

From Sharks to Sugar: Addressing Conservation Issues of Non-Traditional

Contemporary Art Media

by

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CHAPTER 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I have used some strange materials to make artwork. For the thesis exhibition for my Master of Fine Arts degree, I included an installation piece involving a washbasin filled with several bars of soap. This would not seem unusual if the viewer saw the work in a photograph. However, when the piece was installed in a gallery, the viewer walked into the space and experienced the overwhelming smell of bacon coming from the soap. When making the soap, I had added a special ingredient, an artificial gel with an intense bacon scent. This gel is a product formulated for hunters to use as an attractant for bears.

I have not explained the special ingredient to most people who have experienced the piece simply because not many have had reason to ask me about it. No one has asked me whether I intend for the piece to last forever, or if I will remake the soap every time the piece is shown. No one has asked me whether or not the scent fades over time. Then again, no museum owns this piece.

If a museum actually decided to acquire my work or any work like it, many questions would arise and would ideally need to be answered before the museum agreed to own and care for the work. It stands to reason that since the artist who made the work is most familiar with it and the methods used in making it, he or she should be consulted. As a

preventative conservation measure, the museum should have as much information as possible about the technical nature of the artwork. As I completed my second Master's degree, this one in Museum Studies, I wondered: Do museums actually capture this information? If so, when? Do conservators investigate this information? Or is it collections managers or registrars? Who documents it? How? Can others access this information?

So for this project, I investigated how museums holding contemporary art in the United States can more effectively communicate with artists in order to conserve artwork made from alternative media and accessioned into museums' permanent collections. This type of art is made from non-traditional materials that conservators are not typically trained to care for.

Historically, fine arts conservation has been broken down into categories of traditional media such as paintings, textiles, photographic materials, etc. (Hill Stoner, 2005, p. 50). However, approaches to conservation have changed over time as artists have increasingly employed everyday objects, mixed media, and ephemeral media (Hummelen, 2004, p.208). In this project, I focus on contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials by living artists.

Examples of this type of art range from Joseph Beuys' *Eurasia Siberian Symphony 1963* made in 1966 with mixed media listed as a panel with chalk drawing, felt, fat, hare, and painted poles, to Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* 1992 installation piece made of chocolate, lard, and lipstick, both in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Some art employs the use of one unusual material in mass repetition, such as in Tom Friedman's untitled four-foot-high sculpture of stacked sugar cubes in the form of the artist's body.

Art conservators commonly treat artwork made by artists who are deceased. In that situation, conservators must become detectives. Based on research, conservators gather as much data as possible to guess at what the artist would have intended. This project focuses on methods of preventative conservation, specifically on collections managers capturing information from artists while they are alive.

This topic is important to the museum field because this kind of artwork is being exhibited and collected by major museums that have a stake in preserving it. I initially believed that a system of standard procedures would be helpful to museum staff when dealing with this type of art. But in doing this research I learned that an important step is to create an effective communication system between the artists who create the pieces and the museums that acquire them. Artists and other museum

staff (in addition to conservators and collections managers) need to be educated about this art and its unique conservation needs.

Artist intent is difficult to define completely, but for the purposes of this paper I define it as the artist's reasoning behind making the piece, why the artist used certain materials, how it was made, the decision making process (or creative process), and how the artist wishes the piece to continue on after its creation. Artist intent may often be overlooked or assumed by museum staff. Museums should address the intent of the artist to get the best understanding of the art, to comply with artists' rights law, such as Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) of 1990, and to more fully understand how to plan for the future care of the artwork as well as help maintain professional relationships between artists and museum staff (Malaro, 1998, p. 186).

Artist intent directly affects conservation efforts. For some artists, the concept is more important than the actual object. For example, artists such as Yoko Ono and Sol LeWitt often used written directions for others to physically make the artworks, and the museum collects the artists' instructions as opposed to the carried out works. For some artists, an important aspect of the work is its deterioration. For others, the artists would like the works to survive, but in order for preservation to be carried out, clear communication needs to happen between the art maker and the

art conservator.

Ideally, in-person communication between museums and artists would alleviate some miscommunication and prevent assumptions about artwork on the part of the museum. By advocating a system of better communication and possibly collaboration between museums and artists, my topic addresses some important needs. It supports museums' responsibilities to care for works in their collections to the fullest extent possible. Museums have an ethical responsibility to learn as much as possible about the works they care for. It serves artists to ensure that their intentions are honored by museums. There is untapped potential for collaboration between the museum and the artist to further comprehension of the artwork. Yet, there is a lack of awareness in some museums of the importance of gathering information from living artists.

As museums increasingly collect contemporary art, much of it made with nontraditional ephemeral materials, museum staff must find appropriate methods of preventative conservation to care for this work, as it has unique needs. When the artists are alive and available to communicate, museums should interview the artists as part of a preservation plan as soon as possible upon acquisition of the work, even earlier. However, some museum staff lack skills needed for effective communication with artists, and staff often do not have preservation plans

for this unusual artwork.

Although some museum professionals may understand the value of increased communication between themselves and artists, there is often a gap between theory and practice. Not every museum necessarily knows about the existing available resources to help them facilitate conversations with artists about their work. I found that some efforts in the museum field at present do indeed produce effective methods for preventative conservation of this art; therefore, I am interested in finding a way to disseminate this information broadly to more museums with contemporary art by living artists so that they could incorporate them into their practice.

In this paper, I begin by describing my methodology, which included reviewing pertinent literature, attending a contemporary art conservation conference, and interviewing experts on this topic. I conducted three case studies on different examples of artwork made with nontraditional ephemeral materials by living artists. I interviewed artists who made the work and museum professionals who care for the pieces. Finally, I attended a training workshop about interview methodology for conservators. I include limitations of this project, offering examples of areas I was not able to investigate.

