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# VARIABLE MATERIALS, VARIABLE ROLES: THE SHIFTING SKILLS REQUIRED IN CONTEMPORARY ART CONSERVATION

GWYNNE RYAN

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## ABSTRACT

The Hirshhorn Museum, one of the Smithsonian Museums located on the National Mall in Washington DC, houses a collection consisting exclusively of modern and contemporary art. As is the case in many institutions with contemporary holdings, methods of addressing the unique challenges in the preservation of contemporary art are being sought out and developed to accommodate the specific needs of the museum. In response to fundamental shifts in artistic practices, contemporary art conservators are experiencing shifts in their own roles, resulting in a need to incorporate new tools, new skill sets, and a higher level of collaboration into everyday practices. Inspired by many of the current discussions underway in the pursuit of practical solutions, the collections care staff at the Hirshhorn have been exploring ways to modify their fundamental practices in the installation, acquisition, and conservation of contemporary art.

## 1. CONTEMPORARY ART CONSIDERATIONS

Many factors are contributing to an overall paradigm shift in the decision-making processes in the preservation of contemporary art. Artists' incorporation of ephemeral or non-conventional materials into their artwork is not uncommon, and the presence of food, live animals, and various electrical components are increasingly encountered. Such is the case of the cabbages, live snails, and electric oscillating fan in the work *Palimpsest* by Ann Hamilton (fig. 1). Concurrently, artists who choose to work with more traditional art materials often employ them in unconventional formats, such as the Prussian blue pigment that is applied, highly under-bound, over the entire surface of the oversized sculpture *At the Hub of Things* by Anish Kapoor (fig. 2).

Along with the presence of unconventional materials, the designated manner of display often puts the materials at unusual or increased risk. For example, *At the Hub of Things* is displayed directly on the floor and without a protective vitrine: two essential requirements of display that pose interesting challenges in the preservation of the under-bound surface pigment that is vulnerable to significant loss through any form of handling or surface cleaning. In the case of the interactive work *Palimpsest* by Ann Hamilton, notable loss or damage to the original materials has also been unavoidable during each period of exhibition as the floor tiles, which consist of cast beeswax, are actively walked upon by museum visitors. While the choice of the artist to use this material in this way was very deliberate, the condition of interaction during display results in the unintentional darkening of the wax as the surface becomes embedded with all manner of debris and is soiled in a very short period of time.

Another layer of complexity emerges as, by definition, a contemporary artwork is in its infancy. Many artists, understandably, continue to readjust their perceptions and their approach to a particular artwork over time as both they and their audiences discover its unique idiosyncrasies as it develops a life of its own, and eventually enters into the art historical continuum. This is currently the case with the work by Hamilton where the Collection Management staff at the Hirshhorn have been in active dialogue with the artist over the course of two decades, working together with her to explore and experiment with viable options that would

allow the beeswax floor to perform its intended function without resulting in its complete destruction. In short, the approach taken at one point in the life of the work has evolved and what was deemed as appropriate at one stage becomes less so at another and vice versa.

On the other end of the spectrum, some artworks are fabricated with the understanding and the requirement that the materials must evolve or be replaced over time. Many Conceptual Art objects fall into this category. In the case of time-based media, artworks can face the inevitable issues of technological migration many times over as old formats are necessarily replaced with new ones. The challenges encountered with time-based art are representative of those encountered in contemporary art in general; however, they often occur in a condensed time frame with solutions being sought out of urgency often at a quicker rate. This point is made to stress the trend of time-based media conservation often paving the way to solutions that become viable for the broader category of contemporary art.

