Saving the Now
Crossing Boundaries to Conserve Contemporary Works

IIC 2016 Los Angeles Congress Preprints
Contributions to the Los Angeles Congress

12 – 16 September 2016

Saving the Now:
Crossing Boundaries to Conserve Contemporary Works

In collaboration with the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA)

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Published by
The International Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (IIC)
3 Birdcage Walk
London SW1H 9JL, UK
www.iiconservation.org
iic@iiconservation.org

Content is available online at www.tandfonline.com/ysic
Studies in Conservation

Special Issue: IIC 2016 Los Angeles Congress Preprints

Preface
Graham Voce

Foreword
Sarah Staniforth

Supplementary issue papers

Cindy Sherman: A Play of Selves. A collaborative approach to conservation
J. Luca Ackerman, Peter Mustardo, Hanako Murata, Tatiana Cole S2-1

Challenges in the conservation of the work of León Ferrari
Gabriela Baldomá, Marta S. Maier S2-7

Side by side: old and new standards in the conservation of modern art. A comparative study on 20 years of modern art conservation practice
Lydia Beerkenes S2-12

Street art conservation in Athens: Critical conservation in a time of crisis
Maria Chatzidakis S2-17

The Artist Initiative at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Robin Clark, Michelle Barger S2-24

Keith Haring in Pisa and Melbourne: Controversy and conservation
Jenny Dickens, Antonio Rava, Maria Perla Colombini, Marcello Picollo, Will Shank S2-29

Conserving the self-taught artists collection at the Smithsonian American Art Museum
Tiarna Doherty, Helen Ingalls, Amber Kerr, Catherine Maynor and Leslie Umerberge S2-38

Reflections on light monitoring: Evaluating museum lighting options for modern and contemporary art
Charlotte W. Eng, Frank D. Preuss, Terry T. Schaeffer S2-44

Coat of arms: Dovetailing the needs of outdoor sculpture and military assets to develop more durable and adaptable paint systems
John A. Escarcega, Abigail Mack, Rachel Rivenc, Tom Learner S2-49

The role of conservation in new contemporary art installations in new contexts: The case of Richard Serra’s East–West/West–East in Qatar
Stavroula Golfomitsou S2-55

Conserving a boundary: The conservation and management of a Berlin Wall mural
Kiernan Graves, Katey Corda S2-61

Dialogue in conservation decision-making
Jane Henderson, Tanya Nakimoto S2-67

Transitional media: duration, recursion, and the paradigm of conservation
Hanna Hölling S2-79

Altered surfaces, taking the long view: Applications of ethnographic conservation practices to the conservation of contemporary art
Stephanie E. Hornbeck, Dana L. Moffett S2-84

The future is not what it used to be: Changing views on contemporary color photography
Nora W. Kennedy, Meredith Reiss, Katherine Sanderson S2-91
The potential role of citizen conservation in re-shaping approaches to murals in an urban context
Caroline Kyi, Nicole Tse, Sandra Khazam

This is so contemporary? mediums of exchange and conservation
Robert Lazarus Lane, Jessye Wdowin-McGregor

Do conservators dream of electric sheep? Replicas and replication
Louise Lawson, Simon Cane

New paint, new challenges: Conservation of Roy Lichtenstein’s outdoor sculpture House I
Nani Lew, Jihyun Choi

Challenges and approaches in conserving new ink art
Angela Wai-sum Liu, Athena Kin-kam Wong, Evita So Yeung

Finding common ground and inherent differences: Artist and community engagement in cultural material and contemporary art conservation
Kelly McHugh, Anne Gunnison

Collecting participatory art at the Denver Art Museum
Kate Moomaw

2004-6-16 to 2014-8-15: The birth and death of a work by Gu Dexin
Sara A. Moy

Conservation of a contemporary lacquered screen: A collaborative, interdisciplinary, international project involving the artist, fabricators, and conservators from three different areas
Julia Nagle, Lyndsey Morgan