I then review the literature on contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials, the making of this art, and also the

literature on collecting it. This art is defined further and a brief history of the work is given. I examine the inherent dilemma in collecting contemporary art as it is not necessarily made to last, and I delve into the subject of the artists' points of view. Legal issues surrounding artists' rights and copyrights are also included.

Next, I discuss literature on the history of art conservation and its evolution in response to the increasing complexity in contemporary art, especially art made with unusual and challenging materials. The literature review shows how the conservation field has addressed artist intent, newer conservation philosophies, and the crossover in the fields of conservation and collections management. I explore the ways that roles are shifting in museum collections stewardship, conservation in food art, and the artists' role in conservation.

Then I focus on literature about the documentation of artist intent, its importance, when to document it, challenges in documentation methodology, and archiving this documentation. Evidence from literature shows a need for open access to documentation of artist intent and past efforts to address this issue are shown.

My findings chapter presents the results of my primary research. A report on the art conservation conference I attended is included, as well as my discussions with experts. For the case studies, I include images of

artwork, quotes from the artists and museum professionals I spoke with, and I comment on information from those interviews as it relates to my other research.

Lastly, I present my conclusions and recommendations to the field of collections management based on this project. I describe the product stemming from this project that I hope will instigate further discussions on these issues.

Capturing artist intent is central to contemporary art conservation. Collections managers can and should participate in this activity as part of a preventative conservation plan for contemporary artwork made of nontraditional ephemeral materials. Collections managers need training in how to conduct artist interviews, as this is an excellent tool for capturing not only artist intent, but also artist process and materials as well-information that could be crucial for later conservation treatments.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGIES

To learn more about my topic, I employed five different primary research methods. The first was the literature review of the written material pertaining to topics of the evolution of art conservation, contemporary art and its unique challenges in conservation, and contemporary artists' use of non-traditional materials. Second, I attended a conference "The Object in Transition" to hear experts in art conservation and art history discuss this topic. Third, I interviewed two experts in the fields of conservation and collections management who have participated in research relating to my topic. Fourth, I performed three cross-comparative case studies by interviewing both museum professionals and artists who work in nontraditional ephemeral media, focusing on one piece of artwork at each museum. I focused on one case each from three different museums with contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral media in their permanent collections. I carried out these case studies to learn how different museums in the San Francisco Bay Area are currently caring for this type of artwork, any opportunities for improvement, and to get the artist's perspective.

Finally, I attended a training workshop given by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, "Interview Methodology for Conservators" at an American Institute for Conservation

conference to learn how conservators are gathering data from living artists.

Literature Review

I reviewed literature for this project, as it informs what developments have been made up to this point relating to my topic, especially the history of art conservation and how it has evolved over time. As a result of this literature review, I define the type of artwork made with unconventional media and the conceptual framework behind why these materials are implemented. By reviewing literature, I sought to ascertain how contemporary art conservators have tackled this issue in recent years.

Conference

I attended a conference January 24-26, 2008 called “The Object in Transition: A Cross Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art” at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. I attended sessions where conservation professionals from all over the world talked about issues in contemporary art conservation.

The “Object in Transition” conference at the Getty Center caused me to rethink my approach to this project. Several discussions at the conference made me realize that many conservators are truly working on this issue and trying to figure out methods to get the artist’s perspective.

Their goal is to prevent the need to guess after the artist's death what the artist would have intended. They want to be able to make decisions about how to perform treatments with allegiance to the artist's wishes.

Through this conference, I learned that not every museum has conservators on staff, but museums are often accessioning at a rapid pace. This made me think about museums without conservators and wonder if collections managers could use this information. Regardless of whether or not a museum has a conservation lab, this information could be very useful to have at the time of accession or even beforehand and keep it on file. Collections managers play a key role in the process of conservation, as they are the staff members who look after the collections regularly and spot conservation issues that need to be handled by a conservator. I was interested in tackling this issue from a collection manager's point of view.

Expert Interviews

Separate from my case study interviews, I talked with two people who I consider experts in the fields of conservation and collections management: Dr. Glenn Wharton and Jill Sterrett. Both scholars served on discussion panels at "The Object In Transition" conference in Los Angeles and also spoke at the "Interview Methodology for Conservators" workshop in Denver, and they have researched and written extensively in their fields.

I interviewed Dr. Wharton, Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art, specializing in time-based media conservation. He is also a Research Scholar at New York University, with a joint appointment at the Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center and the Museum Studies program. Wharton is also the Acting Executive Director of International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art North America (INCCA-NA). My goal was to find out more about the INCCA-NA and its current status as a contemporary art conservation resource and the potential for accessibility to other museum collections professionals beyond conservators and curators. I asked him a specific set of questions inquiring about INCCA-NA that can be found in Appendix D.

I also interviewed Jill Sterrett, Head of Conservation and Collections at SFMOMA who is involved in initiatives advocating improved communication between museums and artists. Sterrett also teaches Preventative Conservation at John F. Kennedy University Museum Studies graduate program. I had initially intended to speak to Sterrett about options for case studies for me to focus on at SFMOMA. However, our discussion veered into a larger discussion on contemporary art conservation and collections management that informed my approach to this project.

Case Studies/ Interviews

I conducted three case studies of San Francisco Bay Area museums with contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral materials in their permanent collections. The museums that I addressed were San José Museum of Art (SJMA), Berkeley Art Museum (BAM), and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).

For each museum, I focused on one piece of artwork that is made of nontraditional ephemeral materials, has been accessioned into the museum's permanent collection, and its artist is living and available to communicate with. Based on one piece of artwork in each museum, I conducted interviews with a number of collections professionals- collections managers and conservators at museums with this contemporary art in their permanent collections.

