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# The *Technique* of Conservation

## Hands and Minds, Science, and Humanities

*This paper is an expanded version of my paper “Conservation and Contingency: On Realms of Theory and Cultures of Practice” presented at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin on November 22, 2015.*

### What is conservation?

Simplistic as it may seem, there are many possible answers to the question: What is conservation? Today, conservation no longer aims simply to prolong its objects’ material lives into the future. It is now also seen as an engagement with materiality,<sup>1</sup> rather than material—that is, engagement with the many specific factors that determine how objects’ identity and meaning are entangled with the aspects of time and space, the environment, ruling values, politics, economy, conventions, and culture. Additionally, beyond its concerns with objects, conservation has now also begun to engage with subjects, and the accompanying notions of the transmission of skill, technique, tradition, memory, and tacit knowledge. As an entanglement of theory and practice, and seen from a diachronic perspective, conservation is an altogether distinct theoretical-practical construct—a complex sum of approaches and processes that refuses to fall into pre-established categories.

But to ask what conservation is also means scrutinizing the context in which, and the reason why, we need to pose this question. Today, it no longer seems feasible to perform—and to discuss—conservation without considering it within a broader context—that of the (history of) human sciences in particular and culture in general. Outside the field, grasping the richness of conservation’s knowledge helps to bypass its somewhat limiting bondage with object-oriented materialism and authenticity that for decades exposed conservation’s material interests and annihilated the need for context. At the beginning of this new millennium, conservation ought to be contextualized within

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<sup>1</sup> Although the words “material” and “materiality” carry ambivalent meanings in vernacular English, I understand materiality as a form of framing the existence of artworks and artifacts across time and space. The physical matter connoted with materiality assumes potential from its association with non-physical matter. Hong, “Material/materiality.” In conservation, the non-material aspects of materiality may include the artwork’s concept, temporality, and spatiality.

a broader culture that produces it and within the human sciences within which it operates.<sup>2</sup>

Set against the background of its development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in what follows, I will sketch a picture of conservation that always exists somewhere between a set of dichotomies of hands and minds, practice and theory, the tangible and the intangible, and the traditional and the new. By putting today's conservation into an historical perspective, this paper will examine how the attention paid to materials and materialities effectuated from science's persistence that, since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, has actively contributed to the shifting identity from the artisanal craft and artistic activity to that of an (apparently) exact science. Such a shift in conservation's identity should not be mistaken as its ultimate emancipation. At present, it seems that conservation has already reached beyond its romance with science and is seen as a critical act of valorization and interpretation. The cultures it engages, and those it produces, still need to be fully understood in order to come to terms with what conservation is and what it does.

Drawing from these perceptions, I will argue that, rather than seeing the complexities of conservation as a hindrance, we may turn them into positive values. Mapping the territory of conservation, and unfolding its knowledge, can only begin by dissecting its rich practices and attitudes. After all, with its *material consciousness* (Richard Sennett), conservation is perhaps one of the very few areas with the ability to engage with nearly every sort of producer and material in nearly every extant technique enacted in diverse social milieus. Therefore, the titular *technique of conservation*—the textual, material, and social,<sup>3</sup> but also epistemic practice (the conjunction of practical and propositional knowledge)—will combine intellectual inquiry with technical knowhow—a project that can today perhaps only partially succeed, but which, with the future in mind, is nonetheless worth pursuing.

Just like the heterogeneity of conservation as argued here, the perspective from which this paper has been written is multifocal. The following insights are inspired by my long-term commitment to conservation practice, stewardship of art collection, and academic discourse; indeed, this chapter mixes conservation theory and philosophy, studies of material culture and archeology, and the history of art.

### **Terms, taxonomies, contingencies**

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<sup>2</sup> Hölling, "The Explicit Material," 2014; Hölling, "Cultures of Conservation," 2016.

<sup>3</sup> "Technique" as defined in Dupré, "Artechne."

