

Juggling Priorities: Risk Assessment and Risk Management of Sheila Hicks’s “B-level Tapestries” at the Ford Foundation

Emily B. Frank – ebf252@nyu.edu



NYU

INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS

Sheila Hicks was commissioned to create two large-scale fiber artworks for the Ford Foundation headquarters in New York City at the time of the construction of the building. One was for the boardroom and the second was for the auditorium, both in the basement of the building. They were created and installed in 1966-1967. At some point in the following years, the works were treated with a caustic fire retardant that caused slow disintegration of the textile fibers. Slightly modified versions of the works with certified fire-retardant materials were created by the artist in 2013 and 2014 for the B-Level boardroom and auditorium, respectively. Surrounding the reinstallation, the Ford Foundation consulted with the artist, a conservator, and a number of installation companies to mitigate the spectrum of risks to the new artworks.

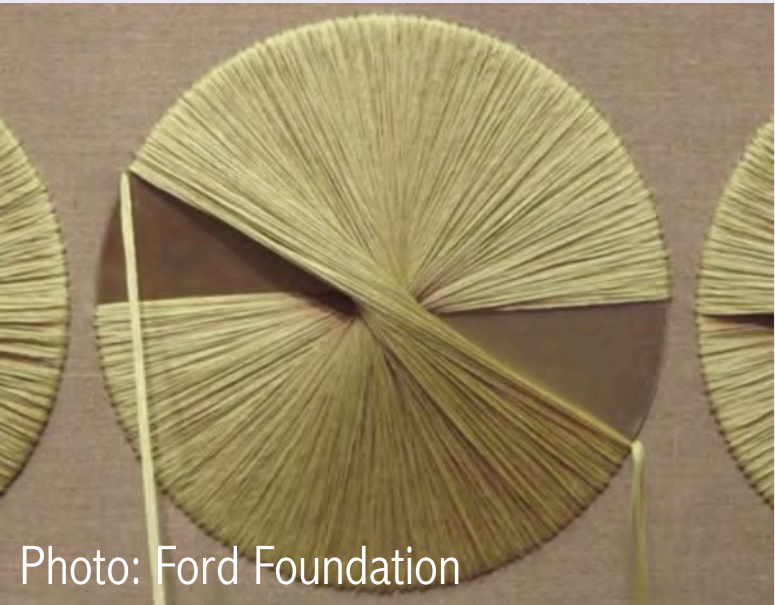


Photo: Ford Foundation



Photo: Bruce Davidson, Magnum Photo



Photo: Emily Frank



Photo: Ford Foundation

Material Risks

Material	Risk
Pine (Wood Frame)	Breakdown of cellulose
Stainless Steel (Structural Hardware)	Corrosion
Linen (Textile Ground)	Breakdown of cellulose; Degradation in strong acids, sunlight, and at high temperatures
Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) (Medallions)	Stabilizers can separate from polymer and may result in an oily substance or a white bloom; Expected carcinogen
Acrylic Spray Paint (Gold on Medallion)	Cracking; Corrosion
Pearl Cotton	Breakdown of cellulose; Degradation in strong acids, sunlight, and at high temperatures
Embroidery Thread (Thread)	Breakdown of cellulose; Degradation in strong acids, sunlight, and at high temperatures
ALPHAFLAM Varnish & ALPHACOAT Finishing Varnish	Unknown
Material Interaction	Aging materials may react unexpectedly with one another

Slight Moderate Severe

Environmental Risks

Environmental Factors	Risk
Global Climate Change	Unpredictable weather patterns that may result in floods, etc.
High Temperature and RH and Psychrometric Fluctuations	High temperature and RH encourage fungal growth; Fluctuations accelerate the breakdown of organic materials
Fire	Burning
Light	Light will accelerate the breakdown and fading of linen, cotton, and PVC
Pollution	Off-gassing and cleaning products will accelerate material deterioration
Pest Infestation	Insect, rodent, mold, or fungal infestation
Storage	Object may experience extreme temperature and RH fluctuations as the result of changing environment; impaction of dust; abrasion from dust

Conclusions

We might infer from the fact that Sheila Hicks thought the visual effect and spirit of her work was better served through its re-creation rather than conservation treatment, that she prioritizes its visual and tactile qualities over the more abstract idea of “preserving the original” or the “patina of time” enhancing her work. These works provided an interesting opportunity to explore the artist’s contribution as a stakeholder to the conservation decision-making process. Future conservators will have to reconcile the value systems of Sheila Hicks and the Ford Foundation.

Physical Risks

Physical Factors	Risk
Visitor Interaction	Abrasion or, in extreme cases, tears
Deinstallation and Reinstallation	Physical damage during handling
Traffic/Construction Vibrations	Mild overall deterioration

Thermodynamic Risks

Entropy	Anything that might occur or act on the artwork that has not been accounted for otherwise
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Proposed Risk Management Plan

Location—Artworks kept in current, intended space

Light—50,000 lux hours yearly, appropriate light source installed

Pollutants—HVAC to control particulates, regular housekeeping, avoid overspray during cleaning

Temperature—18 °C

Relative Humidity (RH)—50-55%, monitor with dataloggers

Mount—New walls with vapor barrier, space between wall and art

Integrated Pest Management (IPM)—Monitoring for biological attack, identifying pests, setting thresholds for action, implementing controls

Handling—Gloves, trained professionals

Physical Contact—Barrier, sign

Construction—Deinstallation, regular checks

Disasters/Emergencies—Plan made, updated

Documentation—Examination and documentation regularly

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