I interviewed the artists whose work is made of unconventional media. I wished to discover how artists working in this media think about this issue, what their concerns are, and what their intentions are for the lifespan of their artwork. I wanted to find out if artists consider the long-term survival of their artwork when selecting media. I was interested in finding out how artists want to communicate with the museum in regards to preservation of their work.

For SJMA, I focused on the artwork called *Untitled (Mud Animal)*, 1999, made of stuffed animals, mud, furry bathrobes, and wood stool. I spoke with the artist who made the piece, Kathryn Spence. Because there is not a conservation laboratory onsite at the museum, I spoke with a freelance conservator the museum uses for occasional contact work. I investigated the use of an outside conservator and the differences involved between in-house and contract conservation regarding this type of work.

Rosana Castrillo Díaz made a sculpture out of Scotch tape that was created specifically for the Berkeley Art Museum to become part of the permanent collection. I spoke with the artist, the Director of Registration at BAM, Lisa Calden, the Senior Preparator/Exhibition Designer Barney Bailey, and a conservator who had some useful information about a very similar piece the artist had made previously.

For SFMOMA, I addressed an inflatable plastic piece by Carlos Mollura and spoke with Michelle Barger, Deputy Head of Conservation and I also talked with Doug Kerr, the Senior Preparator in the Registration department.

I drafted a set of questions to ask each artist (see Appendix A), a set for a registrar at each museum (see Appendix B), another for the conservators (see Appendix C), and an additional set of questions for Glenn Wharton of INCCA-NA (see Appendix D). In conversation with

Jill Sterrett we started with my questions designed for conservators, but it expanded into a discussion of collections stewardship at SFMOMA and the future of contemporary art conservation in museums.

Training Workshop

I attended a training workshop on interview methodology for conservators at the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado on April 21, 2008. International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, North America (INCCA-NA) hosted this workshop and several leading experts in the field of conservation presented. Workshops like this could be applicable to collections managers and registrars with contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials in their permanent collections.

Chapter 3: LIMITATIONS

There are many limitations that restrict the scope of this project. I chose to focus on artists using nontraditional ephemeral media in three dimensions, but not art involving technology, often referred to as Media, or New Media. I did not focus on Internet art, digital art, video art, or art created with computers and software programs. This type of art has its own special set of issues that are quite complex and interesting, but in the interest of narrowing my focus, I did not include it in this project.

I did not focus on traditional art made with traditional media. Art conservators are trained in dealing with traditional media and have set methods for approaching their treatments, although consultations with artists is valued by the conservation community.

I also did not concentrate on art made by artists who are now deceased, but this is certainly a major challenge for conservators who are forced to “read between the lines” and make educated guesses on what the artist would have wanted. Conservators must refer to artist’s estates, living relatives, assistants, fabricators, art handlers, curators, and others as well as written materials. This could be a fascinating investigation as a separate project.

I did not direct this project toward private collectors who own this type of work. Although it is a very interesting dilemma to ponder that a

large amount of art made of nontraditional media is owned privately and therefore, there is no real obligation for the owners to ensure that it is cared for and treated by professional conservators. It would be interesting to find out what the relationship is between private collectors, independent conservators, and the artists whose work is collected and preserved.

This project does not address museums that do not hold collections- Kunsthalle-type museums, nor does it include galleries. Many institutions show the type of artwork I investigated on a temporary basis and do not necessarily have a stake in the long-term preservation of the artwork. I did not address art organizations that invite artists to create site-specific artworks that are temporarily held by the institution.

Traveling exhibitions and traveling exhibition services are not included in this project. Organizations such as Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and California Exhibition Resources Alliance (CERA) send artwork and other artifacts to various museums and exhibition spaces. It could be interesting to investigate the conservation practices and policies of these traveling exhibition services for a separate project.

I did not focus on issues in registration documentation of this type of work. It occurs to me that it would be difficult to physically tag much

of this artwork. For instance, where would one put an accession number onto a brittle chocolate sculpture without breaking it?

Curators were not approached for this project because I needed to restrict the amount of people I interviewed and wished to focus on conservation and collections staff. However, it would be interesting to learn curators' perspectives and to discuss artist interviews with them. Curators may be in communication with artists, but with different goals in mind. Some of them may already be conducting their own oral histories and collections professionals could collaborate with them in planning artist interviews. This subject is not included in my project but would be fascinating to explore at another time.

I also limited this project in terms of geography. I did not focus on artists or museum professionals working outside the United States, as it was not practical given time constraints and availability at this time. I further limited my methodology to the San Francisco Bay Area in California. There is much interesting artwork being made in other parts of the world that fall under the category of nontraditional materials, especially in Asia and Europe. However, it was not practical for the purposes of this project to include them.

There were some professionals I interviewed who declined to allow me to quote them because of the sensitivity of this topic and its

implications on museum practice. A registrar who was interviewed for this project did not give me permission to publish quotes nor any information from our conversation. However, because this topic is so new, it is not surprising that some registrars might not be informed. One way to confront this challenge is to keep discussing it and to share knowledge about current conservation issues throughout the museum field.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the texts that have been written by museums or museum professionals, certain themes emerge. Within the conservation community, attempts have been made to create international networks for conservators to pool their resources and share information gathered from artist interviews and other documentation. In some of the literature, interview methods were suggested. Some interview initiatives were attempted but withered out in unsuccessful results. Another attempt at an international database of archive information is presently being carried out, but it is too soon to evaluate its success.

Authors of two past John F. Kennedy University Museum Studies theses have posed similar questions. One author asked “Can museums save video installation art at the moment of accession?” The other thesis project tackled the issue of New Media art and set out to uncover the artists’ perspectives on preservation of this type of art in museums. My thesis project builds on these topics and asks a related question: “How can museums save artwork made with nontraditional ephemeral materials made by living artists at the moment of accession?”