For the sake of terminological clarity, throughout the text, “conservation” is used to indicate a more general meaning of conservation-restoration-preservation. As part of human sciences, conservation comprises, among other things, all actions related to the manipulation of objects—their examination, documentation, and maintenance that, to varying degrees, are oriented towards securing these objects’ existence and survival. Conservation is also the accompanying theoretical underpinning, the construction of knowledge about the objects and their makers in the form of documentary narratives (conservation documentation), but also tacit, unarticulated knowledge of specific techniques, approaches, and archival systems in which documents and objects are ordered. Unless used specifically in an historical or technical context, conservation substitutes the words “restoration,” and “preservation,”<sup>4</sup> of which their fluctuating meanings are contingent on the context in which they are used.<sup>5</sup>

The phonetic-semantic associations may allow allocating conservation in “conservatism”—an aversion to change or innovation, and sympathy for traditional values.<sup>6</sup> To conserve means to attempt to limit or impose some kind of order onto the contingent world; this poses an interesting paradox, because, as we will see, the notion of conservation itself is anything but fixed or determined. Slightly provocative at first sight, the contingency of conservation offers an alternative view of conservation—one that gestures towards a reflection on an otherwise conservative, linear view on the development of the field.

Here, conservation becomes a complex techno-cultural practice with a strong, retroactive impact on its objects and subjects. The technological practice of conservation

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<sup>4</sup> There has been much discussion about conservation taxonomies. ICOM-CC, for instance, proposes to split conservation into “preventive conservation,” “remedial conservation,” and “restoration.” ICOM-CC, “Terminology.”

<sup>5</sup> Restoration, from the old French “restoration” (fourteenth century) signified a means of healing or restoring health, or renewing something lost. It gained the sense of “repairing of a building” or “restoring to a former state” in the mid-fifteenth century. As an attempt to return something to a former state, restoration also implies a very specific idea about time—the time of reversibility and chronology (see Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive*). The etymological origins of conservation, instead, might be traced to the late fourteenth century and its development from the Latin word “conservacionem” meaning the “preservation of existing conditions.” To conserve, from old French “conserver” or Latin “conservare,” means to keep intact, preserve, and guard. Already in 1870, Manfred Holyoake, in his book *The Conservation of Pictures*, described conservation as “the wider art of preserving as well as restoring the works.” (Ashley-Smith, “The Basis of Conservation Ethics,” 18). In a widely held view, restoration and conservation represent a divergent modes of practice. Additionally, the association of conservation/restoration with the practice of healing mentioned earlier—and the fact that conservators are regarded “doctors” of diseased objects—gestures towards curating, which originates etymologically in the Old French expression “curation,” meaning “treatment of illness,” or the Latin “curare”—“to cure.”

<sup>6</sup> Inboden, “Zur Konservierung ästhetischer Bedeutung,” 1990, 29.

refers to the application of science and technical means in everyday participatory practices; its cultural activity, instead, to literacy practices that entail the construction of knowledge and beliefs, and the enactment of values, judgments, beliefs, and emotions linked with meaning-making activities embedded in distinct cultural milieus. Less a practically oriented activity toward the purposes of efficiency, the techno-cultural practice of conservation meant here is the sum of technical potentialities and cultural attitudes.

### **Between tradition and reinvention: Bunglers and scientists**

The conservation of fine art has a long history marked by various standards of practice and principles, in the course of which theories have emerged only in the very recent past. It is often assumed—explicitly or tacitly—that the development of conservation is progressive, that is that later achievements in conservation are an improvement on former ones. Similarly to progressivism, the advance of science and technologies in conservation has been regarded as vital to the improvement of conservation performance. For many, this moment allowed for the development of conservation from the restoration and its separation from working-class artisanship.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to this model, I believe that conservation has continued to reinvent itself throughout history. Artisanship—the hands-on knowledge of materials and ability to manipulate objects—never disappeared, and scientific conservation goes hand in hand with the humanistic development of conservation. As a result, we might speak of different cultures of conservation—artisanal, artistic, scientific, and humanistic—which have existed parallel to each other throughout history and which have generated and were instigated by distinct kinds of knowledge.

