

**Ever since conservation emerged as a profession profoundly preoccupied with the nature of artworks, interest in the media and materials' physical constitution has gradually moved to the center of art theoretical and historical discourse. As it became a scientifically grounded and intellectually substantiated field towards the second half of the twentieth century, conservation gained the ability to provide connoisseurship with hard facts about the materiality of the artefactual world. The 'material turn' of the past decades, which designated a deep preoccupation with materiality, reinforced interests in conservation's scholarship across a range of disciplines within the humanities. Most importantly, however, conservation has begun emancipating itself from its somewhat subordinate role in relation to other disciplines by contributing to greater knowledge about both objects and the cultures that produced them.**

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In this short digression, I propose to examine the intersections of conservation with human sciences, and to go beyond the issues of art technical analysis, which has become one of conservation's major contributions to the emerging specialisations of material and technical art history. The latter, undoubtedly, has enhanced art historical understanding, though it has not exhausted conservation's capacity to engage with the materiality of objects. The explicit material, as I will claim, will allow me to suggest that conservation's contribution to human sciences spans a broader horizon of intellectual engagement with the object, including, but not limited to, concerns about its material constitution. Acknowledging the unquestionable importance of conservation science in providing analytic precision, I assert the importance of conservation theory and philosophy. This most important branch of conservation studies places itself at, and is reciprocally served by, the intersection of other human sciences such as philosophy, the social sciences, anthropology, history and art history.

'Explicit' has as its etymological origin the Latin 'explicare', which means "to unfold," "unravel," "explain," or to make visible. Therefore, in such a broad understanding of conservation, the enfolding material puts forward a way of conceiving of a more complex form of materiality that involves, yet is not exclusively concerned with, the physical constitution of the matter. I phrase "explicit material" as a means of referencing the ways conservation explicates its objects and artifacts in terms of relational and temporal materiality, reaching beyond the tangible sphere of the material.

Art, according to Alfred Gell, is a system of actions articulating 'social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency'.<sup>1</sup> Such a dynamic conception of artworks renders them 'the deposit of social relationships'.<sup>2</sup> Conservation, in tracing the circumstances of the artwork's emergence, strives to re-imagine these relations in order to understand an artwork that has resulted from a specific creation process. Such a process never comes to completion as the result of one person's enacted skill and knowledge, but rather as a consequence of collective powers, extended collaborations and mobilisation of resources.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the case of artworks being restored and re-restored, the network of people whose practices produce the object as we perceive it in the present is even larger. For instance, historical restorations performed by artists or craftsmen shed light on restoration and conservation as culturally contingent processes of the manipulation of artefacts. In privileging practices, and reflecting on the critical actions that it has taken, conservation unravels not only ways of maneuvering artefacts, but also makes clear how these actions, in effect, shape art historical interpretations. By recovering the system of relations and its impact on the trajectories of artworks, conservation may help to

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untangle the historical conditions that allowed for certain sets of actions, while restricting others. As in the deduction of Michael Foucault's historical *a priori* (Foucault 1976), conservation's inquiry into the past may unravel (archaeological) orders and traces so as to



contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms that led to the circumstances in which both the object and the world surrounding it, including social structures, exist.

Despite what has been claimed, at the beginning of the 21st century, with its proclivity for technical interrogation, conservation's scholarly legacy continues to be too readily reduced to that of a subordinate field in the service of other disciplines. Allegedly, conservation speaks a different language. But unlike art history that has been suspected to subscribe either to the production or to the consumption of works of art in general<sup>4</sup>—Marxist-inspired materialism for example—conservation, I suggest, embraces a broad spectrum of inquiries. Following something that might be proximate to the

The heterogenous assemblages of installation art, as well as traces and leftovers of performance clearly articulate the “explicit material” discussed.

