is what you think, and what you’ve decided what you think, and the writing will come very easy.

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EF: It’s hard to take a stance. I’m trying to parse these small issues. I’m really interested in the issue of displaying the work in its remnants, and this more than any documentation deals with what is the art, and I think it really goes back to Walter Benjamin, with the aura, but also goes to the modernists with their dramatic encounter with the work of art, with Franco Fried and Clement Greenberg, and maybe how our conception of how we experience the work of art will be modified, or how that method may not necessarily work. But I also have to find what installation’s I’m really talking about. I’m interested in installations, they can have performative elements, but mostly installations that can be acquired into a collection. That they have enough material to them that they are acquired as objects into a collection. Because that’s I think where the real issues come about is once they’re given a value and a number.

CMU: That’s interesting. That’s a good topic.

EF: You have an amazing job.
Lizzie Frasco interviewing Jen Mergel, associate curator at the ICA Boston

April 3, 2009

EF: I’m really interested in this idea of the [artist’s] sanction and you know taking artists at their word, but then question of the proximity of the sanction to the original intent has any meaning.

JM: Yeah.

EF: If a work is collected several years after it’s bought the artist might changed their concept…

EF: And there’s a lot of examples of artists who say “I want to remake this work, I want to make it better” and the museum is like “no, this is a souvenir from your first show, or this encapsulates the moment.” And I really want to ask the question does the artist’s sanction in a way isn’t similar in certain instances.

JM: Yup, yep yep where you have to revisit even if something’s written down as a document in 1989 . . . These are all interesting questions. So if we are going to be talking about specific cases you can begin to frame your questions around certain works, I noticing illustrations of the pin cube or others that were in the collection . . .

EF: I’m really interested in the . . . I know this is not necessarily installation art but I guess I’m considering it a sculpture with, an installed sculpture, it treats the space in a different way than the traditional sculpture.

JM: And I think it does fall under the category of installation art in the sense that it can’t be moved without reassembling it, it cannot, it’s completely unfixed. It is fixable, but is unfixed in that there’s no glue nothing holding it together. So once it settles in place, you can removed the sides of the mold, and the pins themselves . . .

EF: Oh there’s a mold?

JM: There are four pieces of plywood that are used to create the hollow cube, the box shape with the floor sort of being the fifth side and then the top being open. And then to create the piece . . . well I should take a step back . . . when we received the piece into the collection what we received were the four sides of the mold, and boxes and boxes of pins, and there is, because of the sheer weight of the steel in that quantity, there is this sort of this hollow wooden box in the center that’s spacing out some of the center space, it’s not to the edges per se, but the pins fall around that so that the weight of them in that center space isn’t too much for the floor to support. Tara herself had experimented with this in a version of a solid form, but it was just too heavy, too dense. In other versions of this work that she’s had with toothpicks, it’s completely toothpicks, there is no hollow structure because the density of that material is such that she can you know . . .

EF: This is something she did when she was making the work, not when it was adapted for the collection.

JM: No, she figured out in her studio, and she is always quite sensitive to serendipitous discoveries with material that she is also very pragmatic when it comes to, how is this actually going to work, how can we practically make this available for installation in other circumstances, for example even when
she’s not there. When she’s in California installing another show, and something were to happen to this piece, which is very fragile, and you know some four year old runs into in and knocks the pins, how do we practically handle that as an institution or a private collector, anybody were to take that piece. So she is very pragmatic in thinking of such things such as an interior box that make the weight of the piece such that it can be installed in more locations and you don’t have to reinforce the floor underneath, especially since its on our cantilever, that makes it even trickier in our gallery space.

EF: So is the box something that she would be ok with the viewers knowing or is that something . . .

JM: She doesn’t forefront that as part of the work, and she’s actually very, she wasn’t very specific about that when our education and interpretations came, and tour guides have asked about that, should we tell them about the box inside? She said that’s really not the point of the piece, I mean really the point of the piece is the coherence of these loose pins and just the fact that their head and their weight, it’s really friction and gravity that bring the piece together and make it work. So she wouldn’t want to distract from that magic. With the fact that practically speaking it’s too heavy, and then there’s this long parenthetical explanation about why there’s this little hollow inside so it will be a little less dense on the floor, so she doesn’t ask us can you tell people about that. Obviously if somebody were to say, “Is that solid pins?” We would not lie to them. We’d say, you know ‘there’s actually one hollow form in the center to sort of evening out the density of the material. But if someone were to say “Is there a magnet inside?” No “Is there any glue?” No. And if they ask how it’s made, we can tell them, and this is again how the materials came in: she gave us the four sides, the interior frame, and then it’s boxes and boxes of pins.

EF: Who makes it, every time?

JM: Well she’s done it sometimes, or her assistant, but when it’s collected in an institution like ours where we have professional preparators and crew then she also delivers the piece with a set of instructions, illustrations that sort of step-by-step you know procedures of how it is that you go about assembling mold, screwing in the four sides, placing it on the floor, checking the right angles, making sure it’s even, when you place the pins in how you sprinkle them in to ensure a density and an evenness, so it’s very very deliberate. And very systematic, and so she works through, “Ok, you know, here you would be sprinkling, pay special attention to the corners to make sure those are filled as evenly, it’s very important to her as an artist that corners are very crisp, and so you wouldn’t want an open chunk or soft clunkiness at the edges. And then evenly laying the work to the top of the four-sided mold, and then very carefully unscrewing the connections between those four, removing one side at a time, not being alarmed that some pins are going to slide out, and knowing that that is part of the process of making, that it is fragile, and once you’ve removed the four sides, you know we’ve developed systems internally where for example we have a broom with a magnet at the end of the handle so we can pick up the loose pins, especially that fall into the crack, you notice there’s a grid on our floor, and there’s a seam in the concrete.

EF: So is there a piece of concrete under it so you can pick it up and move it into the gallery?

JM: No, no no there’s never a big concrete piece under it, we always make it on the site. And that why I would argue that it is installation art. That you cannot move that piece. So if you want to relocate it, you have to disassemble it, put all the pins back in the boxes, reassemble the mold, put the mold in the new location where you want it to be seen, refill it, remove the mold sides. It can never be moved intact. And there are points where somebody does bump into it, you do try to make adjustment to the corners. And that has to do with the artist’s intent, she’s been very clear she wants the edges to be crisp, she wants the overall form of the cube to be very clear and intact, so that there is an impression of solidity from a distance, and sort of uniformity and symmetry, and then when you get up close you realize that it’s
fractured and fragmented and that’s creating a tension in the work. So if it weren’t perfectly cube shaped you would lose some of that tension.

EF: And is this something that the pins are important, the original pins that she sent?

JM: She specifies their size, seventeen straight pins and even in the instruction manual she lists the manufacturing source, so the important thing is that the art is not those specific pins, the art is the artist’s discovery and intention that these pins be brought together at this dimension, ours is 42 – by – 42 inches by 42 inches, you know 42 by 42 by 42 cubed, but she’s done works that are 46 inches cubed, she done works that are as small as 36 inches cubed, it’s always an even number, 36, 38, 40, 42 you know. It’s more about the concept. And she knows the effect of the work, the existence of the work is in its material presence. And that even a reproduction of it, when you were talking about the distinction between performative documentation of something that is an ephemeral event, that’s not the same for her. So she doesn’t believe the work just exists on a sheet of paper,

EF: So there’s a hybrid, a fluidity of conceptual art of say Richard Serra or something that could actually be remade.

JM: Hers can be remade. And she expects it to be remade each time it’s installed. That’s part of the concept.

EF: But the specificity of the pins and everything . . .