Pliny the Elder provides the earliest written evidence for the conservation of antiquities in the first century AD, without disclosing information about actual techniques.<sup>8</sup> But the foundations for modern conservation were first established during the Renaissance. From the accounts of Cellini, who provided the first written description of methods and thoughts of a restorer, we learn about the approaches of the Renaissance restorers. Mainly in the skilled hands of artists-restorers and artisans, the rapid development of restoration was dictated by the aesthetics and tastes of the time, and became popularized

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<sup>7</sup> Philippot, “Restoration From the Perspective of the Humanities,” 217.

<sup>8</sup> Sease, “A Short History of Archaeological Conservation,” 1996.

with the rise of antiquarianism. Albeit demanding skills and understanding of the matter, restoration seemed at times to have been held in low regard, which Cellini confirms by stating: “It is by no means proper for me to patch up old statues, as that is generally done by a sort of bunglers in the business, who acquit themselves very indifferently.”<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of an artist, doing the job of mending other masters’ crumbling sculptures was neither considered artistry nor an honorable procedure.

The discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum and their subsequent excavations impelled the development of preservation techniques. It is not without reason that the roots of scientific conservation are ascribed to the rise of archeological conservation. Scientists at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century began involving themselves in the treatment of antiquities. Here, the emphasis was on materials rather than on the actual treatment of predominantly archeological objects. The development of scientific laboratories at museums and the work of Friedrich Rathgen in Berlin, among others, laid the groundwork for the scientific conservation concerned with the examination of materials and the processes of their deterioration.<sup>10</sup> It is neither possible to summarize here the impact of the first conservation publications in the field, nor to provide an account of the development of material studies in Europe and in the U.S. resulting from these approaches. But it is important to note that such a scientific approach to the conservation of archeological artifacts had an immense impact on the development of the positivistic, analytic branch of conservation, in one of its forms later also linked with the emerging specialism of the so-called “technical art history.”<sup>11</sup> No doubt, technical art history sources reveal the same disciplinary origins.

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<sup>9</sup> Cellini, *Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini*, 405.

<sup>10</sup> In 1888 Rathgen was appointed head of the chemistry laboratory at the Königl. Museen in Berlin. He was author of *Die Konservierung von Altertumsfunden* published in 1898. In Britain, the early conservation lab was devoted to the analysis of materials and archaeological artifacts in the early twentieth century (British Museum Lab with Harold J. Plenderleith), and only in the 1930s, the focus slowly shifted to fine arts, marked by the publication of *Manual of the Conservation and Restoration of Paintings* by Helmut Ruhemann, George Stout and Plederlight, 1939. In America Edward Forbes established a research department at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, run by George Stout, John Gettens and colleagues. They later established *Technical Studies in the Field of Fines Arts* (1932), which became a forum for publication of all matters related to conservation. For an account of the evolution of conservation technical studies, see Ainsworth, “From Connoisseurship to Technical History” and for a discussion of artworks’ technical examination as it developed in the United States, see Brewer, *A Laboratory for Art*.

<sup>11</sup> Technical art history is, according to Erma Hermens, concerned with researching the material history of an artifact, which “goes hand in hand with an increasingly scientific approach in conservation research and methodology, rapidly developing scientific analytical applications, and a growing interest in documentary sources on techniques and materials past and present.” Hermens, “Technical Art History,” 151. See also Ainsworth, “From Connoisseurship to Technical History.”