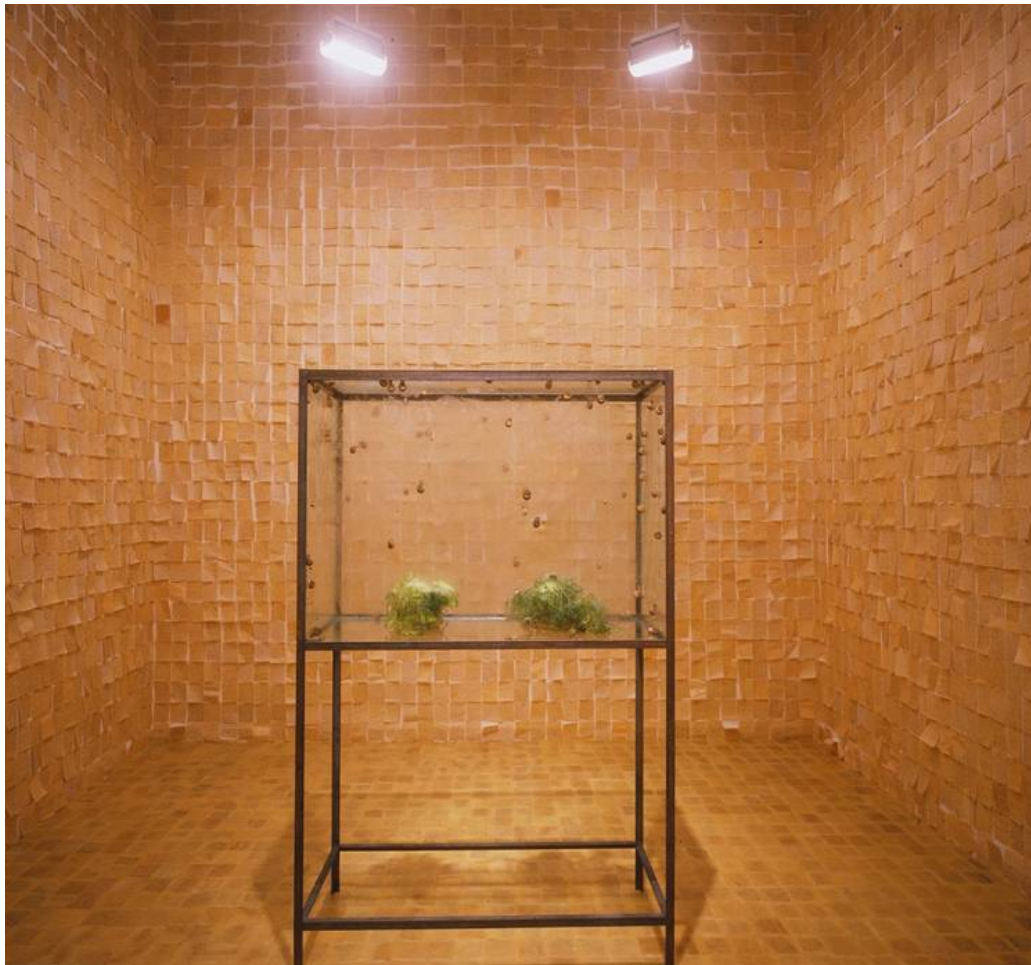


Fig. 1. Hamilton, Ann. *Palimpsest*, (1989). Installation with paper, wax, live snails, aquarium. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Ginny Williams in honor of Olga Viso, 2004. (Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum)



Fig. 2. Anish Kapoor, *At the Hub of Things*, (1987). Fiberglass and pigment. (163 x 150 x 114 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of the Marion L. Ring Estate, by Exchange, 1989. (Courtesy of the artist)

## 2. PRESERVATION OF THE IMMATERIAL

Underlying each of these above-mentioned factors is the recognized fact that more often than not there is more than just the material to preserve; now conservators are often charged with preserving the intangible aspects of the work as well. This means several things. First, the preservation of the materials can take a lower priority to the preservation of the intangible components. The concept of the 'original surface' loses its hierarchical location at, or near, the top of our priority flow chart, and understanding the role that the actual material plays in any artwork is essential. Secondly, it also means that documentation takes on a much more prominent role as the primary means of preserving the immaterial aspects of any artwork. Indeed, the lack of adequate documentation of these intangible components puts the work at risk of loss. Condition reports, treatment reports, before-, during-, and after-treatment photographs are tried and true means for documenting the material, but now there are the conceptual, performance-based, interactive, and environmental or sensory-related components that need to be addressed, and addressed in a way that makes sense, not by forcing a fit into the current material-based systems of documentation.

As mentioned earlier, practical tools for collecting and maintaining documentation are being actively discussed and sought within the contemporary art preservation field. Challenges arise as these forms of documentation often call for an increased level of narrative and the incorporation of information that comes from a variety of sources in areas of expertise far outside of the traditional materials-based conservation resources. In response, the contemporary art preservation field is acknowledging the need to explore the more well-developed methods of documenting the intangible that are practiced in the broader arena of the social sciences. In a sense, conservators are discovering the need to adopt techniques that enable an approach to artworks as ‘living’ pieces that are evolving throughout their lifetimes and in response to a myriad of social forces in a very real way.

