



Article: Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings: Conservation of an ephemeral art practice

Author(s): John Hogan and Carol Snow

Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*

Pages: 37-46

Editors: Emily Hamilton and Kari Dodson, with Sarah Barack and Kate Moomaw, Program Chairs

ISSN (print version) 2169-379X

ISSN (online version) 2169-1290

© 2016 by The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works

1156 15th Street NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20005 (202) 452-9545

www.conservation-us.org

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). It is a conference proceedings volume consisting of papers presented in the OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings.

Under a licensing agreement, individual authors retain copyright to their work and extend publications rights to the American Institute for Conservation.

This article is published in the *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*. It has been edited for clarity and content. The article was peer-reviewed by content area specialists and was revised based on this anonymous review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein, however, rests solely with the author(s), whose article should not be considered an official statement of the OSG or the AIC.

SOL LEWITT'S WALL DRAWINGS: CONSERVATION OF AN EPHEMERAL ART PRACTICE

JOHN HOGAN AND CAROL SNOW

Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings create an entirely new point of departure in the creative processes of idea, visualization, variants, realization, immutable repeatability, and intellectual implications for artists. LeWitt's Wall Drawings are not physically artist generated and are non-artifact oriented. When the artist's intellectual intent and production are intended to be of a temporary but repeatable nature, how are the standards explained and maintained long term? What are the implications related to conservation, connoisseurship, and technical art history when dealing with practitioners of ephemerally based arts—reinstallation versus repair, disappearance of original materials, repeatability, human participation in realization, concepts of non-cultural rarity, maintaining artistic integrity, cultural historical context, avoiding making an "Identical Copy" but respecting the parameters of the "Idea"? Training future "draftspersons" in the materiality, scale, process, and nature of a democratic hand is a critical component. This article addresses the role of the archivist of historical and current installations working with conservators at Yale utilizing their expertise to inform realizations of the Wall Drawings far into the future.

KEYWORDS: Sol LeWitt, Conceptual Art, Drawings, Wall paintings conservation

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The evolution of conservation theory and practice can be a slow progression or a sudden leap. In the case of Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings at the Yale University Art Gallery, it is the latter. Therefore, a quick review of wall paintings in the Art Gallery's collections and the relatively standard conservation practices for these works allows a better understanding of current and future approaches to LeWitt's ephemeral artworks.

1.1 WALL PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS OVERVIEW

Among the oldest wall paintings in the Art Gallery's collections are Egyptian fragments dating to the second millennium BC and the once-polychromed Assyrian wall reliefs, dating from 883 to 859 BC, from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud, now Iraq. The Assyrian reliefs with inscriptions were recently examined using visible-induced luminescence digital photography in a collaborative project with conservation scientist Jens Stenger and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations PhD candidate Shiyanthi Thavapalan, who is studying Mesopotamian ideas of color (Salas 2014). The palace wall reliefs that remained in situ at Nimrud have tragically fallen victim to the abhorrent acts of Islamic State militants (Danti et al. 2015), thus increasing the importance of the Art Gallery reliefs.

The Art Gallery is renowned for its collection of ancient wall paintings from the Greek, Parthian, and Roman site of Dura-Europos in modern-day Syria. In addition to a wide range of artifacts, the joint excavations by Yale University and the French Academy of Letters between 1928 and 1937 yielded many significant wall paintings and drawings, including military graffiti, representing multicultural and polytheistic traditions. At the time of excavation, Dura wall paintings were backed with plaster, wood, and hemp. A comparison of their relative states of preservation found that the paintings left on these field backings, including the Synagogue paintings in the Damascus National Museum, are better preserved than paintings that were transferred to fiberglass backings (Snow 2011).

Art Gallery collections also include wall paintings and drawings from 15th century Europe and China. New installations include late 19th century wall and ceiling paintings in the Department of American Painting and Sculpture. Installation of the first Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing was done as part of the Art Gallery's 2006 renovations of the 1953 Louis Kahn building. That drawing is the focal point of the lobby and receives significant visitor traffic (fig. 1).