The introduction and gradual acceptance of scientific analysis as a key in the understanding of the nature of artworks resulted in the establishment of conservation as something of an exact science rooted in the nineteenth-century conviction that truth about objects can be revealed through science.<sup>12</sup> According to Steven Dykstra, “There was a belief that the authority of science and scientific technologies would complement the art of restoration and lend it the type of credibility that was carved out in the natural sciences. There was a confidence that a measure of scientific objectivity would dispel any perceptions of art restoration as an entirely interpretative and unrestrained process.”<sup>13</sup> Here, conservation strives to enforce the “truth” conveyed in the object, usually related to its physical, historical, and aesthetical integrity.<sup>14</sup> The ability to gain objective knowledge through scientific analysis led to notions of “original object” and “original condition,”<sup>15</sup> and a specific understanding of artists’ intentions through the discernment of physical matter. Traditional conservation theory added to these dicta “minimal intervention,” which was regarded as a fundamental principle in the 1970s and has strongly guided conservation practices ever since; the term is closely associated with the idea of “reversibility”—both deriving from a positivist belief in objectivity.<sup>16</sup> Broadly speaking, early conservation theories were established in the context of the restoration of artworks that are: conceived as unique objects (often in a singular medium), the creation of an artist-as-genius—beginning with Vasari<sup>17</sup> and culminating in Romanticism—and linked with that intentionality.

### **Traditional and new theories: from object-centrism to relativism**

Today, there is a strong sense of the division between the scientific and humanistic cultures of conservation.<sup>18</sup> Oriented towards ocular and structural desires, the former is often object-based, reductionist and objectivistic, and rests on scientific positivism and the belief of objects as truth conveyers. The latter is bound with culture and people, and oriented towards the values established by them. It is linked with a more inclusive, relativistic, pluralistic, and all-encompassing view of the network of people and things.

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<sup>12</sup>Laurensen, “Authenticity, Change and Loss;” Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*.

<sup>13</sup> Dykstra, “The Artist’s Intentions,” 201.

<sup>14</sup> Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued*; Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 65-66;

Laurensen, “Authenticity, Change and Loss.”

<sup>15</sup> Villers, “Post Minimal Intervention.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> I refer to the concept rather than the contemporary literal sense of the word *artist*; instead, Vasari’s subject is referred to as an *artefice* (artificer).

<sup>18</sup> Hölling, “Cultures of Conservation.”

The recent theory has developed hand in hand with new models of decentralized and inclusive museology; it acknowledges artworks as cultural products, dynamic entities, the materiality of which can only be identified in an entangled network of relations and under the consideration of social and temporal aspects. Rather than seeking evidence under a microscope, the conservation addressed here allies with the social sciences, philosophy, archeology, and aesthetics. Divorced from the idea of the authentic artifact and its authentic condition, artworks and artifacts are seen as processes evolving and changing in time, non-reducible to a particular condition discernable by measurement and analysis. The role of ethnographic conservation in reformatting the scope of the field by looking at living heritage cannot be underappreciated.<sup>19</sup> But it is especially recent art and media that have imposed a radical rethinking of conservation paradigms and principles, and to which I will return after providing a brief overview of conservation's early theories.

According to Paul Philippot, the development of conservation as an historical discipline based on method might be located in the nineteenth century when Canova refused to add missing elements to the sculptural ensemble of Parthenon, while Thorvaldsen consented to restoring the Aegina Marbles in the Neoclassical style.<sup>20</sup> The concepts expressed in nineteenth-century restoration rhetoric contributed to the development of conservation. The crystallization of fine-art conservation theories was preceded by theories of architectural restoration laid out by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc in France (restoration is “modern” and must follow the unity of style) and opposed in Britain by John Ruskin (antiquarian attitude) and William Morris (historic preservation) but also elsewhere by Alois Riegl (theory of values) and Camillo Boito (philological conservation).<sup>21</sup> Although the past century has brought various theoretical voices into the field (Dehio, Baldini, Conti, Philippot), the historical and aesthetic dimension of restoration found its major expression in the theory formulated and published by Italian art critic and historian Cesare Brandi in 1963.<sup>22</sup>

In his *Theory of Restoration*, Brandi sees restoration as a “methodological moment,”

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<sup>19</sup> Thinking here of course of Miriam Clavir's intellectual project. Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued*.