### 3. INSTALLATION DOCUMENTATION

One area of focus at the Hirshhorn is the evaluation of the documentation systems for installation purposes. The high priority placed on this type of documentation is due to the fact that a significant percentage of the museum’s collection requires some form of installation and assembly to be accessible to its audience. Unlike a traditional painting or sculpture that exists as an artwork even when it is not on display, these works exist as disassembled parts. The extent of assembly required and the degree of teamwork that can be involved in the installation of these artworks can be quite extensive. The need for collaboration extends into the creation of the documentation as well, as the know-how behind the installation often comes from a wide variety of sources, sometimes outside of the museum staff, and from specializations that lie far afield of traditional conservation contractors. In the past year alone, participants in installation procedures at the Hirshhorn have included: electrical engineers, the Department of Agriculture, software engineers, a seamstress, and a billboard manufacturer. Collecting this range of invaluable and diverse input into a comprehensive report that acts not only as a recipe in a sense, but also as a record of the narrative behind any particular iteration of the work is essential, especially since the process of installation and materials of the artwork itself may be altered over time or in different environments. However, pulling it together into something coherent is not an easy task. One interesting solution to this challenge was presented by Thomas Zirlwag at the Electronic Media Group session of the 35<sup>th</sup> AIC Annual Meeting in 2009. He describes the installation of a complex kinetic time-based media artwork at the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany in which one conservator’s involvement was as a “Documentation Conservator” dedicated primarily to collecting and synthesizing the installation documentation (Zirlwag 2012). This has thus far not been an option in the understaffed and cost-cutting climate currently present at the Hirshhorn; however, it is an interesting model and one that may emerge into more common practice.

Video documentation is also becoming regarded as a helpful tool in the preservation of installation art, both in terms of recording the process but also as a means of capturing the overall intended experience of viewing the artwork which is particularly useful for time-based works. The on-line tutorial “Guidelines for Video Documentation of Installations” put out by the participants of the Inside Installations Project (2007) is one example of how conservators are attempting to address the need for standards to be developed for this type of documentation, just as the means for photo-documentation of the material aspects of art have been standardized within our profession. Inspired by these studies, but falling short on resources and skills, the Collections Care staff at the Hirshhorn have often collaborated with the museum’s

Communications and Education Departments, teams better suited for the function with the skill sets and the equipment and also with the desire to capture the installation process of the permanent collection for their own purposes. However, one may predict that the demand for videography capture and editing skills will only increase within the contemporary art community in the future.

#### 4. ACQUISITION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In recent years at the Hirshhorn, the processes around the acquisition of contemporary art have been evolving with an increased degree of input from the Collection Management department, consisting of Conservation and Registration Departments, with an emphasis on establishing the preservation parameters of the artwork in the very early stages of discussions. Curators, registrars, conservators, and exhibition staff work together as a team, first contributing to a collaborative internal pre-acquisition summary. Once the decision is made to acquire a particular artwork, this collaboration is continued in the development of the acquisition contract itself. While full access to the artwork and the artist by the conservators prior to the acquisition is common practice for the acquisition of artworks at many institutions, it becomes imperative with contemporary artworks. The ability to gain a sufficient level of familiarity with the artwork and the artist's goals for its preservation cannot be understated as it forms the underpinnings of the language incorporated into the acquisition contract.

The development of appropriate preservation-related language within the contract is becoming accepted as an essential step in any acquisition as often the long-term preservation and maintenance of a contemporary artwork is largely dependent upon the involvement of the estate or a designated third party. In addition, the resources required for continued display and maintenance of an artwork can far exceed what is immediately evident. As a result, increased concentration is being placed on outlining from the start what the overall resources may be in caring for the work into the future and on clarifying the various roles and responsibilities of the museum and the estate in the care and maintenance of the artwork.

For example, in the recent acquisition of three separate and distinctly different installation artworks whose primary materials are electrical light fixtures and bulbs, the individual acquisition contracts were drawn up to address the unique issues of each artwork by outlining the artist or the estate's responsibility in supplying bulbs and in providing input on viable alternatives when light bulb technologies evolve or become obsolete. In addition, and just as importantly, provisions were put in place to define the level of decision-making power that remained with the museum as owner. It should be noted that the language from one contract to the next varied as there is not necessarily a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the inevitable obsolescence of bulb technologies. The inclusion of such provisions is also not limited to artwork with electrical fixtures, but can apply for any work that requires replenishment of materials or the involvement of contractors that fall outside of the conventional conservation fields in order to maintain the artwork in a fully functioning and displayable state.