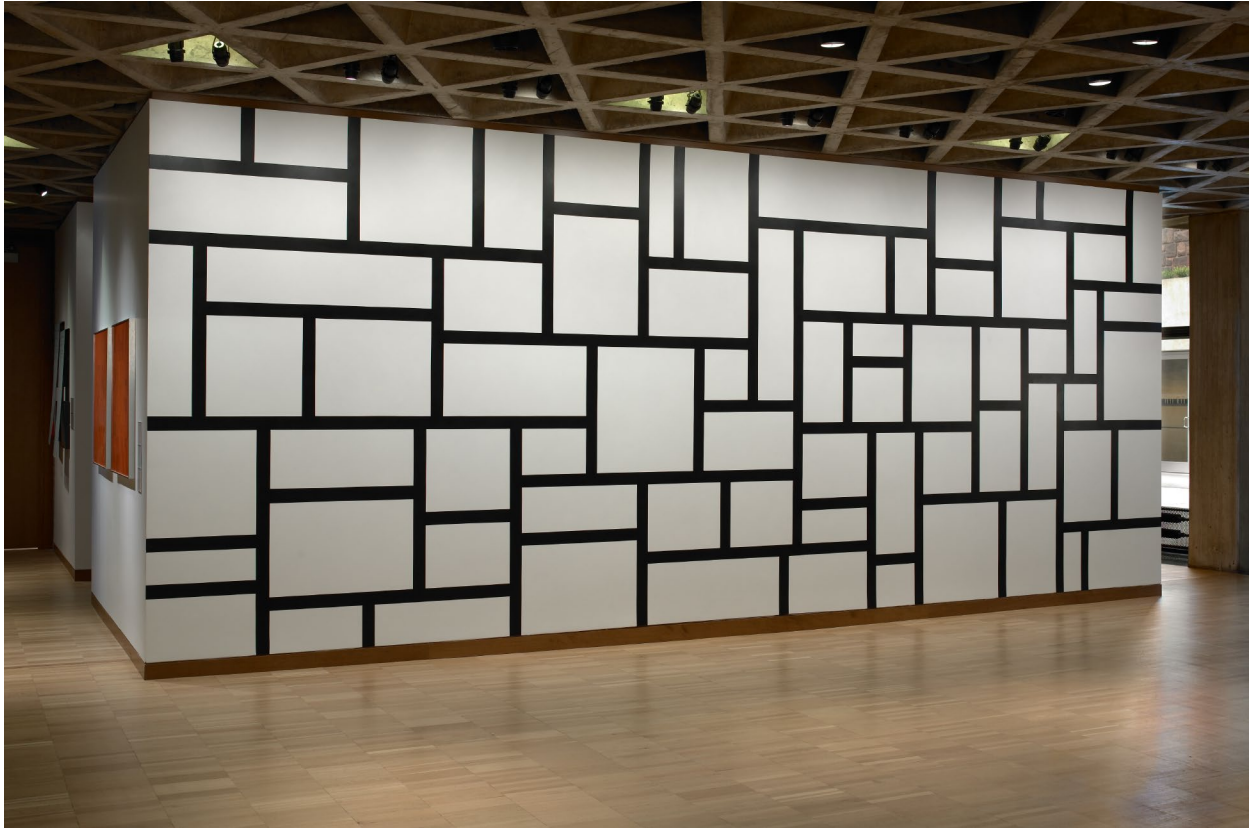


Fig. 1. Sol LeWitt, Wall Drawing #614, 1989, India ink. Yale University Art Gallery
(Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery)

1.2 TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO CONSERVATION OF WALL PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

As with all other disciplines in conservation, treatments of wall paintings range from minimally interventive to structural transfers. Significant developments arose in wall painting conservation after the 1966 Florence floods when “Mud Angels” worked to save frescoes (Spande 2009). The Opificio delle Pietre Dure (OPD) continues to research and teach new techniques in conservation of mural paintings. The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, offers a three-year MA program that covers topics such as documentation, technology, materials, environment, cleaning and consolidation, passive and remedial intervention, fieldwork, and research.