<sup>20</sup> Philippot, “Restoration from the Perspective of the Humanities,” 216.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>22</sup> *Theory of Restoration* outlined the theoretical and practical framework for restoration and included guidelines on what is ethically acceptable and unacceptable in restoration. Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, 62.

that is, a means of recognizing a work of art in its aesthetic and physical being.<sup>23</sup> He further assigns a high value to the historical, material authenticity of the artwork.<sup>24</sup> Using the principles of Gestalt psychology, Brandi sees an artwork as a set of relationships among its constituent parts, rather than their sheer sum, and bases his theory on the presumption of the univocality of artistic intent. Brandian axioms are succinct: he postulates, among other things, the minimization of the randomness of taste and subjectivity in the process of making a decision concerning conservation, the unacceptability of creative conservation, and the prohibition of entering the time of creation of an artwork (reserved, according to Brandi, only for the artist) by the conservator.<sup>25</sup> He further advocates for the complete reversibility of restoration work and respect for the history of an artwork. The founding principle of his theory was the unity of an artwork (i.e. its nondivisibility into constitutive elements); he further conceived of an artwork in the relation between its “aspect” (*aspetto*, or image, which needs to be preserved unaltered) and structure (*struttura*, subject to restoration).<sup>26</sup>

Published in Italian in 1963, Brandi’s work was translated into English much later and was only revealed in fragments to an international readership by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> But why it is so important to consider Brandian thought in the light of the dialectic of science and the humanities in conservation is because, in its antipositivist leanings, Brandian thought insisted on artistic, historical, and aesthetic criteria in conservation. In the so-called Ruhemann-Gombrich debate, published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1963, Brandi opposed the judgment of paintings solely by their chemical, physical, and technical criteria. This debate was centered around the controversy that arose due to the cleaning of paintings in the National Portrait Gallery in London and revealed that the values of conservation can conflict with facts derived from scientific analysis.<sup>28</sup> The Austrian-British art historian Ernst Gombrich, who, like Brandi,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>24</sup> Glanville, Introduction, xx.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of Brandian axioms, see Sebastiano Barassi, “Dreaming of a Universal Approach: Brandi’s *Theory of Restoration* and the Conservation of Contemporary Art” (paper presented at the seminar *Conservation, Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, Royal Academy of Arts, September 24, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> The German translation speaks of *Aussehen* and *Stuktur*. Brandi, *Theorie der Restaurierung*.

<sup>27</sup> Authors of conservation theoretical texts in the 1970s and 1980s such as Hanna Jedrzejewska, Jonathan Ashley-Smith or Barbara Appelbaum, do not appear to have considered it.

<sup>28</sup> The National Portrait Gallery cleaning controversy, also known as the Ruhemann-Gombrich debate, revolved around the cleaning of paintings and issues of intentionality. It is considered crucial as an example of the rupture between the scientific/technological approach and attitudes emphasizing the validity of historic and artistic argument (including aging and patina and involving comparative, observational methods). See Steven W. Dykstra, “The Artist’s



was a proponent of the understanding of an artwork in a broader set of relationships, and historic and aesthetic context, later commented: “People are blinded by the analysis of the medium that they forget the other half.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the more recent past and the appearance of hybrid multimedia works of art brought about the questioning of some of the Brandian dicta, the humanistic-historic attitude irreversibly changed conservation consciousness. Humanistic understanding of conservation and its artworks as something more than the sheer sum of their constitutive parts could not have been undone. Moreover, twenty-first century conservation polemics have been strongly formed by the uneasy coexistence of humanistic and scientific cultures. These cultures demonstrate that conservation is conditioned upon an underlying uncertainty about *where* and *how* the object is. Conservation’s search for it is surrounded by ambiguity resulting from the impossibility of balancing the general and the specific, and the ability to distinguish, as the heritage scholar Thordis Arrhenius puts it, “between true and false, original and copy, beginning and end.”<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, it remains to be mentioned that traditional conservation is too often and too simply juxtaposed with new approaches. What is considered new conservation frequently refers to the practice oriented towards recent media, which is not necessarily equivalent with new theoretical thinking.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, novel conservation thinking might just as well apply to traditional art and artifacts. In practice, attitudes and concepts often intersect and the most innovative voices never remain entirely free from the references of the past. Clearly, conservation’s theoretical underpinnings are neither progressive, nor exclusive.