Although the current acquisition protocols are evolving at the Hirshhorn, distinct ramifications to the expanding skill sets required of the conservators are already evident. While there is significant input and assistance from legal representatives in tailoring the language of the contracts, it is clear that the role of the conservator is necessarily expanding into a less-than familiar realm and highlights yet another area of professional development that is lacking in the field. The ability to decipher the language of the contract takes on increased importance as the

document, with its focus on preservation parameters, now becomes an essential part of the overall conservation documentation of an artwork that must be considered or consulted by the conservator each time the artwork's condition is evaluated.

## 5. REDEFINING ROLES IN THE PRESERVATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In addition to the development of new documentation protocols and the adaption of a wider range of skill sets, collaboration with the artist in the preservation of his or her artwork is an essential component of contemporary art conservation. With this new role of "conservator as collaborator" comes the need to define its limitations and boundaries, specifically as they relate to the artist's voice. Such is the case in the longstanding research project currently underway with Janine Antoni in search of solutions for the preservation of her sculpture "Lick and Lather" (fig. 3). This artwork consists of a pair of busts: one cast in chocolate and the other cast in soap. The conceptual components of this work are multi-layered and complex. The busts are self-portraits and the chocolate bust is licked by Antoni and the soap bust is bathed by her; both actions can be interpreted as either self-mutilating or self-indulgent and result in a distorted image of the artist. In addressing the preservation of this artwork, the conservators have been focusing primarily on the soap bust, working with the artist to develop a process for recasting it in a manner that will extend the life of the inherently ephemeral material while staying within the conceptual specifications tied to its fabrication.

In any treatment where the artist and conservator are in active dialogue, where side-by-side investigation and problem solving is occurring with the artist and/or the artist's assistant, it is possible to enter into a territory that seems to be increasingly common in contemporary art conservation: that of conservator as part researcher and interviewer, but also as part participant. The conservator becomes a participant in the evolution of the artwork as the very act of studying the work and engaging with the artist can to some extent influence the overall perception of how an artwork should age. While Antoni has clearly defined the conceptual parameters as they relate to the aging of her artwork, this is not always the case. The role of the conservator as a participant in the realization of an artwork is often present to some degree with contemporary art through re-installation, re-enactment, and many times through replication of the artwork itself and ideally the boundaries of this role would be clearly established. However, these boundaries, more often than not, can become rather blurred, and require consistent re-assessment over time from artwork to artwork.

In Roger D. Abrahams' *Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience* from the 1986 publication titled *The Anthropology of Experience* (45-72) he describes his role as an ethnographer: "There is a double consciousness of experience: we participate in the action but also report about it, we are part of it but are also detached witnesses. In the field, ethnographers have to be aware of themselves and their experiencing and understanding, and how their subjects experience themselves and us." Exchanging out the word "ethnographers" for the word "conservators" creates a statement that fits the scenario of working with an artist in the fabrication of their work quite well.

These are important issues to be aware of as the inclusion of the artist is growing in prevalence in conservation practices. At the Hirshhorn, means for incorporating dialogue with the artist as a more regular and standard part of the preservation decision-making processes are being explored both through formalized interviews and informal consultations that are a part of the necessary ongoing relationship that is ultimately sought to be established. However, with this



comes the need to be aware of professional shortcomings in this arena, specifically in terms of the incorporation of interview theory and methodology into the training of conservators.



Fig. 3. Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather*, (1993-1994). Soap and chocolate. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2001. (Courtesy of the artist)

## 6. CONCLUSION

As the preservation of the conceptual and intangible components of contemporary artworks can take precedence over the materials themselves, it is important for conservators to examine the ways in which these elements are documented and preserved and to find techniques that are adequate and appropriate rather than trying to fit them into existing materials-based methods. At the same time, as dependence upon new forms of documentation inevitably increases, the need to develop new skill sets, and, therefore, train conservators to fully develop these skill sets is urgent. Underlying all of this is the increased need for collaboration and long-term relationship building with the artists and the many new participants who play a vital role in the preservation of these types of artworks.

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