The Art – Making and Collecting

Contemporary Art Using Nontraditional Ephemeral Materials –

Definition & History

No term has been coined to refer to the type of artwork that I address in this project. But for the purposes of this project I will call it contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials. This artwork fits into the larger category of contemporary art. Conservators have not been traditionally trained to address this type of art. The term may include mixed-media works, or artwork made using one or more materials.

Marcel Duchamp may be the most influential example of an artist using nontraditional materials as media for artwork. As early as 1915, he stepped outside the confines of what was considered art, making art called “ready-mades,” objects like wheels and shovels he chose to exhibit as artworks. In addition to painting, his work included the use of mixed-media, film, and installation. In his introduction to *New Media in Late 20th-Century Art*, Michael Rush speaks of Duchamp as a predecessor to New Media art (also known as art using digital technology), but the description also fits for the art I address in my project.

Duchamp’s radical shift of emphasis from object to concept allowed for multiple methods to be introduced to a redefined artistic enterprise. His importance to the present study rests not

only in what he did but in what he allowed or initiated in art. The type of thinking he encouraged made explorations into different media and artistic forms seem very natural, almost expected. (Rush, 1999, p.21)

In *Art on the Edge and Over*, Arthur Danto describes the revolution of the 1960's when unconventional artwork proliferated in mass amounts and, subsequently, museums began to collect it in earnest.

By the mid-sixties, pictorial space was no longer the scene of revolution: artists moved outside the picture into forms of productions quite unprecedented, for the understanding of which pictorial aesthetics was of relatively little use. There were happenings, there was performance, there was installation, there was that shapeless array of avant-garde gestures known as Fluxus, there was video, and there were mixtures of multimedia artworks-combinations of readings, performances, video, soundwork, and installation. There was fiberwork and body art and street art and outdoor art, by artists who accepted and even endorsed ephemerality. (Danto, 1996, p.15)

This type of artwork fits into a much larger art historical context that I have only touched upon here. It could be argued that contemporary artwork should no longer be approached in terms of its media, but because I am tackling issues of conservation and collections care of artwork in its material sense, I have categorized this art accordingly.

Collecting Contemporary Art & The Inherent Dilemma

Why are museums collecting ephemeral nontraditional art? Kees Herman Aben gives a good overview of the various reasons that nontraditional work may become part of a museum's collections in the

first place. Beyond strategically planned acquisitions, the less obvious reasons are that art has been given as gifts and that museums may have rare or unexpected chances to purchase unique works of art (Herman Aben, 1995, p.104).

Bruce Altshuler, Director of the Program in Museum Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University, addresses the challenges museums face in acquiring contemporary art in regards to its preservation.

...collecting contemporary art has marked two points of conceptual tension. First, collecting contemporary art conflicts with the notion of the art museum as an institution that preserves the works that have withstood the test of time, placing them within an art historical narrative in which new works can have no definitive space. Second, with the creation of museums devoted to “modern” and “contemporary” art, the focus on the new was found to conflict with the traditional museum goal of preserving its holdings in perpetuity. (Altshuler, 2005, p.8)

Although it may seem strange to some that museums collect this work at all, as managing and caring for it is fraught with difficulties, institutions and individuals collect this work to preserve a moment in art history. Regardless of the reasons for collecting the artwork, it is the responsibility of collections managers and conservators to care for it.

Museum professionals in Contemporary and Modern art museums may be aware of the challenges in conservation, but these issues are also entering the public consciousness, as well as affecting private collectors.

In his article “In a Pickle,” Morgan Falconer uses the example of the highly publicized Damien Hirst artwork containing a shark corpse in formaldehyde and its subsequent decomposition to ask - What if Hirst were not alive to ask about his intentions? (Falconer, 2006) The irony of using this piece as a case study is that the shark was not “pickled” well enough in the first place.

In this particular case, the artist is taking care of the conservation and there is no museum involved, but a private collector. One should not ignore the fact that private collectors are dealing with the mysteries of how to preserve this type of artwork though. It is precisely these private collectors who museums borrow work from for exhibitions and also these individuals often donate their collections in their estates. Museums should keep private collectors in mind as possible collaborators in the long-term preservation of this type of artwork. (Falconer, 2006)

In a *New York Times* article, Christopher Mason warned against the perils of collecting contemporary art made from unconventional materials and talked to private collectors and gallerists who have purchased this type of artwork, conveying various maintenance challenges. Mason consulted private contemporary art conservators and curators. He gave examples of some of the artwork collected- work by Matthew Barney involving an electrical freezing device and frozen cast

petroleum jelly, and Jeff Koons' mercury-filled basketballs floating in water. Collection of this type of art is not slowing despite maintenance challenges. The author asserts that this type of artwork is continually being collected and deemed important. (Mason, 2005)

Artists' Points of View

In *Making Contemporary Art: How Today's Artists Think and Work*, Linda Weintraub investigates art making and looks at the creative process through the artist's relationship to his or her audience. This book shows an array of points of view by artists, which are often theorized about in other sources, but seldom included. The text includes many interviews with artists in which the interviewer often asks the artist about their relationship with collectors and museums and also asks the artists' thoughts on preserving the work.