JM: They can be replaced. Certainly if for some reason we lost a lot of these pins, or someone stole a lot of these pins, or anything like that, her specification is that they should be flat head, not round head, we want to approximate the same length, the same metallic finish, so some are nickel-plated so they have a shininess to them. So it’s trying to achieve as close as we possibly can the originally materiality of what she had used, but it’s not, the art is not in those specific pins, it’s just in their materiality. Which can be reproduced, because, and this is the big point, Tara’s work is based on manufacturing materials right, it’s important because she knows the sources that she is using, it’s not just raw lead, it’s not just raw clay, these are things that achieve their unique qualities through manufacturing processes, and that means that they are ubiquitous, their out there, they . . .

EF: She doesn’t want them to become relics, the pins themselves. What would happen if they stopped making these certain pins?

JM: We asked her that too, if they stop making these certain pins, but say another companies makes a similar type of pin, does the piece stop existing, or do we go with the other type of pin? She is interested in, “it’s fine if there is, again another flat head pin not from that specific company, it’s not as if she’s wed contractually to any of these companies, she’s just trying to do you a favor by, she’s just an easy way to get a source for these materials. So she’s done her research on getting the materials, but again she’s very practical when it comes to: “this is a manufactured item, I’ve sourced it, so you should be able to source it too, this is not some mysterious secret.”

EF: So with some of these other pieces you guys installed these when you had a show here, is it similar where the cups for example could be replaced, they just have to be cut a certain way? Or because these have a slightly different. . .

JM: These are again your standard drinking cup, so you could replace these and it’s only if for example and she talked a little bit with us where you know the cups are just stored in the same big cardboard containers they came with from the company. Now some of the cups that she had used for the
very very first installation of this piece in 2005 had yellowed slightly over time and she replaced those
cause she did not want the color to be a distraction from the overall color field. Again, the work really is
the impression of all of those white cups together in varying heights in their stacks, and the columns seem
to be leaning left and right creating a certain undulating. This was a more complicated installation
because of the sheer floor area and so she’s very systematically worked on the ways to plan so to ensure
that the grid is even, that it is quite regular, she’s set out sort of a template for floor area, it’s always
adjusted to the spaces in which she’s seen, so it’s not a big square dimension of the floor, it’s always 30
by 40 feet for example, it always responds to the dimensions of the room so it was originally shown in a
very very large space in Chelsea in New York, and I don’t know the exact dimensions but it could’ve
been something like 50 by 60 feet and then when she installed it here at the ICA the space that was
approximately 38 feet by 48 feet and so she decided “well what I’m going to do is I’m going to bring the
work in to respond to the dimensions of the room and just create a 6 foot margin around it, which means
that the piece itself is six feet in from each one of the walls. It was space so that people could move
around the piece but it was a different sort of landscape that felt like it was sort of a cross section you
know, just made for that room that could have extended in any direction beyond.

EF: I just find it interesting that you said the cups are remaining and that there are something in the
directions and there are some that are try to . . .

JM: In this case Tara and her team installed this piece, she had she came through the installation she
brought five assistants, people that worked with her very closely and these are also other artists, and she
then obviously also maybe with the support of ten other ICA staff people would direct a crew of 15,
basically in installing the plastic cups on the floor the point is the height of each sets of columns are
varied and she would create a very loose idea in response to the space for example based on the sightlines
from particular doorways into that room, she’d say, “ok I want a larger height here.” There’s no sort of
computer-graphed floor plan for the height has to be this height here, and that height there, it always
varies for each installation in each new venue.

EF: But you could have installed, you know theoretically?

JM: We could have installed it, in this case she very systematically installed it in rows, almost super
market aisles first, so she’s establishing a very even grid that a team can walk through and then you fill in
those little aisles to make it a very even plane.

EF: The reason she has artist assistants, and so many artists are doing this, I mean even Matthew
Barney and this is a really interesting question for institutions because they need to figure how they go
you know work with the designated assistant that the artist has, but then develop ways for the work to be
installed after the . . .

JM: Right, and that’s where these written instructions and diagrams and even on the installation of all
that this surveyed, our senior registrar makes further documentations specifically for other museums,
because we are touring a show, it would been in Boston, it goes to Cincinnati, it goes to Des Moines, it’s
going to San Diego, and in each venue Tara will revisit that venue, set up a new installation plan
specifically responsive to those architectural spaces as well, our senior registrar prepares specific
documentation giving the other museums a sense of “here’s what Tara’s team is going to be doing with
you, here’s what they’ve planned in advance, this is what our staff at the museum to create further
innovations that helped move this installation along, And so it’s certainly the works are sort of
responsive, and the installation is kind of responsive . . .

EF: At least there’s a common denominator of the plans. But you couldn’t necessarily create the
responsiveness that she has when she goes.
JM: So all you can say is for example you know god forbid Tara were moved to mars, and she’s never here, but she’s made clear that I do want this work to be seen by other people, if Tara weren’t here what we could say is, what we know about this piece is that she responded to the architecture of the room, and knew that margins of this work should be responsive to any of the shaped rooms that its in, within a rectangular grid, and that she build undulations and variations within the height of the columns to create these sort of hills and valleys in response to the sightlines, and how a visitor would approach the space, there would be a hill through a doorway, and then a valley nearby and what she described also was her choice of the use this medium, that it was one that responded to light in a very specific way, it’s a used light, she needs to be clear that the light is even, and that any variations in seeming shadowy views of the floor on the bottom of very shallow sections of cups or very opaque tall stacks is something that any of us could perceive as being a quality of the cups, there are no light tricks in the room, if the lighting is very even that means that any variations in the lighting in the opacity or the transparency of the plastic itself, is because of the plastic itself, and just her stacking which was designed to be very even rolling his, so not abrupt edges, it’s not jagged. She would rotate her assistants around the piece so that people were very attentive to macro, or very large scale shapes and people would be very attentive to finish, they’d be following and moving around so that there was an evenness to the whole installation, it wasn’t as if one assistant was in one corner and another was in another corner, so you had four different sections meeting. And the thing that’s very important to Tara is she does not want the “worker bee” aspect of the installation to supercede or in any way distract the visitor’s experience with the materials. So she does not make video installations of people working she does not expose that or forefront that. It took a lot of work, maybe 8 or 9 days to make the installation at the ICA and you know that’s with five assistants working on it and you know other crew working on it and we had lighting on it, etc etc. That sort of work process is the reality but it isn’t the immediacy you feel when the work is seen completed in the space, and you approach it...  

EF: I wouldn’t say that this piece is a process oriented piece, the way that you look at it, it’s more of an autonomous sort of...  

JM: It’s about the gestalt, the overall impact of that sheer quantity of a familiar item that then becomes this cellular unit of this larger whole. And that’s also that notion of scale and that notion of notion of scale, and that notion number of parts to whole is one that directly relates to Tara’s practice of using assistants. She works in skills that are far beyond what a single set of hands can do. And so she helps you think of ways to incorporate a sort of process, an involvement of other people, and how to make that organic, and fluid, and systematic at the same time.  

EF: Is it strange how her work kind of reminds me of Rachel Whiteread’s work you know, it’s very different artists, and that installation she did at the Tate with boxes, I forget what it’s called, in similar ways.  

JM: And that was sort of unusual for Rachel Whiteread. What’s also interesting is that Rachel Whiteread had an exhibition at the same time Tara had, so that people were seeing them in sort of comparison.  

EF: I mean another artist that works very much with the installation process is Anish Kapoor, and you guys had an exhibit of his work. When I was at the MoMA I was speaking with Jim Coddington and he said that applying the pigment every time the work was installed, and I read about almost the religious process conservators have to have in terms of applying the pigment. So I was curious about how you guys installed it.
JM: It does depend on the piece. Because if you are talking with Jim Coddington about sort of a piles pigment piece which is quite different from this one, those Anish did and he almost started crying and tearing up as he was doing it because it was very moving to then sprinkle the dust. There’s like a little mold underneath, but then . . . we did. This case it was a little bit different because it was only the edges, that you’re dusting, and certainly if it needs dusting in certain areas, you can touch it up, it’s true though that the pigment itself sort of sticks to the floor. What’s interesting about this, and you may want to follow up with our senior registrar Janet Moore via email, of course she’s away today at a three-day conference, but she said she’d be happy if you followed up with her on email and she’d be happy to answer questions for you.