The industrial connections in Donald Judd’s art
Eleonora E. Nagy

Where contemporary art and contemporary music preservation practices meet: The case of Salt Itinerary
Andreia Nogueira, Rita Macedo, Isabel Pires

Migrating facsimiles: When copies disappear from conservation control
Alison Norton

Curation, conservation, and the artist in Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art
Emily O’Reilly, Rose Miller, Judit Bodor

Walking the walk and the impact of space and place on new media art
Alice Boccia Paterakis, Astra Price, Hillary Kapan

The parallel paths of conservation of contemporary art and indigenous collections
Renata F. Peters

Materiality and immateriality in Lucio Fontana’s environments: From documentary research to the reproduction of lost artworks
Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, Iolanda Ratti

Reality and illusion: Achieving a balance in the exhibition and treatment of Robert Gober’s Untitled wax legs
Megan Randall

Considerations in the acquisition of contemporary art: Refabrication as a preservation strategy
Gwynne Ryan

Breaking the rules: A new life for rescue public murals
J. William Shank, Tim Drescher
Mesocycles in conserving plastics
Yvonne Shashoua

Testing the limits: The theoretical development and practical reality of a large-scale agarose gel treatment for a discolored Morris Louis
Samantha Skelton, Corina Rogge, Zahira Véliz Bomford

Examining the digital future of analogue slide-based artworks at the Hamburger Kunsthalle
Barbara Sommermeyer, Claartje van Haaften

Autoethnography as a new approach in conservation
Sanneke Stigter

‘There is nothing more practical than a good theory’: Conceptual tools for conservation practice
Muriel Verbeeck

The Artist Archives Project: David Wojnarowicz
Glenn Wharton, Deena Engel, Marvin C. Taylor

Preserving the Open Form. The Oskar and Zofia Hansen House in Szumin: Between architecture and contemporary art
Agnieszka Wielocha, Aleksandra Kędziorek

Conservation from conception: Commissioning an installation by Cai Guo-Qiang
Elizabeth Wild, Amanda Pagliarino, Russell Storer

The importance of documentation to the conservation of the 1955 welded steel sculpture Roundabout, by Leslie Thornton
Stefania Agnoletti, Arianna Rachele Vecchierelli, Luciano Pensabene Buemi

Values, ideas, and practices in social representation of the subject: A possible dialogue between artist and conservator on contemporary art
Mário Anacleto de Sousa Júnior, Rosario Llamas Pacheco

Supplementary issue poster summaries

Use of nanocoatings for the restoration of matte paintings
Carlootta Beccaria, Annalisa Colombo, Francesca Gherardi, Valentina Mombrini, Lucia Toniolo

Art and architecture separated. Homeless art: The case of a wallpainting by Victor Vasarély
Kristina Brakebusch, Börries Brakebusch

On the changing appearance of, and potential treatment options for, softening and dripping paints in CoBrA oil paintings
Ida Antonia Tank Bronken, Jaap J. Boon, Robert W. Corkery, Hartmut Kutzke, Calin Constantin Steindal

Core concepts in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery for inkjet-printed photographs and fine art
Daniel Burge

The Beuys Tree: History, conservation and display
Julian Cech, Gabriela Krist, Eva Putzgruber

The smell of an old journey: The conservation of the travel diary of Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor
Simona Cenci
Conserving contemporary artworks: perspectives of artists and curators at the National Art Gallery of Zimbabwe
  Davison Chiwara, Richard Mudariki

‘Zip’: An adhesive plastic film in architectural drawings
  Marion Cinqualbre, Maroussia Duranton, Jéromine Baudin, Stéphane Bouvet, Olivier Cinqualbre, Emilie Le Bourg

Mosha: the role of contemporary replicas in the conservation and preservation of Japanese paintings
  Justine Ellis, Yasuhiro Oka, Shihoko Hashimoto