With the arrival in 2008 of a new team of conservators at the Yale University Art Gallery, and during the extensive conservation campaigns done for reinstallations in the renovated gallery spaces for a 2012 reopening, treatment of wall paintings and drawings were divided among object and painting conservators. Ancient wall paintings and drawings were assigned to object conservators, whereas ceiling paintings and wall lunettes on canvas were assigned to painting conservators. Various structural systems were used, including new linings and honeycomb aluminum panels.

The 2006 Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing remained something of an anomaly. When it was damaged by floor polishers or nicked by caterers, who would do the repairs? When it was inadvertently spattered with wine or leaned on by visitors, who would do the surface cleaning? A painting conservator? An object conservator?

1.3 NEW DIRECTIONS AT YALE

In 2012, conservation science was brought to Yale through the establishment of the Technical Studies Laboratory, followed soon after by the move of the Art Conservation Research Laboratory from Carnegie Mellon University to Yale, where it is now known as the Aging Diagnostics Laboratory. Both of these labs have become a part of the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (IPCH). A new, shared Conservation Laboratory and Digitization Laboratory are also part of IPCH.

In 2013, Art Gallery director Jock Reynolds enthusiastically reported to the Conservation Department that he was creating a position for a conservator of Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings. Painting and object conservators responded by asking: a Sol LeWitt conservator—does this make any sense? What would this person do? Where would she or he work? Generous funding was received to endow the position of the Mary Jo and Ted Shen Installations Director and Archivist for Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings. This position has expanded traditional concepts of conservation and how we collaborate across disciplines to rethink the confines of movable and immovable works of art.

2. SOL LEWITT WALL DRAWINGS

Sol LeWitt is considered a seminal figure in the movement that became known as Conceptual Art. In 1969, he was asked to participate in a benefit exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery for "Students against the war in Viet Nam." His contribution was a work drawn directly on the wall in graphite based on serial combinations of lines in four directions: 1 Vertical, 2 Horizontal, 3 Diagonal Right, and 4 Diagonal Left.

Upon completion of the exhibition, when asked by Paula Cooper what to do with the drawing, he said, "paint it out." This began his 38-year-long exploration that created more than 1,300 wall-based works exploring language and systems-based decisions made in advance and executed according to the parameters for each work; he named the works "Wall Drawings." This avoided the historical reference of murals and recognized the source point of works that were in conception drawn.

LeWitt made a decision shortly later in 1969 with Wall Drawing #3 to no longer execute the drawings himself. His position was a logical conclusion and proof of the concept as art to have others entirely install the work, thereby eliminating the norm of the artist's hand as essential and precious as a moment in time.

He further supported this approach with the implementation of certificates for each Wall Drawing, as each was created with an accompanying diagram. They are language- or reductively based images of the essence of the work's content. The certificate and diagrams became the economic vehicle and documentation of each Wall Drawing, listing the individual draftspersons who executed the work the first time (fig. 2).

LeWitt's position was that there was an essential symbiosis between the idea and the execution of the work. The concept idea stood alone, but to complete its essence it required realization. However, the realization need not be permanent; the idea had pre-eminence as a repeatable concept not fixed in time or place. Often this structure has been compared to musical compositions—that is, the work is conceived by the artist/composer and then performed by others but is in essence and reality the work of the artist who creates the original concept of the work. When the composition is not followed in execution, it becomes improvisation and the work of that individual, denying the formative concept of the work and the artist's intention.

The certificate and diagrams are the "object" aspect of the work and may in fact require traditional paper conservation. These documents are not replaceable; if lost or destroyed, the work is lost. The documents added the further structure of proper authorship/ownership and were a solution to the question of un-authorized copying based on access to the instructions for any given work.