### **Old and new media: singularity and plurality**

It is not to say, of course, that there is no movement on the horizon of innovation. Recent conservation theory sources analytic and continental philosophies, aesthetics, social studies, performance studies, and archeology. Similarly to ethnographic

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Intentions,” 20. See also Brandi, “The Cleaning of Pictures in Relation to Patina, Varnish and Glazes.”

<sup>29</sup> Gombrich, “Letters on Restoration,” 171.

<sup>30</sup> Arrhenius, *The Fragile Monument*.

<sup>31</sup> The distinction between traditional and contemporary conservation theory was clearly articulated by Salvador Muñoz Viñas, whereby he speaks of “classical” rather than “traditional” conservation. Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*. In the field of conservation of time-based media installations, the critique of the traditional “conservation object” was undertaken by Pip Laurenson, see Laurenson, “Shifting Structures, Identity and Change.”

conservation that references other disciplines' knowledge to come to terms with the dynamic character of heritage, the conservation of recent art strives to grasp its objects' nature and behavior beyond the analytic, scientific framework. What is being applied is the humanistic, heuristic, and theoretical knowledge. The division between the tangible and the intangible, which heritage scholar Frank Hassard took on in his brilliantly formulated thesis concerning the ideological division in conservation,<sup>32</sup> seems to be reunited again in the discussion related to recent media.

Undoubtedly, the transitory, processual, and conceptual aspect of art created mainly since the 1960s forced conservation out of its object-oriented comfort zone. Traditional painting or sculpture can be understood in terms of their material constitution, history of creation, authorship, and display deduced either from the object or from the recorded evidence. Instead, defining the specificity of a physical medium of a multimedia artwork including moving images, plants, TV sets, and sculpturally significant display apparatus, for instance, may not be sufficient in order to understand what and how the artwork is in the present and how it might be continued into the future. Recent artworks often fail to be classified according to the paradigms of material authenticity supported by the identification of their components' physical and chemical build-up. Installations, performances, events, and processes are inextricably linked with the concept of duration, change, and experience—aspects that demand a new set of conceptual tools in conservation. Rather than the artworks' vehicular media, conservators grapple with the artistic media that mediate between what the artist does and what the work says.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the dialectic of concept and material, intricate materialities (plastic, electronic, and organic media with their specific processes of decay), aspects of extended collaborations and distributed authorship instigate changes in the conservation paradigm. The aesthetics of change, iteration, cyclical materialization and reconfiguration—all in all what defines a *transitional medium*<sup>34</sup>—demand an entirely different intellectual mindset and engagement. It might be said that the primacy of hands and the implementation of the technical knowhow is being suppressed by the intellectual dimension of conservation.

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<sup>32</sup> Hassard, "Heritage, Hermeneutics, and Hegemony."

<sup>33</sup> According to the analytic philosopher David Davies the "physical" or "vehicular" medium (paint and canvas, body) might be distinguished from the "artistic" medium (brush strokes, articulated steps). To be precise, artistic statement is articulated through the artistic medium in part and through the manipulation of the vehicular medium. Davies, *Art as Performance*, 58–59. I use the term "vehicular medium" as the equivalent of a physical carrier. See also Hölling, *Revisions*, 61–62.

<sup>34</sup> See Hölling, "Transitional Media."