EF: Oh thank you very much.

JM: She knows that this pigment is no longer manufactured so it’s a very limited commodity now, and so it’s difficult, it does present challenges, you know, what if this runs out?

EF: You had some of this pigment?

JM: We have some of this pigment, but it’s such a distinctive color, and this reproduction can’t even get the intensity of it. So in many cases these pigments they are chemically produced and they are still available, but in some places they stopped producing them you wouldn’t be able to maintain the evenness of tone.

EF: What would you do then?

JM: That’s a good question especially none of these pieces were ours so it wasn’t our decision. It’s up to the collector.

EF: So the mounded pieces, he came here.

JM: He did.

EF: I mean cause his work is being installed all around the world all the time.

JM: He also has very long time assistants working with him. He had two come with him and one of them had been working with him for 18 years. And it’s not as though he’s an extension of his hands, but he’s able to predict if Anish were not here, the level of finish Anish would expect, and the processes that are very distinct to each work in terms of applying pigment, or polishing work.

EF: And then this work . . .

JM: Was actually constructed at the museum. And that piece obviously we constructed and then there are these section forms that come together to build up the sort of mound underneath, this waxy, vasoline, and then that was applied and then once the motor starts moving and evening it out across the . . .

EF: This thing moves?

JM: Yeah.

EF: The wax came with the work?

JM: Drums and drums of it.
EF: And then I guess it’s owned by a gallery?

JM: Well yes it’s courtesy of the artist, I don’t know if anybody has acquired it. It’s a massive work so I don’t know if an institution could have it and have the space to hold it. It has in a way, a direct relationship to the architecture in that it’s abutting against this as if it were a hemisphere coming through wall of the building. And so the waxy material sort of squishes against the each side of the wall.

EF: In the same way the pigment, these are questions that still need to be explored. These are artists contemporary to us, so

JM: In this vaseline based waxy pigment in substance you brings up folks like Matthew Barney again, right, materials like petroleum.

EF: And I think maybe with some of these pieces the institutions could make substances that look and appear and the same way out of different materials, whereas something like Joseph Beuys pieces where the fat is so original, I think there’s more room for . . .

JM: Maybe, although I would not speak and assume that because his research of the very specific properties of materials is so deep and these specific nicks of viscosity and the specific color of it are something that does make the work so I would say that that’s a good question, I wouldn’t assume that it could be easily substituted because this research is so specific.

EF: But he must, with the institutions who collect his work, have some or he will have to, later in his life have sort of . . .

JM: Maybe maybe. Again he knows that that pigment is no longer made and he hasn’t necessarily made efforts to re-source it. So I would not assume that he has the same, pragmatic, attitude that Tara does. That’s not to say that he wouldn’t, he just hasn’t explicitly said anything. You know some of his works are more fixed materials like acrylic, or stainless steel, so those are less of an issue.

EF: And then for some of these other installation that you guys did I’ve seen there’s some sort of documentation, but I was just curious . . . well let’s talk about this one.

JM: Sure, Cornelia Parker’s Hanging Fire Suspected Arson, Cornelia herself came to the ICA to install that piece herself as it is in the galleries right now. And each one of the strings of charcoal along the grid along the top is documented, during that installation process, which is photographed and videotaped to make very clear if the work had to be recreated without Cornelia, every single one of those pieces is related. And if a piece of charcoal dust were to fall off, we maintain that in our register, keep it in a plastic bag and preserve it.

EF: Would then you put it back?

JM: Sometimes you can’t. But it’s not as if it’s just swept up and thrown away. And Cornelia herself has given us great, well there’s video footage and audio footage describing the work, the background of the work, etc. So we do have very thorough documentation not provided by the artist for us, and she just gave it to us, but she was very willing to help us create ourselves so that forever more we are in a strong position to recreate the work. That’s fine with her.

EF: The charcoal has a relationship to the original building, right?
JM: It's the wood from the building that was burnt under suspicious circumstances.

EF: But the charcoal itself couldn't necessarily be . . .

JM: Replaced, I would say no. And the interesting thing is, it is carbon, so it’s probably going to last a long time. But it is definitely part of Cornelia’s practice overall to choose very specific materials that have this historical and narrative resonance, so if you were to take that material and substitute it with another material it’s losing that veracity, that poignant relationship to that historical context.

EF: The relationship between her and Tara Donovan is . . .

JM: It’s very clear. So she, and we can only trust that what she’s telling us is true. You know but knowing Cornelia as we do . . .

EF: It doesn’t necessarily matter anyways, cause it’s her . . . So are these pieces, have you consolidated them, has there been any effort to make the charcoal less I guess breakable? Or

JM: I don’t know of any say varnish or application if that’s what you’re talking about. Something that is protecting the material, or altering it in a way to preserve it. I mean it’s still very soft, just like charcoal is. As far as I understand, and you would have to check with Janet on this, I was here when the work was installed but I wasn’t up in the galleries, during the four or five days when that was going on, there is additional charcoal from the site, so we have preserved you know a box, it is available, so if something were to happen and we were to for some reason lose a section, there’s pieces available from the original material source sort of ready to go in. And thank goodness we haven’t needed to use that, but that’s quite distinct from Tara Donovan providing the phone number and email of a manufacturing source.

EF: For her stuff would you buy stuff now that it’s contemporaneous, or would you just do it years from now?

JM: We could, but we don’t need to. I mean basically the works we have in our collection are the Pin Cube, Nebulous (the scotch tape), and a work on paper, and we have materials for those, and know very specifically if for example the scotch tape were to degrade over time, or to yellow in any way, that that is something that we would know she’s even provided a video of how we would specifically recreate the small forms that make up the larger work.

EF: Do you think that when charcoal falls off that is part of the piece? Is that something that Cornelia would see and say, “yeah, that’s the nature of the material that’s part of the work.” Or is that something that falls off, gets swept up very quickly, and . . .

JM: It’s very unusual for any to fall off. They are quite fixed, these pieces of charcoal with pins to the wire. So it’s not like the pin cube, where even just vibrations in the building cause a few to fall down and we’ll just pick up to make the edges feel clean. It would be highly unusual if something fell off. So yes we would clean it up, because this work is really about the suspension of the material that sort of is creating that cathartic act of destruction becomes act of creation sort of fire sparking up, so we want to maintain that suspension and not . . .

EF: So there’s no degradation chemical or not chemical that is part of the work?

JM: It’s really just, it was an original destruction, but not subsequent.
EF: So I guess just a more general question I mean do you think that there is sort of an inherent, interpretive nature to reinstalling works? I mean this is something I think about in terms of objectivity versus subjectivity.