Artist Matthew Ritchie responds to a question asking whether he is concerned with the longevity of his work, "... I try to build the work so that it functions by itself. I am doing all I can now so that it can survive the absence of the artist." (Weintraub, 2003, p. 57) Conversely, when asked if she does anything now to enhance the value of her work in the future, artist Rirkrit Tiravanija replies, "No future. It doesn't mean anything for me to have something preserved." (Weintraub, 2003, p.109)

Other artists defer to the buyer to take responsibility for preservation. Wenda Gu answers the question of whether or not she takes any action to preserve her work, “The best way to preserve your work is in the collector’s or museum’s hands, not in my studio.” (Weintraub, 2003, p. 301) But this does not necessarily imply that this artist would be averse to cooperating with a museum if staff asked for her input on one of her pieces. It is simply a reminder that artists are usually most concerned with the process of creating artwork and often leave the conservation concerns to the institution.

A conference held at the Getty Center in Los Angeles in 1998 called *Mortality immortality?: The Legacy of 20th-century Art* focused on the preservation of contemporary art. Artists, museum professionals, conservators, art historians, dealers, collectors, and scientists, and other professionals gave their perspectives on various issues surrounding the preservation of contemporary art, and one issue especially relevant to my paper – the artist's original intent. (Corzo, 1999)

Kees Herman Aben succinctly states “the conservator’s dilemma: to preserve art for posterity while trying to respect the artist’s intent.” (Herman Aben, 1995, p.109) Collections managers in charge of any contemporary art should be aware of this because they too are playing a

role in the process of conservation by preventing damage through proper care.

Legal Issues: Artists' Rights & Copyrights

Marie Malaro's *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum*

Collections, often referred to as "the registrar's bible", serves as a handbook for museum professionals in dealing with legal issues surrounding museum collections, outlines basic tenets of collecting institutions such as collections management policies, accessioning, deaccessioning, and loans. Issues discussed in this book that relate to my project are artists' rights including the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) of 1990 and basic guidelines for collections management policies.

In Art conservation and the legal obligation to preserve artistic intent, the authors explain the fundamentals of the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) of 1990 and how the rights it provides to artists may affect the work of conservators. This article includes an overview of the evolution of copyright law, the Berne Convention, the Lanham Act, and the development of moral rights in the United States. It explains how VARA makes museum professionals legally responsible to document and uphold artist intent. There are recommendations to help conservators avoid legal liability. (Garfinkle, 1997)

Art Conservation

Evolution of Art Conservation

In her article, “Changing Approaches in Art Conservation: 1925 to the Present,” Joyce Hill Stoner gives a history of conservation practices between 1925 and 1975, and also discusses the changing styles of conservation from 1975 to 2005. Prior to 1975 the inventions of X radiography and examination with ultraviolet light revolutionized art conservation yet there was no specialization based on media or otherwise within the field. In the 1960’s there were few books on art conservation. But, major training institutions were being formed such as New York University’s Conservation Department, conservation research laboratories sprang up such as the one at Oberlin College in Ohio, and professional societies began to surface. Training grew from apprenticeships to formal education during this time period when graduate programs in conservation appeared internationally. (Hill Stoner, 2005)

During the next period, from 1975 to 2005, specialization according to art media became commonplace. By the mid-seventies a more conservative “hands-off” approach became prevalent. The newer philosophy avoided physical contact with the work whenever possible. Advances in technology allowed for this approach, but also muddled the field with a confounding overflow of choices in approach to treatment and

materials. Now there is more awareness in the field of health hazards to both the conservator and the environment, and more interdisciplinary research has been conducted. (Hill Stoner, 2005, p.53)

The author speaks of a turning point in modern conservation when more value began to be placed on consultation with living artists:

In a landmark conservation conference in 1980 at the National Gallery of Canada, conservators, artists, scientists, and curators discussed issues relevant to the conservation of contemporary art. Several conservators spoke about their collaborations with living artists and the importance of interviewing artists to ascertain their views about materials and addressing damages to their pieces. Consulting and working with artists or collaborating with native Americans have been categorized together as acknowledging the cultures of origin, yet another important new direction for conservation. (Hill Stoner, 2005, p. 55)

The notion of the interviewing the artist to aid in conservation decisions is not new, yet it is still not consistently practiced in the museums that hold contemporary artwork.

Conservation Field Addresses Artist Intent

Steven Dykstra discusses the history of art conservation and the split between aesthetic and scientific art conservator. He explains the history of debates within the art conservation profession and also in other professional fields about interpretation of artist intent. He addresses the ambiguity of the term “artist intent” and breaks it down into eleven variations of its definition. Placing this discussion into an art conservation

context, the author enfold the fields of philosophy, art history, art criticism, and literary writing into the discussion. The “intentional fallacy” happens when art professionals fall back on their own analyses and interpretations of art as artist intent. Dykstra argues that the interpretation and application of artist intent is an interdisciplinary task. (Dykstra, 1996)

Newer Conservation Philosophies

Conservation has changed as postwar and contemporary art delves past conventional media and technique. Contemporary conservation focuses on trying to mediate change as opposed to intercepting change. (Keats, 2006) In his essay “The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art,” Glenn Wharton looks at recent trends that address the conservation of contemporary art. He asserts that the very way contemporary art is made challenges the essential values of art conservation. When the artist is living, the focus of conservation shifts to honoring the artist’s interests (Wharton, 2005, p.165).

Bruce Altshuler observes that traditional practices do not apply to taking care of nontraditional artwork.

Institutional structures created at an earlier time to meet different needs are being called into question by new artistic media and by the use of the term *contemporary* to designate a particular kind of artwork. Alternative conceptions of the artwork and new technologies have created special problems of preservation and conservation. (Altshuler, 2005, p.8)

However, Altshuler's book identifies that there is definitely a shift in practice happening within the art museum field in regards to caring for this type of artwork.