Change has also arrived at the forefront of the discourse of authenticity so significant for traditional conservation. Taking into consideration the artworks' entire trajectories, rather than selecting moments in time, new thinking in conservation acknowledges artworks as palimpsests that accumulate changes, modifications and interpretations.<sup>35</sup> My own work in this field discusses the reciprocal relation between artworks and archive, in which the archive, as a conceptual and physical domain allows for the artwork's actualization dependent on cultural permissions.<sup>36</sup> Rethinking concepts of time in conservation appears necessary to overcome familiar patterns that redirect towards "original" or "authentic" conditions.<sup>37</sup> Further, recent examples of augmented reality (Mark Rothko's *Harvard Murals*), simulated visual reconstruction (The Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum in New York) and digital print technologies (figure of Nefertiti in Neues Museum in Berlin) gnaw on the ideas of material authenticity.<sup>38</sup> This is a rather radical change, since our (Western) culture considers physical objects as material evidence of the past and endows conservation with the role of safeguarding this evidence, however altered, reinterpreted, and mutated. It seems that we have reached a moment that is less about what the conservation of recent art should learn from traditional conservation, and more about what traditional conservation can learn from recent approaches.

Consequently, a change will also have to take place at the level of academic training, in which—however sophisticated—the mastery of conservation still rests in the skillful repairing of objects, its documentation, and the attention paid to traditional, rather than recent, art. Who gets to speak is what matters. Today, the dominant discourses of conservation are still those formatted within the tradition of painting and sculpture, and the circular logic of material authenticity reinforced by existing systems of education, economy, and the media. The informed, open, humanistically grounded connoisseurship—especially in relation to recent media—is still awaiting its recognition in, and beyond, conservation pedagogy. Moreover, and paradoxically, with all its

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<sup>35</sup> Bound with the concept of authenticity, the discussion of an object as a sum of its transitions might be already seen in the work of heritage scholar David Lowenthal. Lowenthal recognizes the historical palimpsests of built heritage and values its endurance through a sequence of changes rather than an original state.

<sup>36</sup> Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Naum Gabo structures at Tate or a reconstruction of Palmyra Arch allegedly destroyed on its original site in Syria by ISIS, exhibited on Trafalgar Square in April 2016 might be further examples. For the latter, see *dezeen* (21 April 2016). For a discussion of Harvard Art Museum's augmented reality project involving Mark Rothko's *Harvard Murals*, see Hölling, "Lost in Museums?"

concerns about the keeping physical things and preserving knowledge about them, conservation seems to have forgotten that its own epistemic and historiographical terms might also be worth preserving and studying.

### **Conservation and technical art history**

Just as conservation has begun to broaden its horizons by opening up to other disciplines, so has art history strived to turn its attention to the aspect of the material specificity of artworks. Although it cannot be said that the discussion of materiality has been entirely avoided in art historical scholarship (see for instance the rich bibliography of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholarship on that matter), it is true that, as art historian Michael Yonan put it, art history's status as material culture seems to have been suppressed for quite some time.<sup>39</sup> Historically seen, forging the discussion of material relations in artworks was not without problems. The engagement with materials, as art historian Petra Lange-Berndt explains, has seemed for many an antithesis of an intellectual endeavor and the study of materials—an auxiliary science.<sup>40</sup> The awareness of materiality as a part of the plural histories of art has been strongly argued in recent art historical scholarship, such as by art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann who postulates a recognition of the interdependence of the material and meaning in art.<sup>41</sup>

Forging material literacy in art historical discourse is crucial, yet should not be seen as equivalent with the understanding of the technical intricacies of materials. In other words, describing the viscosity, transparency, or solidity of materials, and art's ability to activate senses other than visual-ocular ones, may appear insufficient when it comes to complex processes of change and the degradation of artworks, and its impact on the ever time-bound art-historical analysis. Here, the *materiality apparatus* of conservation comes in handy. This materiality apparatus is able to provide hard data about objects and their materials by offering insights into their microscopic and macroscopic worlds.

The curious marriage of conservation with art history is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it bears the promise of expanding conservation's pursuit beyond the practical actions that serve the objects' longevity. Under this premise, from the confines of space of the backstage studio or from the eccentricity of an enigmatic lab, conservation enters the lecterns of art-historical colloquia and symposia. On the other

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<sup>39</sup> Yonan, "Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," 233.