JM: Well I would say, and I’m 99.9% sure that our senior registrar, Janet Moore, would say the number one rule of installing installation work is to get as much information from the artist at the point when it’s originally installed that you possibly can, so that you are very clear on their intentions. And then from there, even if you can’t consult with them forever more, if you feel you clearly understand and have documented here their intentions along with the installation instructions, then that could be your initial guide for reinstalling the work. Now obviously circumstances always change, so you have to always balance artist’s intentions with new contexts, and say, “Well, in this new context, how would we translate those artist’s intentions?” But you know even with Cornelia’s piece, it was originally installed in a space where we didn’t have ceiling scrimps, we didn’t have this set of translucent fabric with lights up above, so we had to construct this grid so as to hang below the ceiling scrim, as opposed to just hanging just from the ceiling, and that was something that Cornelia had to adjust to. Because suddenly there’s this new physical element that wasn’t there before, that is certainly interacting with the piece. And in fact she actually addressed the piece by really addressing that little grid, even though it’s not so overbearing in its presence, but it can’t be ignored, it’s not as if it’s invisible, and she initially in her first installation of this work had this small pieces that almost looked like they were evaporating, into nothing, but here, in this strong edge being there, it felt very false, so she brought, you’ll see this little line of charcoal up the top margin so she’s acknowledging it head-on, so she adjusted based on the grid, with the grid now. There’s this frame hanging from the tracks around our ceiling’s scrim panels, which was never there before we hung it on a normal ceiling. So initially she had hung the wires straight from the ceiling and it could, the pieces of small charcoal we could sort of evaporate up to that more abstract pattern. But now there’s this grid structure, she brought the charcoal right up to an even sort of margin from that.

EF: But she did it.

JM: That was her choice. You know so it’s a good question, say, if we were to ever install this piece in a different location, if we ever built an extension of the building, or had a different ceiling, or were to bring it down to the lobby for some reason, where the ceiling is solid, I’d say we’d probably do it the first way. Because that’s the way she had initially installed it, and that circumstance.

EF: So you have a lot of exhibition of different installations, and some of these are more straightforward where to place things, but I’m thinking of something more like this (Space House?) that you had to install, are the objects slightly more happenstance, because that is sort of the nature of the installation.

JM: Actually, the position of these figures is very fixed. So it’s not like a doll house where you can move them around, they are in these little dynamics, and sort of full tableau, narrative tableau, so that is much more fixed. I don’t know if you saw any installation views of the outside of that piece, but it’s a structure, that is suspended from the space, there are little rooms that are, as a space house there’s a central pod, and then there’s a monorail that goes around it, and there are little rooms that hang outside of it, but that’s a fixed structure and it actually existed before it come to the ICA, and was reinstalled a the ICA, so the sculpture elements themselves already had fixed locations, which he added to the installation for the ICA, and he painted the walls of the room sort of very haphazard cutely sloppy rainbow striping around the room, relating sore of to this idea of orbit, but she didn’t there was not free reign to sort of place those anywhere.
EF: So with a piece like this if there was anything missing, so there’s a plant here, but if something were missing, that you couldn’t necessarily go out and buy, would that be something that you would replace, or I guess everything came . . .

JM: That’s an interesting question, and this happened a while ago so I’m trying to think what would Masaki (sp?) do? You know and Masaki herself as a personality is so informal and flexible, and yet obsessive in her making, she just may make something else to replace it, or you know I do not feel, and this is something we don’t have documentation on this, but from what I know of Masaki, and again I’m always deferring to artist’s intention, what I know of the artist, not what I would do. So what I know of Masaki there could be an informality to it, like “Oh, it’s fine, as if it were stolen from the house. They had a break in, and it’s never to be seen again.” Or she would just say, “Oh you know I made this new chandelier, so maybe I’ll put that in there instead.” Or “I can remake a plant, I don’t even remember what the old one looked like, so I’ll just throw something in there just to make sure it looks balanced or kitschy enough.

EF: So it’s interesting, and Glenn Wharton when I talked to him, he said something about how we’re very reliant on the artist for many of these works, so it would be interesting even with these documentation and this interpretation of the sanction, you know what happens in ten years, twenty years.

JM: Right, right and I think what’s a great example for sort of forty years is the Eva Hesse, big retrospective, sort of what you conserve and what you don’t conserve, and her intentions originally and knowing that those materials weren’t fixed, and the latex and black and things like that were going to degrade, and what that means for audiences, and what they have access to, and what that means for her legacy, that would be a great case study right there, I think these artists are all at the point where they are still alive, and working with us, and giving us documentation and we’re doing the best that we can to make sure that we are trying to research their intentions, acknowledge their intentions, gauge their interest and thus acknowledging their intentions, you know “Tara did you care? How strongly did you feel about this?” You know asking questions like that to know how much . . .

EF: So you guys do artist interviews?

JM: Yes.

EF: It seems like everyone . . .

JM: And that’s something that Janet Moore especially does, a sort of exit interview before the artist leaves. “Tara, let’s sit down cause I want to know what would happen, are we even allowed to dust this thing. Should we dust this, should we not, she we let dust collect on this.” Questions like that.

EF: And there are certain pieces, for example Calder’s Circus, when they installed that at the Whitney, they showed the documentation of him performing that piece in another room. What I find is a very interesting way of conceiving artworks cause it reminds me of something you would see something displayed in an ethnographic or natural history museum, where you have a little documentation and the parts, and the photographs of where it came from. And this is something I’m writing about in my paper is which are works that are going to be continually presented in their autonomy, which are the works that are going to have to start being presented in that way that has documentation with it, with physical remnants, is that a valid method, especially when there is no artist sanction. So that’s kind of where I was going with that.

JM: That’s a specifically interesting example, the Calder Circus, because they are props for a performance, they do stand alone as interesting structures, but the artist himself intended for them to be
activated, and so what better way to illustrate the activations of these sometime fragile works than video footage of himself activating them? Who better than him? But that’s quite distinct from a mobile, or a stabile, that don’t require the activation of a hand, or puppeteer, they are meant to respond to wind currents in the space. Or light and shadow and things like that, they don’t need that type of animation to be understood.

EF: I just think it’s an interesting case of something that’s quite old, and being represented.

JM: Do you have any specific questions for our preparator too?

EF: I actually think it might make more sense for me to email Janet, now that I have her email. Janet’s email is Janet Moore, jmoore@icaboston.org, and her direct line is 617 478-3152. And yes she would be a fantastic research for very specific conservation resources. And she sort of an authority on Kapoor, she moved here from England, and he’s London-based, and she did a lot of work for that exhibition. Even about the shipping and transport of it, and the special care to be taken just to get it into our building. Have you seen the catalog on Kappoor’s work here? That’s very interesting because it’s one of the only publications where he has sort of acknowledged the ‘Indian-ness’ and influence of his Indian culture on some of the works. So even the idea of piles of spice in a market in Mumbai, or Bombay, or the notion that the color red has this deep cultural significance, he has been reticent to talk about this before.
Lizzie Frasco interviewing Glenn Wharton, Conservator at MoMA and Professor at IFA School for Conservation

February 4, 2009

EF: Basically I’m trying to distinguish my project into two parts: I met with Alberto (de Tagle) last summer, and he was talking about the fetishization of materials, and the other one was the idea of documentation being the answer, but at the same time how it brings up questions of the autonomous art work. And how then you reveal art works that are displayed as remnants, and then with their documentation, and then with a replica, and then how you get sort of what you’d display in the Archaeology Museum. I think that’s quite an interesting development out of formalism, which we know in the early twentieth century was so focused on the drama of the autonomous art work. That’s kind of where I’m coming from. And you touched on this in your talk, but the question is who really owns the work, and how much can artists expect to continually have in terms of input. And you mentioned artists at the end of your talk, John Simon, with the computer, how he said he wants to be involved forever.