Conservation of the modern thangka, Caturbhuj-Avalokiteshvara
  Xiaoji Fang, Rui Zhang, Ningchang Shi, Jinong Song

The use of industrial paint on wood by Lygia Clark
  Giulia Giovani, Luiz Antonio Cruz Souza, Yacy-Ara Froner, Alessandra Rosado

Curling, ripples, dimples: Observations from a condition survey of animation cels
  Katharina Hoevng, Suzanna Etemez, Kristen McCormick, Michael Schilling, Alan Phenix

Surface behaviour of PMMA: Is gel cleaning the way to go?
  Stefani Kavda, Nishad Dhopotkar, Lora V. Angelova, Emma Richardson, Stavroula Golomitsou, Ali Dhinoojvala

How far should we go? A controversial issue in mural conservation in Hong Kong
  Eddy Leung, Alice Tsang, Jimmy Wong, Dominic Kan

Improving museum lighting: new experiments in perception and the colour changes caused by white LED lighting
  Hung-Wen Luo, Hung-Shing Chen, Ching-Ju Chou, Ming Ronnier Luo

Influence of environment on the stability of Chinese traditional colorants
  Xiyun Luo, Nannan Fang, Wenqing Zhang, Yiping Du

The dilemma of fading food: An investigation into the light sensitivity of selected Ed Ruscha screenprints
  Laura Macarelli, Heather Brown, Charlotte W. Eng

Lavatio corporis: replicating process art involving decomposing flesh
  Ana Lizeith Mata Delgado, Claudia Maria Coronado Garcia

A productive collaboration between conservation and industry: Developing wet surface cleaning systems for unvarnished painted surfaces
  Bronwyn Ormsby, Alan Phenix, Melinda Keefe, Tom Learner

Surgery, conservation, art: An unusual collaboration
  Flavia Perugini, Flor Mayoral, Daniel Godoy

To be preserved or to be replaced? Contemporary religious imagery in Latin America and its conservation
  Diego Iván Quintero Balbás

Interviewing artists exhibited in The Field (1968): The use of acrylic paints in a seminal exhibition of Australian colour field painting
  Raymonda Rajkowski, Nicole Andrea Tse, Beckett Rozentals

Distinguishing manufacturing practices for titanium white pigments: New Raman markers for dating commercial oil-based paints
  Corina E. Rogge, Julie Arslanoglu

Twin Wells: the reconstruction and re-installation of a multi-media installation with fog and sound elements by Dennis Oppenheim
  Artemis Rüstau, Claire Hoffmann, Kerstin Mürer
Common challenges for ethnographic and modern art collections: Pest control for large and complex objects containing new materials
Naoko Sonoda, Shingo Hidaka, Kaoru Suemori

Conservation of ephemeral art: restoring banana skins in works by Lo Yi-chun
Joseba I. Soraluze, Yu-chun Chen, Chien-hua Lu

Development of a new environmental monitoring system for museums and galleries using RFID-enabled technology
Jonathan Tse

Please do not sit? The display of contemporary furniture in historic locations
Qi Fen Wang, Kathryn Hallett

Conservation of outdoor sculpture: Challenges of three installations in Hong Kong
Yan Ki Wong, Sam Liu, Ronnie Kam, Wing Fai Lai, Alice Tsang
Transitional media: duration, recursion, and the paradigm of conservation

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Fostering conservation as a discursive and contextual practice, this essay examines transitional media that necessitate new ways of thinking about continuity. It looks at two examples of artworks with the objective of unraveling the varying modes of their transition. An event score, event-performance, object, and film drawn from the artistic legacies of George Brecht and Nam June Paik illustrate that ideas of permanence and impermanence are linked with an understanding of artworks in time and duration. While conservation reveals itself as an intervention in the temporal dimension of artworks, the theories of duration allow us to better understand the reciprocal relations between materials and meanings. In doing so, these theories acknowledge and attempt to make sense of the performative materiality of these works.