<sup>40</sup> Lange-Berndt, Introduction to *Materiality*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Lehmann, "The Matter of the Medium," 21.

hand, this offering does not come without a price; rather, it evokes a reciprocal exchange (to greatly simplify Marcel Mauss' gift theory). The interpretation of the facts delivered by conservation is too often left to art historians, or, as Hanna Jedrzejewska put it in her 1976 (!) analysis of the profession, the matters of interpretation belong to the theoretical specialist (artist, art historian, archaeologist): "Nothing could be more wrong than this concept: brains on the one side, and hands on the other."<sup>42</sup> Although conservators acting at the forefront of technical art history might be seen as an exception to this rule, conservation, for all its engagement with heritage, still lags behind in the larger discourse. It is not difficult to search for the reason for this status quo. The insular professional development, or, as Frank Matero puts it, "the avoidance of a critical examination of the inherited historical and cultural narratives constructed through past motives of preservation" might be just two reasons.<sup>43</sup> Despite recent developments, it is still assumed that conservation speaks a different language—its horizon of interests too focused on the scientific or material vocabulary and technicalities of repair or making. Conservation is perceived as "an objective, scientific approach to the past in the form of historical knowledge."<sup>44</sup> But is the horizon not the range of vision that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer assures us, includes everything that can be seen from a particular point of view? Don't we see what we know? (says Goethe)

### **By way of conclusion: Toward a cultural technique of conservation**

The question of what conservation is, from the beginning seems only at first sight simplistic. As a complex sum of approaches, attitudes, and cultures, conservation resists being reduced down to a limited definition. Although it might boast a well-established professional and academic profile defined by a vast number of publications, conferences, and seminars, conservation rejects any uniformity. Conservation constantly seeks to define itself at the crossroads of theory and practice, at the point where custody, stewardship, presentation, and creativity meet. In the bigger picture, balancing between science and the humanities, and artisanal and artistic approaches, conservation both generates and sources a distinct type of knowledge that not only reassures its existence as a practice with epistemic consequences, but also forms its identity as a discipline. This is also why the question of what conservation is has the character of a second-order question: it interrogates the position from which, and the reason why, it is being posed.

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<sup>42</sup> Jedrzejewska, *Ethics in Conservation*, 6

<sup>43</sup> Matero, "Ethics and Policy in Conservation."

<sup>44</sup> Philippot quoted in Matero, *ibid.*

It demonstrates the necessity for a more profound reflection on conservation epistemic dimension and conservation's positioning within human sciences. Every question, once it is formulated, contains its own internal truth.<sup>45</sup>

To briefly return to the title: Of course, to say that conservation has a technique would seemingly once more relegate it into an activity devoted to finding technical solutions. *Techné* was Aristotle's second category of knowledge: skill, craft-competence, and technical knowledge (the knowledge *how* as opposed to the knowledge *of* laid out in Nicomachean Ethics). While the Greek word *technê* often refers to manufacturing as well as to the arts, earlier writers, especially Plato, used these both denominations of knowledge almost interchangeably. In his 1977 essay "The Questions Concerning Technology," German philosopher Martin Heidegger explains *technê* as a kind of knowing, an expertise that exceeds a set of practical skills.<sup>46</sup> Directly linked with *episteme* and its modern form of epistemology that investigates how we *know* things, *technê* is elevated to the *revealing* of making, manipulation, and means, and thus becomes a know-how and an expertise, rather than sheer instrumentality concerned with getting things done. For Heidegger "technology is a mode of revealing," it "comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, [...] where truth happens."<sup>47</sup>

Such truth-revealing, in my perception, is inherent to the "technique of conservation." It may occur when a revision of conservation's historiography, varying types of knowledge and cultural, rather than material, techniques unravel the richness of conservation—a process which is necessary in order to carefully lay out and solidify the new philosophies of conservation.

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<sup>45</sup> Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 218.

<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 3-35).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



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