GW: I think about this a lot. My feeling is that as I said in the lecture, is that an artist has the absolute right at the beginning, at the moment of production, but they give up certain rights when they sell a work of art and other people acquire rights. From my experience though, museum staff bend over backwards to work with artists if they’re alive and if they can be contacted, and even if they have thoughts about their work of art that they didn’t have early on … and I’ve learned a awful lot about this working at MoMA, because for one thing MoMA is sort of iconic within the art world, it has a certain status, and so artists are very aware when their works are actually in the MoMA’s collection, or any major collection, MoMA is not any more important that other major museums, the artists that I deal with are very mindful that their work is going to be shown at this major institution, and staff are very mindful of this status and they want to make sure that the artist is happy with the way the work is shown, with the conservation decisions that are made, and you know when I first started working there I thought, “well I wouldn’t want to bother a famous artist like that” you know and then I learned very quickly that they want to bothered. That they are available, even these artists that I studied, you know, in art history. There are artists with strong personalities. But by and large there’s a really good spirit within the museum staff, and within the relationships that we have with the artists in the collection, and we do communicate with them, and have these relationships. And with installation art, it’s very interesting what happens, as many of the artists expect to be involved every time their work is re-installed and they just assume that they will be called every time it’s re-installed, and that they’ll be able to be there and work with the curator, work with the conservator, making decisions. From the museum’s point of view, yes we want to do that, but we’re very mindful of the future, so what we’re trying to do is document what the artists are saying about the work, so that each re-installation the work becomes itself more and more, and becomes what it can be more and more. So now we know what it looks like in a round room, we know what it can look like in a square room, we know what it can look when there are other works in the room, we know what it can look like on a monitor or projected on a screen, so we get to know it in it’s variability. And through this thicker and thicker documentation that builds but we’re in the business of weaning ourselves from the artists, so we are very aware that the artist won’t always be there, and we’re very aware of the daily rates. So you know you have to build that in to an exhibition cost, if you’re going to exhibit a work whether you’re at your own institution or you’re loaning it out, or you’re borrowing it, do you need to bring a whole team of artists and their technicians? And if that’s the case you need to know that from the very beginning, and you don’t always want to have those costs. So it’s not just the fact that you want to bring in the artist, there’s a whole bunch of other issues like cost, like the time it takes to be with the artist, and to work through all this, and people in museums tend to be very busy, there’s never enough money, there’s never enough time, especially at a place like MoMA which is very exhibition driven. Constantly putting stuff up, taking stuff down, so in the real world, as opposed to the ideal world where you’d want to sit down, spend endless amounts of time with the artist, you need to move away.
EF: So two questions: First, are you then going to do artist interviews each time a work is acquired, creating a sort of continuum, and showing their development; and I guess the other question is, what kind of conflicts arise when the artist, when you and the artist aren’t able to come to a conclusion, and I’m thinking of the example of Krijn Giezen in Modern Art Who Cares, where his work was infested with bugs, and he said ten years after the work he said he wanted the bugs to stay because the work was about decay, but a committee at the Franz Halls Museum came to the conclusion that at the time of the work, based on the documentation and stuff he had written, that the piece wasn’t about decay, it was a postcard, it was supposed to be a souvenir, and so then ruled over the artist to get rid of the bugs, and thought that was within their ethical and legal jurisdiction.

GW: That gets to be very tricky business. When there’s a disagreement, that’s when everybody runs back and looks at their individual contracts, looks at all the documentation they have, original photographs, publications, prior interviews.

EF: Is there an effort to get an artist into publications around the time the work is acquired, or is that just happenstance?

GW: No, not necessarily, but I think it does build the case for doing artist interviews as early on as you can. And allowing the artist to speak when they’re available and they can. If you can then document that twenty years earlier you said something else, you know then everyone has to decide: is this work something that’s on-going, and should we now incorporate what the artist wants it to be, or are we going to be really rigid and say, “No, you made this in 1980, this is what you said then, and it’s more important to us that we have a 1980 work of art by you, then one modified twenty, thirty years later.”

EF: Have there been instances where MoMA said, “well based on the documentation, we’re not going to take the exact action that . . .

GW: Well it’s interesting. I’ve only been there a little more than a year, so I don’t know the whole history. And I’m sure if I had the question, friends on staff would tell me, but I think there’s probably a method at MoMA, like any other institution, not to talk about these things. To document them yes, but not keep these stories alive and sharing them with the public, because nobody looks good doing that. So MoMA’s staff is probably a little bit more protective of this information.

EF: That’s understandable. It’s just interesting for me because it’s basically a philosophical debate that is literally translated into an action . . .

GW: Yes, I think the debates when they get into the literature, are published more by academics more likely than museum staff.

EF: And it seems like they’re kind of rotating the same example, the Joseph Beuys example, because they’re trying to protect. You were going to start doing interviews each time a work is acquired by the same artist?

GW: I make a decision, obviously I don’t interview every artist for every exhibition, but I try to look at the documentation that’s come in. I’m involved in the process, so I make suggestions to the curators, who are usually in touch with the artists, you find out this and that, you send the artist questionnaire, you get that back. I look at the documentation that comes back and make a decision whether I have more questions about work or not. And if I do then I communicate with the curator, and say that I want to do a conservation interview, and it may be one out of ten works, or even less, that I feel I need more information.
EF: The reason this is so interesting to me is that every time an artist comes to Penn to lecture I feel like they have such a persona shrouded in mystery – I’m particularly thinking of Jeff Koons, because he came to speak at Penn and we kept thinking of how much of his identity is constructed a certain way. If you had a continuum of interviews you’d hear them contradicting themselves over a period of twenty years that you wouldn’t necessarily find otherwise.

GW: And these interviews don’t always get published. They’re considered internal documents. I’m all about sharing information, and maybe because I didn’t work for museums most of my career, and so I’m a very big proponent of sharing information among professionals and even with the public when it’s relevant and engaging. So I always start my interviews by asking the artist if they mind if I share this information with others. And I’ve worked with the legal counsel of MoMA to develop a contract, an agreement, releasing MoMA, specifically for conservation artist interviews. And I ask the artist to sign it, and sometimes they come back with, actually Robert Gober, came back and said, “Well I’d like to use the information as well, so could we please add a signature line for MoMA so I can have a copy of the transcript?” And I just thought that was brilliant, I mean good for you. But no almost all of my interviews I have transcribed, I edit the transcriptions, and I put it on the INCCA artist archive database. Which doesn’t mean that I load the interview on to the database, it means others can contact me.

EF: You probably get a lot of requests.

GW: Not yet, but I’m sure that will be coming in the future.

EF: So historicity, I guess is the term being thrown around – I found that June Paik piece very interesting because I would personally agree with you that once technology continues to be replaced, it’s just as similar you continue to repaint areas of a painting that were missing based on the style of the time. And I guess it would be interesting to think how media dates a piece, and whether the artist and the institutions owe that to the public as part of art history, to freeze objects in time.

GW: Nam June Paik is an interesting artist in that he was very playful, and he always wanted to change the technology, and was very engaged, and loved new technologies. And he did not leave us with sufficient documentation to base these kinds of decisions. In a way he was irresponsible for not giving the future the bases for these decisions, but maybe also that’s part of his art, to continue these questions, of what is it, and what should it be. And maybe that is part of his work. It doesn’t surprise me that a curator who knew him would say, “well no of course we should continue to change the technology, that is the art.” And me, who didn’t know him comes along . . . I come along later and say if he didn’t leave us with the clear direction to continually change his art, I’m a more conservative person by the nature of my profession, I would rather saw freeze it, let it be like 20th century technology.

EF: You said the same thing in your article about collection the artist, with the rice and the train, Donald Lipski. Its the same thing – “I’m uncomfortable with this, this is out of my comfort zone.”

GW: Yes, but in that case it was the owner, the artist and me, three different stakeholders if you will. But also I was in private practice, so you know I was brought in to do this work, and I was in a different position than a staff conservator would be. It’s for one thing, they could just go to someone else, I’m nothing in this equation, but if I’m on staff at a museum then I do have some authority.

EF: Well I think it’s interesting the debate about replacing parts and authenticity because I think maybe, and conservators I think are already doing this, that western theory at large needs to reconsider this idea of authenticity because it seems almost impossible to apply [to these kinds of artworks]. And I guess as an art history student, I really know the value of seeing the actual artwork, so even if the piece is
replaced, and it wasn’t touched by Barnet Newman’s hand, it’s really important to see that art work in the continuum of art history… to not have it there because people don’t want to mess with the authenticity almost begs the question of what museum professionals and those caring for the works owe to the public, I guess.