Keywords: Change, Conservation theory, Continuity, Duration, Event, Time, Transition, Recursion

Introduction

The essence of the medium is time. ... Its basic underlying characteristics are change and transformation. ... The medium unfolds itself in time.

Bill Viola

With these words American video artist Bill Viola convinces us that time, change, and transformation constitute the essential characteristics of a medium (Viola, 1999). Viola addresses artistic video, which, according to the German media theorist Dieter Daniels, bridges diverse genres (Daniels, 1992), including those of traditional art. The link between media is often established at the level of the artworks' intermediality and syntheses, which not only connects distinct art forms, but also appeals to multiple senses. Undoubtedly, Daniels' insight into these media entanglements is rooted in the tradition that grew from Dick Higgins' Intermedia (Higgins, 1966), John Cages' earlier activities on the crossroads of modernist music and visual arts, and the blending of art forms in the utopian project of the nineteenth century Gesamtkunstwerk. Most importantly, however, the intermedia dynamics and musical origins of a large portion of the neo avant-garde art of the 1960s–70s including performance, installation art, and electronic media generated new, transitional types of artworks that induced an alternative way of thinking about their conservation (Hölling, 2013, 2015). Change, transformation and, no doubt, time, are intrinsic to all media.

Conservation and intermediality

Why, then, was the legacy of intermediality, electronic music (by Cage, or Karlheinz Stockhausen for example) and other forms of artistic activities such as events, happenings, and performances barely acknowledged in conservation and failed to be reflected in its theories? To be sure, the more recent conservation thinking that brought musical philosophies into play and drew conclusions about the iterant character of artworks significantly contributed to the shift in the traditional paradigm of conservation (Lauresson, 2006). This perception, together with the affirmation of change in artworks, offers fruitful ground for further scrutiny. What follows is an expansion of conservation's intellectual pursuit — an issue too often neglected under competing pressures to deal with the technical study of materials, direct manipulation of objects, and with the rhetoric of material authenticity. Here, the legacy of intermediality not only challenges the established categories in conservation and museum collecting and exhibiting practice, but also radicalizes time. Video, film, and multimedia incorporate and manipulate time; similarly, in short-duration artworks such as performance, (Fluxus) event, and process, time becomes an indicator of these works' identity.

Considerations of time and duration lift conservation to a level of discursivity that transcends its engagement with materials. I will say nothing new if I mention that many of the works created since the
1960s evade the musealization, which occurs at the disjunction from their previous context and their afterlife as museum objects, and that subscribes to the values of material authenticity and to traditional conservation paradigm in preserving objects-things. Rather than rest incarcerated in a particular state or condition, these works transition fluidly from one state, or variant, to another and are better understood as a sum of their transformations — an effect of multiple agencies and a rhizome of origins, developments, and stoppages. While change and changeability are indices of time, transition introduces yet another meaning of "going beyond", 'to the other side', 'to cross over' (from the Latin prefix: trans). For these artworks, change and transition are a condition of possibility for survival.

How does such a transition take place? And how can we make sense of the temporal existence of artworks to draw consequences for their continuity? Let us look at an example.

**Exit: object, event, time**

In a rather brightly lit gallery decorated with a number of artifacts, I cannot help but stare at a single sign affixed above the door. In red letters on a black background, and protected by a simple frame and glazing, we read ‘Exit’. What does this mean? Is it art or a utilitarian artifact indicating the way out of the museum? Instantaneously, I think of the fire extinguisher that I spotted earlier in the museum and wrestle with the thought of their esthetic similarity.