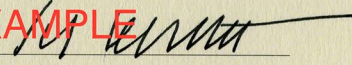
C E R T I F I C A T E
<p>This is to certify that the Sol LeWitt wall drawing number EXAMPLE evidenced by this certificate is authentic.</p>
<p>Wall Drawing #1241 A cube with scribble bands in four directions. One direction on each face.</p> <p>Graphite First Drawn by: Charles Allen, Takeshi Arita, Andrew Colbert, Nathan Gwynne, John Hogan, Gabriel Hurier, Sara Kugman, Nicholas Lennard, Roland Lusk, Roger Gaitan Marcos, Thomas Spoerndle, Michael-Benjamin Vedder First Installation: Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, New York July 2007 16 x 16 x 16' (488 x 488 x 488 cm)</p>
<p>This certification is the signature for the wall drawing and must accompany the wall drawing if it is sold or otherwise transferred.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Certified by EXAMPLE </p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sol LeWitt</p> <p><small>© Copyright Sol LeWitt _____ Date _____</small></p>

Fig. 2. Certificate example (Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery)

LeWitt was emphatic that the documents were not replaceable, and the Sol LeWitt Estate continues to support this position.

LeWitt wrote at length on his working position with his “Paragraphs and Sentences on Conceptual Art,” which is often quoted as a foundation in the Conceptual Art Movement (Zevi 1995). He also wrote his thoughts about aspects inherent to the qualities and execution of the early Wall Drawings that involved basic skill groups and understanding of the processes. Over the next 38 years his explorations of the ideas came to the use of other materials and processes. Individuals with basic skills and the ability to follow the written instructions frequently could install early works. Over time the nature of the work became more demanding in skill groups, and knowledge of processes required a practiced studio draftsman’s involvement with local assistants for the installations to be within LeWitt’s expectations and concept for the work (LeWitt 2006).

The evolution of the ideas and materials utilized by LeWitt continued to quantify in a manner consistent with the underlying concept, structuring execution methods to remain consistent in realization.

He asserted the theory of a human but democratic hand in the installation of the work. LeWitt created structured approaches with all systems involved in the installation process. The ink Wall Drawings are based on predetermined color combinations using individual applications of ink process colors. These combinations produce an infinite range of color but remain individual applications of red, yellow, blue, and gray ink upon one another.

All of the materials utilized in his entire body of Wall Drawings have set formulation of materials and specific application and process standards. This systematic approach provides for consistent realization, be it here or in another location across the globe.

2.1 WORKS IN YALE COLLECTIONS

There are 15 LeWitt Wall Drawings on exhibit at the Yale University Art Gallery and promised as future donations from the LeWitt Estate. Of these works, six are placed in semi-permanently installed locations outside the Art Gallery, such as at the Smilow Cancer Center at Yale–New Haven Hospital and at the Yale Campus in Singapore, presenting a somewhat different demand of condition, of proper reporting and conservation. These works, as with many of LeWitt’s Wall Drawings placed in public places, demand a different approach requiring active participation of on-site facilities staff or scheduled condition reports.

When the Wall Drawings are damaged, there is a decision process that determines if minor treatments are practical or if simply reinstalling the work is called for. When the works are outside Art Gallery collections, responsible conservators should contact the Archive/Estate and determine through dialogue if minor treatments utilizing the correct formulas, color combinations, and process information from the reference working diagrams are possible or if a complete reinstallation is appropriate, given the time required and desired result. Frequently, because local artists have assisted in the installation, they are of value both for their knowledge and ability to perform minor treatments cost-effectively. In all cases it is the responsible and practical approach that the Archive be contacted to make the determination of what is the most efficient solution. That said, many of the mediums are not practical to treat, and it is simply best to reinstall the damaged area if possible or the entire Wall Drawing if called for to maintain the integrity of the work. There are no costs involved for this assistance; if reinstallation is called for, only the direct costs of the studio draftsman’s labor and materials are incurred. Neither the LeWitt Estate nor Yale University Art Gallery have any financial involvement and only seek to maintain LeWitt’s standards of realization and condition.

On a few occasions conservators who were not familiar with LeWitt’s conceptual approach and the nature of process have not contacted the Archive/Estate and instead attempted to treat Wall Drawings utilizing a traditional approach, creating a less than desired result. This type of approach is not only costly but also contrary to the nature of the work.