GW: I think it’s a very good perspective, and I think it’s the dominant perspective at a place like MoMA, because an awful lot of intervention gets done at the MoMA, and other museums, including replacing parts, including really repairing parts, and repainting them, not a canvas, but an element of a sculptural object that’s gotten corroded or broken or damaged. It’s all done according to conservation ethics, so it’s documented, it’s photographed, everything’s written down, but in fact elements are repaired and sometimes aggressively. But always in negotiation with the curator, so it’s always a joint decision, and then we bring in all of our principle such as the principle of reversibility, we want people to be able to undo what we do, and we select materials that are distinct from originals so that they can be identified, and so that someone in the future would be able to look at it closely, or maybe just shine an ultraviolet light on it, and our restorations will jump out.

EF: How does that affect their market value, then?

GW: It would reduce the market value.

EF: Though it may not be listed on the label in the museum, if it were to go into auction, it would be listed as part of the . . .

GW: I mean it’s very rare that a museum like MoMA would deaccession their work, so we don’t even think of that within the museum context. When I was a sculpture conservator in private practice for 16 years, I in the end worked for very few galleries, because often they wanted things done yesterday, and I couldn’t do that. I had works waiting to be worked on, some galleries didn’t want to pay me for the kind of museum quality documentation I would do, cause I would always give them photographs before and after a whole report, knowing that it would go right into the garbage. And some galleries would even say, “Well I want you to repair so it’s invisible, and use the same materials as the artist.” And I wouldn’t do that, and sometimes I would just say to galleries, you know I’ve been trained to work for a museum and there’s a whole of people who do the kind of work you want to do, and I think you should find somebody else.

EF: And then not say that it was repaired?

GW: Yep, that’s probably the norm.

EF: Well at the ICN (Netherlands Institute of Cultural Heritage) they have a huge collection they’re going to start deaccessioning because the Netherlands I guess for a while had artist stipends, and then they had this huge collection now, and then I read in the NYT the possibility of deaccessioning artworks.

GW: Yes, Brandeis University they’re going to sell the whole collection. I can’t believe that.

EF: They have a good collection too.

GW: A major collection.

EF: At a place like MoMA that has a questionnaire and video documentation, would you consider that standard practice, because in my experience it still seems to be a relatively new thing. And when you acquire works by artists that are no longer living, are the same questionnaires filled out?
GW: No. The artist questionnaires are really developed for living artists, or they might be used for artist technicians, or estates, or other people who knew the artist. We carry on the interview sometimes with a wider group of people around the art especially when the artist has deceased. You know I would say the artist questionnaire’s have been around for twenty-thirty years now, so I think many museums who collect contemporary art it’s been standard practice for a long time.

EF: But maybe smaller museums, I guess?

GW: Oh certainly. And if they don’t have conservation presence on staff or consultants, they may not, so I wouldn’t say it’s standard practice.

EF: But the interviews though, would that be something that would . . .

GW: It’s been carried out by museums since the early 1990s, but I think it’s been increasing in practice. But for… I don’t what you call it, non object based art, or let’s say installation art, I just think it’s so necessary, I wouldn’t say it’s standard practice, but I’d say it’s growing and I’d say it’s critical.

EF: Do you think the likelihood of an international database of artist interviews is something I could see in my lifetime, or legal feasible?

GW: Well, I mean it’s there. The INCCA artists archive database is that.

EF: But you were saying a lot of museums kind of see them as internal documents?

GW: Yes.

EF: So could that possibly change? Or maybe 50 years after the artist dies everything then becomes public.

GW: It’s not the natural tendency of a museum to share detailed information with the public. Of course maybe staff people at museum feel very strongly that it should be shared, so there’s a lot of discussion of this, and you know a lot of staff people publish their research, present their research at conferences. Standard practice for sharing artists’ interviews, I think we’ve got a long way to go but it is happening. For a lot of institutions, and it’s really true with INCCA, this momentum is picking up.

EF: What would you say to someone who, this is going in a completely different direction, believes in the intentional fallacy and impossibility of ever knowing what the artist really meant. I guess that’s what I’m facing in my paper, because I want to divide my writing into theoretical topics, and I wanted to discuss the intentional fallacy and this woman, Louise Cone, I got her thesis from Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, it’s just got all these excellent works that illustrate the problems so well.

GW: After the interview I’d like to see that.

EF: She’s really young, and it’s good for me to be reading something by someone that young, and she’s just like “Well, you don’t have to believe in the intentionalism, but you should recognize that the process of trying to get there is at least important.

GW: Very interesting. I taught in my course last semester on the conservation of installation art, we’ve had a session called artists’ intent. I called it that deliberately because I think it’s a very problematic phrase. And so we started by talking about the intentional fallacy and the art historical literature around
there. The ability for even an artist, much less anyone else, to be able to talk about the relationship between the idea in their mind and the product, that would be the work of art.

EF: Yeah, you were saying to oral history, just the translation itself . . .

GW: Yes, there’s a whole school of art historians who say no one can articulate what was in the artist’s mind, and it’s a fallacy to assume that. And so what we need to do is just start with the object, and we can expand from that by knowing more about the artist, by knowing more about the materials, by knowing more about the time period, the social context, the political context, in which it was created, the art historical context. But it’s really the art historian’s job to do that, not the artist’s. So it’s a fallacy to go back to the artist and say, “What’s the meaning of this? What was in your head?” Because they’re going to try to describe what was in their head, but that’s not important, what’s important is the object. That phrase artist’s intent has been sort of boiled down, and so overused, particularly in the conservation community because it’s assumed that you can just ask the artist, and the artist will be able to tell you what his or her intention was, and once you get that you’ll be able to make a conservation decision. And I would agree with whoever you just referenced that it’s the right approach, but it’s wrong to oversimplify it, and think that it’s going to be easy, and think that that’s the only course of research that’s appropriate.

EF: Well, I guess also at the ICN I was reading in Modern Art, Who Cares? about this idea of asking the artist what part of the artwork is privileged. Which I think is asking what is the absolutely most important aspect in this installation, and kind of say “rate things.” Which I find to be interesting, very practical approach, because if what if the wall drawings are not important and they can be recreated, and . . .

GW: Conservators tend to be very applied and very practical, and I think it’s good that they do that. They are very oriented around documentation, their principles and ethics, but I think it’s also very important to bring in art historians, philosophers, anthropologists, others who have other understandings of art, and that’s what Arthur Danto was talking about in that quote that I read.

EF: I have to look at some of his work.

GW: Yeah he’s a very interesting philosopher and art critic. Because I think I’m very influenced by social science theory – that understands the world through social construction. And that to understand an object, we have to realize that we can only understand it through our own circumstances, and through the blinders that we have from that are created from our own biographies and are in such certain circumstances. And someone from another place in time or geographically is going to understand that object in a different way. And so to assume a universal understanding of an object is a false assumption. And so I think it’s very dangerous to think in terms of objectivity, there is a single way to know an object, and that’s the fallacy of science, that we can know an object through material research and through sort of the application of scientific methodology you can come to a decision about what an object should look like – I think you always have to bring other non-material ways of understanding it.

EF: It kind of seems that conservators are going have to become superheroes.

GW: Or at least work with other people. Get a little bit better at collaboration. And we’re getting there, and I think contemporary art is forcing that. And I think it’s applicable to all areas of cultural heritage conservation, but I think when there’s living artists, when their works are underpinned by conceptual notions you know it’s not just about what was it made out of.
EF: I don’t think I’ve ever seen it at the MoMA, but I have at other places, but displaying an image of what the piece used to look like with what it now looks like along with the artwork. I’ve seen it in several museums on the label, you know what I mean? Actually mostly in Europe.