Com&Com (Johannes M. Hedinger, Marcus Gossolt), Bloch, 2011. Bloch sculpture/tree trunk/natural ready made, trailer, ropes, Bloch footprint. Installation view at the Swiss Art Awards, Art Basel 2012. Courtesy Com&Com

Ongoing participatory, process-oriented project. Subject to interpretation and re-valorisation during its ongoing journey through geographically distant places, the trunk is both the carrier of an old Swiss tradition, and a platform of mediation between various manifestations of local folklore.

logic of the anthropological *chaîne opératoire* (‘operational sequence’) and itself being a recipient of the tactile, sensual artwork that is made available to its manipulative procedures, conservation looks into the conditions that enabled the artwork's creation (the creative agency of the authors, technicians, patrons and curators) and to the conditions that transformed it (the adaptation of the artwork to the constraints of a museum, its interpretation and de-mobilisation). Here, materiality does not necessarily have to stand in opposition to visibility.<sup>5</sup> One could say that the co-constitution of the visibility and materiality—a sort of a concern with the *ecologies of the visual*<sup>6</sup>—stands at the center of conservation.

Now, departing from the idea of the artwork as a result of social action of which one of the fundamental conditions is time, conservation engages with the temporality of its objects in a multifold way. Firstly, as a culturally contingent action, conservation unfolds in time; thus it has a temporal specificity without which it would remain a practical-theoretical set of generic actions and concepts. Secondly, because the material it engages with is temporally specific—it always refers to a specific time—conservation might be conceived of as a process that intervenes in the intrinsic temporality of material, either modifying or manipulating it. Following this line of thought, the artwork that is comprised of these materials invokes the particular temporality in which it was assembled. This is exemplified in the conjunction of media archaeology and conservation by technology-based media, in which the playback or display apparatus points to a specific era of technological development. Thirdly, because conservation actions take place only in the present, rather than in the past, conservation becomes a temporal intervention that translates the specific temporalities of artworks into the present.<sup>7</sup> Such temporal translation is always peculiar to the availability and specificity of the technical tool at hand, to cultural actuality and the competence and

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skill of those who perform it. To be sure, translation is impossible without the transformation of the original.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere I have argued for the inclusion of the archive as a virtual and physical realm that enables the actualisation of artworks.<sup>9</sup> Anchored in time and culture, such an archive contains the material of artworks as a sort of temporal materiality, contingent on historical and present conditions, and the archival logic that guards it.

Although the formulation ‘explicit material’ might apply to traditional art and artefacts, it is most clearly articulated in recent art forms such as computer and technology-based media, heterogeneous assemblages of installation, and performance art. The short-durational (or ‘ephemeral’) art forms that require—or even call for—replacement, exchangeability, repeatability, reinterpretation and reinvention, point to ways of rearticulation of what objects are, and what they were, according to the museological standards and paradigms of conservation. Beyond the artefact-centrism characteristic of theories of art and material culture, drawing from recent scholarship and criticism, there emerges a system of relations that advances new modes of thinking *with* and *about* objects.

My own work has contributed a concern with the way conservation draws on critical, media, and art theories in creating its own philosophies. In a world dominated by art historical perspectives, the inclusion of conservation’s reflective capabilities may have an impact on how we conceive of artworks. The virtue of such new thinking on the intersections of disciplines and the amalgamation of disciplinary languages is that it ceases to be simply a contribution to the study of the physical ‘thingness’ of an artefactual world. Rather, it may

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enrich critical thinking in art theory and aesthetics. It is a contribution to the question of what it means for an artwork to continue to exist and compel our attention even when separated from its original context, submitting to the aesthetics of change and transformation. This consideration partakes in the recognition of the obdurate materiality of a work not as a mere material, but rather as an explicit one—a bearer of complex meaning, acting in the present. [S]

With its proclivity to defy well-rooted convictions and definitions, the most recent “objects” and artefacts challenge the display aesthetics and museum collecting standards.

Com&Com (Johannes M. Hedinger, Marcus Gossolt), *Baum 1*, 2010. Tree sculpture/natural ready made. Installation view on the occasion of the exhibition *La réalité dépasse la fiction* at the Centre Pasquart Biel/Bienne, Switzerland. Courtesy Com&Com

From a natural ready made to its museological life, the work was ritually cut into pieces during a performance concluding the exhibition and left the museum to live its fragmented live in people’s homes.