2.2 MASS MOCA

Sol LeWitt, in conversation with Jock Reynolds, determined that a reference exhibition would be of value for the Wall Drawings to continue to be properly installed after LeWitt’s death. LeWitt made a promised gift of a large number of Wall Drawings to the Art Gallery with the understanding that a long-term museum exhibition would be created, presenting the work in a historical time line. The Art Gallery, in cooperation with the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), raised funds to renovate one of the buildings at MASS MoCA and create the “Sol LeWitt Retrospective,” a 25-year-long exhibition. LeWitt determined the works and placement for the exhibition. The exhibition opened in 2008, a year after LeWitt’s death. It continues to provide an immersive opportunity for the general public, as well as scholars who are focused on LeWitt’s contribution to art history as a seminal figure in the Conceptual Art Movement (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Sol LeWitt, Wall Drawing # 413, 1984, Color ink washes. Sol LeWitt Estate. MASS MoCA.
(Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery)

2.3 WALL DRAWING CONSERVATION

As described earlier, it was Sol LeWitt's intent that his Wall Drawings not be conserved in any traditional manner, such as transferring them to other supports or locations, but rather that they be intentionally destroyed, as seen in figures 4 through 7. They are by LeWitt's intention repeatable, and works that are "permanently" installed may be loaned and installed simultaneously for exhibitions with fixed duration with the understanding that they be destroyed at the end of the exhibition.

3. SOL LEWITT ARCHIVE AT YALE

The Archive provides controlled access to scholars. It will function as a resource center to the individuals involved in the execution of the Wall Drawings. It is located in the Yale West Campus Collection Studies Center, which incorporates a new conservation laboratory and provides access to a multifaceted spectrum of conservation disciplines. The addition of the LeWitt materials provides another dimension to the growing concern of addressing new issues and theoretical approaches to the field. LeWitt is but one example of an artist whose practice is in many aspects outside the norm of conservation. Creating the archive of his work at Yale is an initial step in what is rapidly becoming a widening field of concerns as more contemporary art utilizes ephemeral practices and media in addition to theoretical ones in the creation of art.

The responsibilities of the Archive in this environment will include:

- Creation of a comprehensive set of archival reference samples of all materials, wall preparations, formulas, and process standards.
- Creation of an analog and digital record of all hand skills involved in the execution of the work.
- The provision of scaling parameters or scaled working plans for Wall Drawings where scale is not predetermined in the original conception for the Wall Drawing.



Figs. 4–7. Sol LeWitt, Wall Drawing # 1241, 2007, Graphite pencil on plasterboard, 16 x 16 ft. Sol LeWitt Estate.
(Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery and Yale University Art Gallery)

- The provision of logistical support for installations requiring the supervision of draftspersons trained in the processes and standards involved in the execution of the works. Prior to his death, LeWitt reviewed the Wall Drawings and indicated which required the supervision and involvement of trained draftspersons and which did not.
- Maintenance of material standards and formulas when current products are discontinued to conform to the original application process for each medium. To date this has been addressed for two of the materials utilized: (1) the original inks for the ink drawings were discontinued, new formulas were developed that would conform to the installation process and match the color and surface qualities of the original work as conceived, and (2) the 2-mm color leads used for the color pencil drawings were discontinued and are now manufactured for the Estate to facilitate the installation of those drawings.
- Training of draftspersons in the proper use of materials and the standards for installation and conceptual aspects of the work as LeWitt intended.
- The provision of access and information for researchers to historical and related process materials.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Conservation of Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings is an evolutionary process based on how the information can go forward in time, maintaining a knowledge base that provides the information required to properly execute the Wall Drawings. It is essential that new individuals be trained in the skills involved and in an understanding of the conceptual root of each work. Research is already well under way for a historically accurate catalogue raisonné, which is scheduled for digital publication in 2016 by Artifex Press and later as a multivolume book by Yale University Press. This will become a reference document of the realization of each drawing. It will contain photographs of the work installed in its original location, names of the original draftsman's materials, dates of conception and realization, and any related notes of importance. The digital format will continue to record new installations and their related documentation, as well as related historical documents, catalogs, films, and critical material. A materials and methods section will be added to the digital record at the Archive for each Wall Drawing, indicating installation specifics required, skill groups involved, materials, scaling parameters, and type of wall preparation information required to execute the work properly. With the development of future technology, new systems will update all digital files to conform to new standards. This will be maintained as part of the LeWitt Wall Drawing Archive at Yale.