Crossover in Conservation and Collections Management Fields

As collections managers and registrars perform preventative conservation tasks such as monitoring and controlling environmental conditions in collections storage and employing Integrated Pest Management techniques, and are in charge of the documentation surrounding artwork, it seems that conservation and registration disciplines overlap on this subject. In "The New Museum Registration Methods," an appendix dedicated to the registrar's code of ethics addresses the registrar's responsibility:

The primary concerns of registrars are creating and maintaining accurate records pertaining to objects, including those documents that provide legal protection for the museum; ensuring the safety of objects; arranging insurance coverage for objects; and handling, transporting, and control of objects. (Buck, 1998, p. 349)

The creation and maintenance of accurate records of artistic intent pertaining to objects falls under this description, especially if a conservator is not on staff. Therefore, those in the field of registration should be collaborating with those in the field of the conservation regarding artist interviews as they relate to the long-term conservation of

contemporary art. Collaboration with other museum staff such as preparators and curators is also an ideal approach to performing artist interviews.

Herman Aben explains the conservator's role at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in relation to loaning out work, emphasizing that conservators spend much time supervising the actual works "en route". (Herman Aben, 1995, p.104) This is an example of a place where conservators' and registrars' roles overlap, as registrars are often the staff who act as couriers for loaned works.

There is definite crossover between the conservation and registration fields – two other examples of this are that conservators register data, and registrars perform condition reports. In *The New Museum Registration Methods*, Marie Demeroukas gives a basic definition for a condition report:

A good condition report is an accurate and informative account of an object's state of preservation at a moment in time. It provides a verbal and/or visual description of the nature, location, and extent of each defect in a clear, consistent manner. ((Demeroukas, 1998, p. 53)

However, she goes on to explain how registration and conservation condition reports are different:

A condition report written by a registrar, curator, or collections manager... is not the same as a condition report written by a conservator; the former aids in collections management whereas

the latter is a tool for planning and performing object treatment.
(Demeroukas, 1998, p. 53)

Nevertheless, both disciplines should become more familiar in each other's practices. In fact, Jill Sterrett, Director of the Collections at SFMOMA, observes that at some museums the two fields are beginning to merge. In the next section of this paper, I delve further into Sterrett's thoughts on this topic.

Collecting and archiving artist intent can be delicate business, and conservators first consult documentation from any prior interviews or written exchanges. It is important to research prior documentation to prevent the redundancy of interviewing artists several times about the same piece. According to Wharton, these documents exist in registration files or collection databases. (Wharton, 2005, p.174) Are collections managers involved in this information exchange?

In *Reinventing the Museum*, Carol Milner, in her essay "Who Cares? Conservation in Contemporary Context" discusses roles and responsibilities for conservation in the museum:

At one end of the spectrum we have the bench conservator working on his or her object in the conservation laboratory, state or private. Further up the chain we have the person at the other end who pushes the button which sets this process off and enables it to happen. (Milner, 2004, p. 298)

Often, the collections manager sets conservation in motion. Milner (2004) advocates for collaboration and communication within the institution in order to effectively preserve collections. “The fact that integrated conservation is a collective responsibility throws up the need for effective communication at all levels” (p. 299).

As registrars and conservators are trained in caring for artwork made from traditional materials, they also confront challenges when faced with documenting and preserving video installation art. Although I am focusing on a different type of artwork, some of the challenges are the same for both types of contemporary art. In her master’s project, Jacqueline Morton Arase describes the accession methods and preservation strategies now used by registrars, and she sets out to improve them. Her product is “A Resource Guide to Accessioning and Preserving Video Installation Art,” which includes advice on how registrars can collaborate with artists, conservators, and others to better understand the artwork at the moment it is accessioned. The author values the communication and collaboration between art professionals and artists in order to conserve contemporary art made from nontraditional materials, and the author’s product gives practical guidance to registrars who must care for this newer artwork.

Shifting Collections Stewardship Roles

Acknowledging the malleability of the field, Herman Aben (1995) states, “There seems to be a lack of awareness of professional ethics being a never-ending process” (p.108). At the time of he made this statement, thirteen years ago, it was the first time an international group of professionals had come together to discuss the inherent challenges of ephemeral media in modern and contemporary art, and so it marks a time of change in thought and practice. This change in conservation ethics directly affects the thought and practice of collections managers.

At the “Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles? Artists’ Installations and the Museum” conference at the Tate Modern Museum in March, 2007, Jill Sterrett gave a presentation entitled, *The museum’s response to installation art in terms of shifting practices within conservation and the challenges of custodianship*. She spoke of a museum putting up a temporary installation and then deciding to keep the work for the permanent collections. (Sterrett, 2007) This notion of keeping art originally meant to be temporary is interesting because it is precisely how much of this type of artwork ends up being accessioned to a museum’s permanent collections. Often a museum commissions an artist to install a work temporarily and then decides to acquire this piece. However, the artist may not have created the work with any intentions for permanency.

Sterrett investigated the challenge of keeping contemporary art, specifically installation art, and offered an approach by breaking it down into two distinct parts:

The first part involves retooling conservation methods for caring for contemporary installations. For instance, in conservation, preserving a work's *integrity* is still the bedrock of practice AND tradition still links an object's true nature to its moment of creation. If this is your footing, then the last forty years of artmaking is bound to be disorienting.

Whether due to material or contextual variability, performance elements or interactive components, installations and other contemporary works often confound the notion of completion but also what constitutes the finished work of art. And by this measure, conservators *can* find themselves hemmed in by their own version of distracting wrong-headedness.