GW: I don’t think MoMA’s really good at that.

EF: But do you think they need to be?

GW: Yeah. I’d like to see more of that. I’d love to see more of our internal research, debates, and discussion made available to the public, I’m really big on transparency, and about how these objects are contended and negotiated, and I think it’s fascinating to the public to engage in that, I’d love to see more blogging, more 2.0 interactive discussion about what these works are, can be and have been. And that includes documenting artist’s points of view, images from various points in the object’s life.

EF: So does that then take away from the autonomy of the artwork when you have the two versions, because then it almost seems to piece exists somewhere in the middle?

GW: Yeah, I think there are many people who feel that it’s the art professional’s job to negotiate these things for the public, so that someone from the public can come in and experience the object the way the artist would’ve wanted it to be. When you transfer it to a museum it becomes the museum’s responsibility to decide what it is and what it should be. And it’s too messy to present this as contingent and controversial. I don’t agree with that point of view.

EF: When you look at artworks now do you find yourself analyzing them technically or do you still . . .

GW: Enjoy them? I think I enjoy them more because I can look at them technically, I can read into the history, wonder if they’ve been restored or altered by people, or time. Anthropologists talk about the biography of things, the social biography of things, and I would add to that the material biography of things. Objects, works of art, as they travel through time and space do change, inevitably, and their contexts change. You know an archaeological object may have been a household, utilitarian object, then it broke and got buried, and dug up by archaeologists so . . .

EF: And why is that interesting in ethnographic studies but not available information for art now, and in ten years this will be part of the historical discussion and they will be looking back and saying, oh what did they do?

GW: And that’s interesting, I like to think that conservation and the kind of work we do is a really interesting area within museums, and I think the public would be interested if it were presented the right way.

EF: Do you think contemporary art, with its shifting boundaries, is also going to have to change as what we define as authentic? And how we value things? Because for a video that exists in a series of six, what is the piece – is one more valuable than the other? It seems we have to give room here. Right?

GW: Yeah, we can no longer talk about the authentic object, because we know too much. We can’t say that that’s the same object that an artist originally created. It’s altered physically, and in the case of installation art or time-based media, it may have nothing to do with the original technology even. SO we have to question that and we have to tease it out, or what is it then. And that’s one of the questions I ask the artists – what is it? What is this work of art? You know in terms. And like I said I’m trying to answer questions that people are going to ask in the future, and I don’t know what those questions are, so let’s
just get the artist to say, what is it? And how do you want people to experience it? So that when something happens to it and a decision has to be made, you can go back to that. I think it’s really important to realize that authenticity itself is socially constructed and cannot, can never be understood objectively.

EF: I find it so interesting because, not to say that it’s a totally western thing… but I’m taking a Japanese art class, where every year a few logs are replaced on Buddhist temples, until the temple is several thousand years old, but there’s nothing that’s several thousand years old about it?

GW: Right. So is it the same temple? If there’s no trace of the original material.

EF: I would say yes.

GW: I think it’s complicated. I don’t think it’s easy to say yes or no. And I think what we need to understand it. In its complexity.

EF: In its context it’s still the same temple, but I guess to a different, degree…

GW: To a western mind, it may not be. It may be a replica. But to an eastern mind it may be. Because what’s authentic is not the material, what’s authentic is the cultural tradition of maintaining it. So that authenticity has to be found in that practice of maintenance, or repairs, or even reconstruction.

EF: What about performance art? The documentation begins to constitute the work, and I asked Vita Acconci when we interviewed him as a class, I said, “Well so are you ok with your being constituted as such.” And he basically said no, and this might be one of the reasons he transitioned from performance art, this idea of wanting the work to exist as an idea, as a concept, but it actually exists as a video.

GW: Again, that all needs to be defined. Documented. If the artist tells us that this video of a performance was the work of art from the beginning than it is. But that’s not always the case. It could also just be a document and nothing more.

EF: A trace. Well I guess, if you know anything about some of these pieces, and how they were restored. I’m really interested in Rachel Whiteread’s work – is it stored as large pieces? Or individual pieces?

GW: I know less about that work, because even though I was a sculpture conservator for 25 years when I came to MoMA, I’m not one there now. Well when they have media components, I work with the sculpture conservators to figure things out. And I’m in the same office as they are, so we’re all friends and colleagues, and we discuss things together, but it’s really their work, so I guess Rachel Whiteread’s is simply packed in individual pieces – that would be typical of MoMA.

EF: But this one has media.

GW: The Bruce Nauman … this is one of the ones I want to interview him about. So I’m building a research project with big media works, which includes Bruce Nauman, but I do have a lot of questions about them. They’re the same questions: what is it? What can it be? What is its variability? All that. And we don’t have adequate documentation.

EF: Is the media stored with the objects? Is it all stored together?
GW: No, the media is stored the original or archival masters or submasters are stored out in a film and media storage facility in Pennsylvania, rural Pennsylvania… built with cold storage, so it’s really ideal storage conditions. And what we might keep at MoMA or the Queens warehouse, in the media storage room, are the exhibition copies. So we keep the laser discs, or the DVDs, or the tapes that we use to show in the gallery at Queens. But separate from the sculptural elements.

EF: Have artists ever been ok with the media parts of installations being exhibited separately or is it always considered one piece? And the digital file is sort of only shown in that situation?

GW: I’d say the norm for time-based media installation is for the video or audio components to always be shown with the sculptural elements in the same format, the same layout, that it was originally shown.

EF: So for the website you couldn’t just put the media?

GW: For the normative as I just described it, no. On the other hand the artist might say, sure show it on a monitor, project it. And some artists do. They’re fine with it.

EF: That’s a lot of responsibility.

GW: Yeah, we have to define what it is and what it can be.

EF: I guess this isn’t so controversial, except that the media . . .

GW: That one was very interesting to document. So I interviewed someone from his, this is Olafur Eliasson, I interviewed one of his studio technicians, to learn what the glass is, where they bought it, in case some glass panels break – how do we replace them? Questions about, it rotates on a series of motors, so how fast the rotation should be.

EF: I wouldn’t even think of these questions.

GW: Yes, what do we do if the motors go out? How do we replace them? The interview was very technical on this piece, because I wanted to know about all these elements – how do we replace them, how do we get spare parts?

EF: I couldn’t find a picture of this, but what about this Anish Kapoor piece?

GW: I’m not familiar with that piece.

EF: Cause it said it has raw pigment in it, and I was curious if the museum has one of his pigment sculptures.

GW: I don’t know.

EF: I guess I could ask Mr. Coddington about this next week.

GW: Yeah, Jim would know more.

EF: And then you mentioned about how the lard was recast for this. I thought it was really interesting.
GW: Yeah, so the MoMA made molds for the Janine Antoni and this was all developed in collaboration with her and the sculptural conservators. So we now have molds, and whenever it’s exhibited we cast lard in molds.

EF: My professor, Professor Poggi, she does Contemporary art at Penn, she focuses on Picasso, and she said she met with Jim Coddington the last two years because she’s interested in Picasso’s guitar and that the MoMA has… which original documentation shows… a table on the wall; and she went and looked with him at the box, and they found the table.

GW: Yeah, I’m not familiar enough with the circumstances. We covered a lot of territory.

EF: This is a very general question: do you think we’re moving towards sort of codified methodology here in terms of contemporary art, or do you think it will always be case-by-case?

GW: I think it will always be case-by-case, and that’s the way it should be. But I think there are broad parameters that we’re moving towards. That will guide us, and they’re based on the ethics, and principles for practice that came out of our profession for object based art. They need to modified. But we are working that out. So yes, I think we are moving toward a set of broad guidelines.