Collaborative research will continue with conservators and conservation scientists to find practical solutions for materials that are no longer manufactured or that are determined to be unhealthy and/or unstable. Although it may seem ironic that ephemeral works of art require materials that can last, a goal in the execution of the artwork is that it be done to the highest standards with safe and stable materials.

REFERENCES

- Danti, M., S. Branting, P. Tate, and A. Cuneo. 2015. *Report on the destruction of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud*. ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives. <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/report-on-the-destruction-of-the-northwest-palace-at-nimrud/>.
- LeWitt, S. 2006. *Sol LeWitt: Wall Drawings*. Bologna: Damiani Editore.
- Salas, M. 2014. *Ancient pigment, new discoveries: Egyptian blue*. Yale University Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. Accessed March 16, 2016. <http://ipch.yale.edu/news/ancient-pigment-new-discoveries-egyptian-blue>.
- Snow, C. 2011. Preservation of art and artifacts from Dura-Europos: A conservator's perspective. In *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity*, eds. L. R. Brody and G. L. Hoffman. Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art. 33–44.
- Spande, H., ed. 2009. *Conservation legacies of the Florence flood of 1966: Proceedings of the symposium commemorating the 40th anniversary*. London: Archetype Publications.
- Zevi, A., ed. 1995. *Sol LeWitt critical texts*. Rome: I Libri di AEIUIO.

FURTHER READING

Baume, N. 2012. *Sol LeWitt: Structures, 1965-2006*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Cross, S., and D. Markonish, eds. 2009. *Sol LeWitt: 100 Views*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

MASS MoCA. n.d. Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective. Accessed March 16, 2016.

[http://www.massmoca.org/lewitt/.](http://www.massmoca.org/lewitt/)

FILMS

Blackwood, M. 2000. *Sol LeWitt 4 Decades*. New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, Inc. DVD. 58 min.

Howard, E. B., and T. Piper. 2010. *Sol LeWitt: Wall Drawings*. New York: Checkerboard Film Foundation. DVD. 55 min.

JOHN HOGAN received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has been a principal draftsman for the Sol LeWitt Studio since 1982 and Installations Director for the LeWitt Estate since shortly after LeWitt's death in 2007, overseeing numerous LeWitt installations, such as the U.S. Mission to the UN, Center Pompidou Metz, Museum M, and the creation of the MASS MoCA retrospective, as well as works in private collections. In 2013, he became the Mary Jo and Ted Shen Installations Director and Archivist for Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings at the Yale University Art Gallery, a unique position of collaboration among conservators, curators, and artists. This position helps realize LeWitt's vision to maintain the interiority of the work into the future and provides a resource for the related materials and methods utilized in the installation of the Wall Drawings. Address: Yale University Art Gallery, PO Box 208271, New Haven, CT 06520. E-mail: John.Hogan@yale.edu

CAROL SNOW, Deputy Chief Conservator and the Alan J. Dworsky Senior Conservator of Objects, is a graduate of Skidmore College and the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation. She worked at the Walters Art Museum, on archaeological projects around the Mediterranean, including a Fulbright Scholarship to work in Turkey, and then as a private conservator primarily in the Boston area for nearly 20 years. Carol joined the staff of the Yale University Art Gallery Conservation Department in 2008 and is responsible for the conservation and preservation of an encyclopedic collection spanning from ancient to contemporary three-dimensional works of art in a wide range of media, including stone, metals, ceramics, glass, wood, ivory, textiles, plastics, kinetic art, and digital media. Address: Yale University Art Gallery, PO Box 208271, New Haven, CT 06520. E-mail: Carol.Snow@yale.edu