The sign in question is George Brecht’s *Exit* (undated, Fig. 1, Collection Braun/Lief, Museum Ostwall Dortmund) created in the aftermath of his earlier work — an event score *Exit* from 1961 (Fig. 2, extant in variants, such as FLUXUSVERSION I). Underappreciated for their impact on 1960s–70s conceptualism and on the increase of emphasis on the role of a spectator-participant, Brecht’s events are also one of the most significant contributions to the development of intermedia and to sustaining their legacy after the 1960s. The events follow Brecht’s idea that “…the details of everyday life, the random constellations of objects that surround us, stop going unnoticed” (Johnson, 2008). They incorporate chance happenings and chance durations to achieve a multisensory ‘total’ experience (Brecht, 1970). Events rely on the concept of the score, which might be grasped as an instruction transposed into the medium of language (Osborne, 2002). Such conception of the event score implies the presence of interpreters that complicate authorial singularity and, tied to it, the paradigm of intentionality. This conception also asserts the freedom of interpretation and the presence of the artwork’s multiple instances. Anyone can execute an event — as *Exit* shows here — and anyone should. With its short duration, the Fluxus event also stands for a generative amassment of objects in effect of its disappearance (Hölling, 2015, pp. 81–83).

From the diaries Brecht wrote on the occasion of his participation in Cage’s classes at the New School for Social Research in New York 1958–59, one can deduce his deep intellectual investment in the concept of events and the conditions that enabled him to fulfill them. Events succinctly exemplify his interest in creating situations in which works are means to an end and an end in themselves, simultaneously as documents, props, and left-overs. However, the back and forth between event and object is crucial when it comes to the artwork’s temporal dimension, reconfirmed by him saying: ‘Every
object is an event and every event has an object-like quality. (so they're pretty much interchangeable’ (Brecht in Deuzeu, 2005). Here, Brecht oscillates between a conceptual object and an object-based concept, challenging the dichotomy of permanence and impermanence.

How can we make sense of this for conservation? How can conservation attend to the temporal identity of this work and account for its materiality? Before attempting to answer this question, let us take another glimpse at the world of Exit.

What, how, and where?
The artwork, so far, has become an event score, a realized, or potentially realized, event and a sign, which manifest, *nota bene*, in multiple iterations. Additionally, the film *Entrance to Exit* (1965, Figs. 3 and 4) may be counted within its universe. It presents 'a smooth linear transition from white, through grays to black, produced in developing tank', according to the description on the website of the Electronic Arts Intermix, New York (EAI, 2015). It continues:

The ‘door sign’ ENTRANCE fades in, white letters on the black background, stays for a few seconds, then slowly fades into white. Five-minute fade into black and the title EXIT, which stays for a few seconds then fades into white.

In the absence of any narrative and filmic apparatus (camera, lens, film crew), and using silence, nothingness, and boredom as artistic means, the film is self-referential and presents the underlying characteristics of Fluxfilms (Ganz, 1988; Hölling 2015, pp. 4–10).

So what exactly is Exit? Is the work a work-thing or rather an event? Does the existence of Exit lie in all its singularities, which should be conserved as such, or do these singularities point to the multiplicity of its universe and the potentiality of its constant transition and change? What is the relation between its fractals and the whole? Where, how and what is the work? If, reverberating Brandian dictum, the imperative of conservation is, first of all, to understand what the work is; these questions must be faced, even if the final answers to them are far off. Here, conservation oriented towards the paradigms of material authenticity and point(s) of origins, including exclusively artistic, rather than other, intentions, quickly exhausts its capability to grasp, and to cope with, the intricacies and complexities of its ‘object’. Matters of materials and display retreat to yield the fascinating questions of an ontological nature. These questions approximate the modes of the world and its making, even if, of necessity, the answers are always partial and conflicting (Goodman, 1978).