EF: Last question: this is a woman Senneke Stigter at the Kröller-Müller, I interviewed her over the summer, she’s wonderful, and we talked about this Joseph Kosuth piece where it was acquired from an original collector, and the photograph is supposed to be the decentralizing element in the art object, and they replaced the photograph based on the original interpretation. And I guess I think this is pretty radical, right? Taking something several years later, taking a photograph of the new wall, and I think they didn’t talk to him, but I was just curious as to what you thought of this and if you thought it could be done at MoMA?

GW: Well he’s a conceptual artist by definition, or he defines conceptual art, you could say, one of the original conceptual artists. So I think it’s very important to understand his concept behind the art, and what is it? And if he does provide a museum with instructions on what the art can be and should be, when it’s exhibited I think the museum has to comply with that, if they were provided at acquisition. If he, as many artists, were to make comments many years later that are different from the original, we would need to assess that and think it through. But if for instance he has said that his work of art with text in it can only be exhibited in a country that speaks the language of that text, I think we need to honor that. Or if a photograph of an object in his installation needs to be a photograph of that object, or if that object can change but then you need a new photograph of that object, we need to comply with that, so it gets very complicated.

EF: She makes a very convincing argument. I guess my one objection would be that the older piece was frozen in time. Why not re-create the interior in the museum?

GW: Yeah, I don’t know.

EF: I think she and her colleagues are quite progressive, very avant-garde.

GW: Yes, they are the best in my mind. They are setting the standard. I’m so glad you’ve come across this inside installation project. I wouldn’t rely to heavily on this publication, because these are early descriptions of the case studies. What’s now on the website are much more rich, they’re deeply buried on the website. It’s one of those difficult websites to access, but just keep drilling down drilling down drilling down. But there are some publications that she’s written on the inside installations project. I essentially used their website as my textbook for my class last semester.
Appendix B


Scheme for Documentation

1. Photo-documentation of all stages of the process and, if applicable, video and sound documentation.
2. Complete notes and documentation for the initial development stage.
   - This is often crucial in the understanding of why certain things were done. Many times compromises are made during installations due to cost factors, time restrictions and limited availability of materials. Knowing the history behind certain decisions makes the reinstallation of a work much easier. Within any institution, it is quite difficult to establish a methodology for recording these decisions. They are often made during information conversations or during last-minute installations and do not get passed along. The appointment of a documentation coordinator would facilitate this process – he/she keeping up with the work, asking questions about any decisions taken and attempting to understand what the concept is as it unfolds.
3. Coordination between the curator, registrar, conservators, technicians and lighting specialists in order to understand the ‘whole’ installation.
   - In this way uninformed and inappropriate decisions can be avoided as much as possible.
4. Solicitation of reports from all participants in the project.
   - This would include technicians, curatorial representatives, curators, registrars, lighting consultants, electricians, etcetera. These report would be collected and reviewed by the documentation coordinator, citing all inconsistencies.
5. Central archive to file reports.
   - Easy access in the even that the piece needs to be refabricated. This reduces the possibility that individual files will be lost and that personnel changed within the institution cause loss of valuable information.
6. Interview with the artist.
   - It is ideal if the artist can be persuaded to focus on the banal aspect of documentation at some time close to the installation of the original work. In that way artists are able to give an accurate representation of the process and how they feel about the work. Information acquired in retrospect is often transformed quite dramatically and thus can be difficult to reconcile with the original documentation.
7. Presentation of potential pitfalls for the future.
   - Many artists are reluctant to discuss how they feel about the work being reinterpreted or reinstalled in the future. They often find that the piece is only relevant to the present situation; in such cases the documentation of the piece may be the only necessity. The work then becomes a moment in history, never to be constructed, only read about or viewed in photographs or films. But over time the attitude towards reconstructing the work may change and the artist may become more willing to have works reinstalled in different environments, with different criteria and on a different scale. The initial interviews can be helpful in obtaining information about the importance of elements such as specific materials and what to do if they are not available, and about the parameters for altering a colour, light, measurement, etcetera – depending on the situation at hand. Some artists are very casual about their ideas and enjoy having them transformed by history and circumstance; others are far more tied to their materials. In some cases, the relationships inherent in the piece must be preserved in order to preserve the intent. One must carefully study whether these things are crucial to the essence of the piece or not.
8. Architectural plans and blueprints should be retained and preserved in as much detail as possible.
Appendix B

10. Reinstallations.
   - When a work is reinstalled, there are inevitable grey areas where decisions are made which
     may not conform to the original specifications, or they may be an interpretation of an unclear
     document or blueprint. It is extremely helpful to have these decisions documented, since
     ‘mistakes’ or ‘misinterpretations’ are often handed down and become more drastic alterations
     after several generations.
Appendix C


Director and conservator respectively at the Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf

Checklist for interviewing an artist:

– Information on materials (names, compositions, manufacturers, supplies)
– Techniques employed, collaboration with assistants/ other workshops/ companies
– Meaning of materials and techniques, reasons for their choice
– Samples of materials, the artist’s documentation of materials and techniques (primary, secondary), other places where documents on the materials or techniques are preserved
– Opinions or recommendations for installation, display, maintenance, storage and transport
– Opinions or recommendations concerning preventative conservation treatments (e.g. glazing)
– The extent to which changes in the work’s appearance (as a result of ageing or damage) are intended/ accepted, experience with ageing/ damage, dependence on the work’s meaning on the state of preservation
– Opinions on interventions, the state at which an intervention should be considered, the extent to which intervention is intended/ accepted, experience with conservation/ restoration:
  - aesthetic considerations
  - authenticity (which parts do not necessarily have to be original in view of the work’s meaning)
  - functionality (in relation to the work’s meaning, acceptance of exchange of parts to keep the functionality)
  - preservation of value (economic aspects)
– Earlier collaboration with conservators
– Interest in publishing this information

Note the time and context of the interview!
Specify questions to a single work/ a group of works/ a period of time!
Appendix D


Figure 3.2 The aims of conservation: RIP balance triangle.

Revelation: Cleaning and exposing the object, to reveal its original form at some point in its past. The visual form can be restored to give the observer, typically a museum visitor, a clear visual impression of the original form or function of the object (see Chapters 7 and 9).

Investigation: All the forms of analysis which uncover information about the object, from visual observation and X-radiography to complete destructive analysis (see Chapter 6).

Preservation: The act of seeking to maintain the object in its present form, without any further deterioration. This will typically involve a full range of preventive conservation practices and the stabilization processes of interventive conservation (see Chapters 8 and 11).
Appendix E

From "Developing a Methodology for the Conservation of Contemporary Art," Louise Cone, 75.
## Appendix F

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institute</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tatja Scholte</td>
<td>Art historian</td>
<td>July 28, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senneke Stigter</td>
<td>Conservator, Professor</td>
<td>July 29, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philadelphia Museum of Art</td>
<td>Andrew Lins</td>
<td>Chair of Conservation</td>
<td>October 27, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fine Arts Department, Upenn</td>
<td>Gabe Martinez</td>
<td>Director of Graduate Photography</td>
<td>November 25, 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Museum of Modern Art</td>
<td>Glenn Wharton</td>
<td>Conservator of Time-based Media</td>
<td>February 4, 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim Coddington</td>
<td>Chief of Conservation</td>
<td>February 13, 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology</td>
<td>Richard Leventhal</td>
<td>Curator in the American Section and Professor in the Department of Anthropology</td>
<td>February 19, 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia</td>
<td>Jenelle Porter</td>
<td>Associate Curator</td>
<td>February 19, 2009</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ingrid Schaffner</td>
<td>Senior Curator</td>
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<td>Whitney Museum of American Art</td>
<td>Carol Mancusi-Ungaro</td>
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<td>Eyebeam Gallery</td>
<td>Amanda Crowley</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>March 6, 2009</td>
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<td>Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston</td>
<td>Jen Mergel</td>
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<td>April 3, 2009</td>
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