The very good news is that conservation methods for contemporary art have been studied and discussed extensively in recent years. For works such as, Pipilotti Rist's video installation, *Stir Heart, Rinse Heart* (2004), Lynn Hershman's interactive web portal, *Agent Ruby* (2001) or Sarah Sze's *Things Fall Apart* (2001), theoretical and practical problem-solving are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

This sophistication leads to the second part of the challenge of keeping contemporary art, which boils down to a question. *Are museums, as the tools of understanding that we aspire them to be, actually equipped to operate in the ways that the art needs them to?* (Sterrett, 2007)

She pinpointed an important problem: "There's a bit of confusion about who is supposed to do what. The bottom line is that it takes more time than we give it." (Sterrett, 2007) She recognized that traditional professional divisions employed in modern and contemporary art

museums are not effective and that roles need to shift. Sterrett referred to Martha Buskirk's writing in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, explaining,

... in shepherding contemporary installations into the future, the complex negotiation, to which Buskirk refers, between a work's initial appearance and its extended life distills down to mediating its variability... managing variability is shifting the way we keep collections... (Sterrett, 2007)

Like Morton Arase, Sterrett believes that collaboration is key.

She talked about the shift at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) towards the collections division – the museum merged its intellectual and physical stewardship functions. Physical stewards-conservators and registrars, are now working with intellectual stewards-librarians, archivists, and a team that manages the electronic databases. The team's job is to underpin physical and intellectual stewardship. The museum has been functioning this way for seven years and the biggest challenges have been in managing the change, “managing the breakdown in silos of operation. The result is a commitment to something larger.” (Sterrett, 2007, webcast)

This SFMOMA institutional structure regarding collections stewardship is timely and conducive to the focus of their collections. However, until other museums follow this model, it is important to find

and employ solutions for caring for contemporary art that fit into the way most art museums function now.

Conservation in Food Art

Food as art media falls under the umbrella of the unconventional art media I focus on in my project. Elyse Klein examines conservation issues for artwork using unconventional organic materials, specifically food, as its media. This conservation student addresses this type of art as high risk, focuses on its inherent vice, and discusses situations when deterioration is the artist's intent. She briefly discusses questions museums should raise at the point of acquisition and the addresses some health risks involved in keeping food art in a collection for museum staff and visitors in long term. Klein asserts that communication with the artist in making conservation decisions is imperative, and that each artwork must be considered individually and in consultation with the artist. (Klein, 1991, p.8)

In a discussion of ethics, artist's intent, and artist's rights, Glenn Wharton and Sharon D. Blank outline the process to be taken by conservators before performing major treatment on a deteriorated work of chocolate art. They recommended that after attempting to attain documentation of the artist's intent, preventative measures should be taken to slow the deterioration of the work, such as "exhibiting and storing it in

a stable environment, and establishing good housekeeping policies for control of pests” (Wharton, 1995). The collections manager, not the conservator, often performs the latter of these preventative conservation measures. So it seems logical that a collection manager could also document the artist’s intent.

The authors conclude that for chocolate art, preventative conservation methods are most appropriate (Wharton, 1995). As chocolate is a befitting example of nontraditional ephemeral media used in contemporary art, this supports my assertion that collections managers should be and are involved in the conservation process of this work because collections managers practice preventative conservation in collections caretaking.

Artists’ Role in Conservation

Jennifer Crane discusses new media art using digital technology, specifically the Internet, in her 2007 thesis project, “New Media Art Matters: Artist Perspectives on Preservation in Museums.” She argues that both artists and museums manage preservation issues with this nontraditional contemporary art. Often, when repairs are needed for these types of pieces, the artist is the only person who understands how to repair the work. I suspect that this may also be true of many other non-digital contemporary artworks, because the artist may be the sole person who

understands how the materials were used to create the work. Her recommendation is to make a plan between the artist and the institution the moment the piece enters the collection before repairs become necessary. Crane concludes that there must be better education, better communication, and better planning between the artist and the institution. (Crane, 2007) I agree with the author's conclusions and see the need for museums to set plans into action.

Documentation of Artist Intent

Importance of Documenting Artist Intent

... materials and working methods acquire a highly specific significance so that conservation research must be conducted per artist and per work. Because conservation in most cases constitutes an intervention in the materiality of the work, research into this layer of meaning before a conservation method is established is particularly important. (Hummelen, 2005, p.167)

It may not seem obvious why documenting the artist's intent for the art is so important. For example, a large scratch in one piece of artwork meant to look rough might be an asset to the artist, but for a different artist a scratch in a slick pristine sculpture would be considered a flaw. Museum professionals cannot so easily assume this information, especially if they are unfamiliar with the work and its intended meaning.

Modern and contemporary art museums often lack information on materials and techniques used by artists, but this information is crucial to

art conservation. This information should be documented while getting the artist intent on record.

When To Document Artist Intent

“The complex history of the work after it leaves the control of the artist speaks to the importance of later understandings.” (Buskirk, 2005, p.56)

After the work leaves the artist studio, there is no real incentive for the artist to remain invested in the work. However, staff at some institutions may assume the artist has a responsibility to help the museum if the museum makes a request at a later date. If museum professionals plan on calling on an artist only when problems surface, they risk oversight of a great opportunity to actively employ preventative conservation. If one interviews the artist as soon as possible after the piece is acquired, however, the artist is more likely to be in a position to speak clearly and fully about their art-making process for that particular piece, and the information will be more valuable in the future should conservation issues arise.

The gathering of data that could influence the meaning of the work – with an emphasis on the use of material and working method – is thus one of the first activities to be undertaken in the conservation of modern art. The curator/conservator determines the meaning. (Hummelen, 2005, p.167)

Whether or not there is a professional conservator on staff at a museum, a conservation plan should be made for each piece of contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials at the time of accession. At the 1998 Getty conference, Grattan and Williams said “The goal of conservation needs to be defined for each piece based on the artist’s intent, the nature of the materials, and many other factors, including budget.” The authors make a startling point, warning against waiting to interview artists until a problem arises, “Unfortunately, artists are often more ephemeral than their works.” (Grattan, Williams, 1999, p.73)

Dan Flavin’s artworks made from fluorescent light fixtures that have gone out of production. The artist is now deceased and questions arise about his intentions. He had claimed that he would rather see the works “disappear into the wind” than live on, but fourteen years after he expressed that intention he worked with the Dia Art Foundation to ensure that his art would continue on in the future. This shows how artist intent often changes over time and that it is crucial to document their intentions accurately and often. (Allen, 2005) It is an example of the problematic nature of capturing artist intent and illustrates the value of ongoing communication between the museum and the artist about the work.