Allochronic and autochronic
Ontologically seen, the event score Exit presents us with a conundrum. First, Exit is an object-thing that exists as a card offering written instructions — ‘Word Event. Exit. G. Brecht Spring 1961’. Because the sign has a specific, fixed relation to time, it could be termed an autochronic work (the prefix ‘auto’ from Greek stands for ‘self, one’s own’). The quantitatively undetermined number of its interpretations would classify Exit as an allochronic work — a work unthethered to particular temporality (from Greek ‘allo’ meaning ‘other’, and opposite to ‘auto’). I developed the argument of the temporal characteristics of artworks as an alternative to the dichotomy of the permanent and the impartment, and following Nelson Goodman’s much-discussed distinction between forgeable (autographic) and unforgeable (allographic) arts (Hölling, 2015, pp. 83–85). Allochronic works, which usually last only for a short time, respond actively to time — they are repeatedly executed, ‘updated’, and therefore, as a rule, more prone to extrinsic and

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**Figure 3** Film still from: George Brecht, *Entrance to Exit* (Fluxfilm no. 10), 1965, 7 minutes, black and white, sound. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York and Anthology Film Archives. © VG-Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.

**Figure 4** Film still from: George Brecht, *Entrance to Exit*, (Fluxfilm no. 10), 1965, 7 minutes, black and white, sound. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York and Anthology Film Archives. © VG-Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016.
intrinsic change. Autochronic works, in turn, respond to time passively — here change is linked with gradual decay and degradation (Hölling, 2013, 127–130). Allochronic and autochronic works are mutually related; autochronic works are often generated in the effect of the allochronic works’ performance. Due to their long duration, autochronic works comply with the system of collectible objects and the traditional conservation’s quest for permanence reflected in preserving artworks as objects-things. It is interesting, at this point, to note that Brecht’s artwork demonstrates certain similarities to Nam June Paik’s Zen for Film (1962–64). Paik’s iconic film, an empty film leader that runs through a projector and collects traces, has formal similarities to Entrance to Exit. Paik’s film shares with Entrance to Exit both a tongue-in-cheek humor and also self-referentiality. Because, in the vein of an allochronic work, Zen for Film is repeatedly re-instantiated with the help of a new vintage projector and a new blank leader, the object-relic generated in the course of its existence, and now housed at the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection at MoMA, assumes the characteristics of an autochronic object-thing. In that sense, Zen for Film shares with Exit the same temporal entanglement and interdependence between event and object.

**Vehicular and artistic medium**

Although I grapple extensively with this topic in my book Revisions (2015), for the purpose of this essay, I shall briefly mention one more aspect that Exit and Zen for Film share: the complex relation between the artistic and vehicular medium. Proposed by the analytic philosopher Davies (2004, pp. 58–59), the ‘physical’ or ‘vehicular’ (paint and canvas, body) medium distinguishes itself from the ‘artistic’ medium (brush strokes, articulated steps). Artistic statement is articulated through artistic medium in part and through the manipulation of the vehicular medium. Artistic medium mediates between what the artist does and what the work says. Of course, it would be a simplification to say that all physical carriers of an artistic statement are equivalent to the vehicular medium. But I suggest that the artistic media of Exit and Zen for Film are fully reflected in their performative qualities while the object-relics and left-overs — the sign in the case of Exit, or the filmic remnant in Zen for Film — are manifestations of the vehicular, physical, and autochronic medium. From yet another perspective, it might be said that the ‘unruliness’ of these works (Dominguez Rubio, 2014) exhibits itself in multiple vehicular media that embody artistic medium.

In traditional conservation, significant weight is put on vehicular medium, understood as an equivalent of artistic statement and valued for the history of its origins. This emphasis seems to wrongly relegate artistic media to physical carriers, often linked with the notion of intentionality. The latter is a matter of contention, to only consider, for instance, the concept of high and low-level intentionality (Dipert, 1988, pp. 182–200; Hölling, 2013, pp. 69–70), not resolvable here for reasons of space.

**Recursion**

Now, putting the aspect of the vehicular medium aside for a moment, what to the same extent connects these artworks is an idea of recursion and the relation between reproduction and repetition. Imagine, using an example taken from everyday life, placing two mirrors parallel to each other: the image, then, acquires a nested character that occurs in the form of seemingly infinite recursion. Deriving from linguistics, cybernetics, computer science, and visual arts, recursion is a complex concept that allows generating both simple and highly complex, multi-hierarchical structures (Corballis, 2011; Martins & Fitch, 2014). There are multiple definitions of recursion in different fields, but it might generally be said that recursion demonstrates how units of meaning in symbolic forms, including language, are combined and embedded (Irvine, 2015). Recursive embedding in language, for instance, manifested in quotations, citations, and references.

Although both iteration and recursion involve repetition, iteration explicitly uses a repetition structure. Unlike iteration, which, proximate to reproduction, designates the process of repeating an action or object an arbitrary number of times, with each repetition being a separate act that can exist apart from the others, recursion involves embedding the action or object within another instance of itself and may involve hierarchic orders. Although recursion demonstrates certain similarities to reproduction, it does not aspire to reproduce something in the sense of ceaselessly repeating its structure in an unrelated set of events. Brecht’s Exit, when analyzed in terms of recursion, would embed ever new forms of Exits within the initial concept formulated by the event score, and rather than displacing the old work, subsequent manifestations would carry its essence in their conceptual or formal structures.

Here, intermediality comes back into the picture, not as a fusion of art forms, but as the intermediality’s varying forms — as transposition in the sense of adapting one medium to the requirements of another medium, as re-presentation, and as remediation (Lushetch, 2012). The wandering of Exit from an instruction-score to event, to performance, to film, and to object(s) is a succinct example of such intermediality.

I also suggest that recursion perhaps most closely represents the idea of an artistic medium that is
invariably being embodied in variants — mirror images, quotations, and references. As such, recursive structures of an artwork would embrace both its allochonic and autochronic variants.

To grasp recursion and intermediary means also to grapple with plural temporalities. It is first the artwork at the beginning of the mirror image and its temporal embedding within the technological status of that time. It is then the recursive structure in the process of constant formation that introduces new vehicular media carrying the artistic statement and characterized by their intrinsic temporalities. Last but not least, it is the self-referentiality of the artwork in the recursive structure that never finds itself outside of this reference circle and where the new is never truly new because, by creating an impression of novelty, it repeats and restages reality. Here, continuity of form, rather than material, is secured by constant renewal. 'Worldmaking as we know it always starts with worlds already on hand; the making is remaking' (Goodman, 1978, p. 6).

Conclusions: conservation as temporal intervention

Regarding the idea of recursion with all the seriousness it deserves, a question must be posed as to whether the notion of conservation can be sustained. Clearly, the paradigm of conservation related to the rhetoric of authenticity and culture of material sustainability reached its limits confronting the worlds of transitional media and their ‘going beyond’ and ‘crossing over’ to new, unfamiliar territories. Perhaps, a possible scenario would be to rethink the notion of conservation as an intervention in the temporal dimension of artworks. Arguably, what conservation does is introduce stoppages, interruptions, and attempts of the reversion of time (conveyed in traditional approaches and the word ‘restoration’ which implies very specific ideas about time, chronology, and reversibility) (Hölling, 2013, pp. 149–70). The quest for permanence is a fallacy because everything is constantly moving along a trajectory defined by the relative duration of the impermanent (Brisley, 2008). The unfolding of the medium in time suggested by Viola at the beginning of this essay may imply, in long duration, a recursive unfolding. An ultimate recourse from the traditional categorization of media to which intermediary already became an antitode could possibly be sought in the observation of their transition. In other words, the medium is that which transitions and changes, and, consequently, it is characterized by the specificity of its change. Finally, and if nothing else, through transitional media, we may learn how to incorporate the acceptance of changeability into the paradigm of conservation and understand our discipline as a necessarily discursive and contextual practice.

Acknowledgements

Parts of this article were developed during my tenure as Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Professor at the Bard Graduate Center in New York, at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, and the Department of History of Art at University College London. I would like to express my gratitude to the foundation and to my faculty colleagues and friends who supported me.

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