Challenges in Documentation Methodology

Because understanding the artist's intention in using his materials is key in contemporary art conservation, and Roy A. Perry goes further into methods of capturing artist intent:

... the conservation department's priority on acquiring a contemporary work is to gather information from the artists or their assistants. Questionnaires are prepared individually to reflect the particular work, its history, and the artist... An hour or two's discussion in front of the works can elicit far more information and insight than written correspondence alone."(Perry, 1999, p.42)

But documentation of interviews and written intentions by artists can be problematic whether museum professionals give a written questionnaire, or conduct an audio-recorded interview. Martha Buskirk poses the question "What happens when language is used to communicate the artist's intent and the artist misspeaks? One drawback to depending on descriptions rather than the evidence contained in a material object is the problem of ambiguity or even error." (Buskirk, 2005, p.43)

Carol Mancusi-Ungaro's method seeks to solve some of these problems by videotaping the interview of the artist speaking about his intention for the work while videotape is capturing both artist and referential artwork. In "Material and Method in Modern Art: A Collaborative Challenge," Mancusi-Ungaro discusses the impossibility of the museum professional being able to guess at how an artist made his or

her art without consulting the artist. She describes her practice of videotaping interviews with artists as they look at their artwork and she compares that practice with the use of written questionnaires. Questionnaires, by their standardized approach, cannot take into account the vast differences in approach that artists take. The video interview allows for an open-ended discussion between the artist and interviewers. She asserts that only through examining the experiences of the artists looking at art combined with making art can conservators understand the artwork fully. "There is the intangible element of the artist's intent in manipulating tangible material that must be considered." (Mancusi-Ungaro, 2005, p.157)

Mancusi-Ungaro, who had been conducting these video-interviews for over twelve years, talks about her approach to interviewing artists, and what she now values as a result of conducting these interviews in this particular way:

What I had hoped to document was not merely a discussion of materials and technique but, more than that, a solid sense of the artists' concerns about what they were looking at and its future preservation. Naturally, artists' relationships to their materials and thoughts about the future care of the art are as varied as their personalities...The artists' concerns may be narrow or broad in scope. Yet, inevitably their involvement adds another dimension to the investigation by posing questions unimagined by researchers and thereby enriching the pursuit in unexpected ways. (Mancusi-Ungaro, 2005, p.157)

I believe that it is impossible to ever fully capture the artist's intent because he may change his mind or be unclear, and it is simply not possible to know what another person truly wants. But it is essential that the institution acquiring the work make every possible effort to document the artist's intent while the artist is available and alive, and at the time of acquisition. Buskirk defends the practice of documentation of artist intent: "Critical or descriptive language, declarative language, the language of instructions, the language of agreements and contracts- all of these are relevant because they shape the form in which the work of art will arrive at the viewer." (Buskirk, 2005, p.56) After all, the main reason that a museum acquires the work for its permanent collection in the first place is to exhibit it to viewers.

Archiving Documentation of Artist Intent

There is a long, but scattered history of conservators attempting to organize a system for documenting artist intent and archiving that documentation. Erich Gantzert-Castrillo describes the Archive of Techniques and Working Materials Used by Contemporary Artists that he started in 1979. He saw a need for conservators to have more information about contemporary artists techniques and materials, and initially sent 140 questionnaires to artists from German-speaking countries. The fact that this conservator began this archive as early as the 1970's shows that there

has been a need to access this information for quite some time, although this need has been expressed more within the field of conservation than in other museum disciplines. Reflecting on his experience with the archive, he says, “In the course of time, we have ascertained that, alongside compiling information on materials and techniques, the section of our archival work devoted to authentic statements by the artists on substantive issues is becoming increasingly important.” (Gantzert-Castrillo, 1999, p.130)

At the 1998 Getty conference Debra Hess Norris spoke about collecting accurate information from the artist:

Whenever possible, this information must be gathered by speaking with the artist. It may be best collected at the point of acquisition and should include a record of the artist’s vision for the work over the next fifty years... The information must also be shared with the profession.” (Hess Norris, 1999, p.133)

In 1996 Ysbrand Hummelen and the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art in the Netherlands set out to analyze considerations that come into play when conserving Modern and Contemporary art. A major outcome of the study was “inadequacy of available information and documentation on an artist’s intention when using various materials and techniques during the process of making an artwork.” (Hummelen, 1999, *Mortality immortality*, p.173) While it is important to document artist intent, materials used, and techniques used,

this information should be disseminated to a larger community of museum professionals to be used to its full extent. However, there are legal and copyright issues that might prevent sharing information openly because laws between countries can be very different.

In the book *Modern art: who cares?: an interdisciplinary research project and an international symposium on the conservation of modern and contemporary art* a decision-making model for the conservation and restoration of modern and contemporary art is explained in steps:

1. Data registration
2. Condition
3. Meaning
4. Discrepancy? (between 2. & 3.)
5. Conservation options
6. Weighing conservation options
7. Proposed treatment (Hummelen, 2005, p. 165)

A collections manager, in the absence of a professional conservator on staff at a museum, would perform the first four steps of this model before bringing in a conservator. The steps and checklists offered as aids in this book could be very useful for a collections manager responsible for contemporary art in a museum collection. Data registration and observing and reporting on condition would be obvious steps to any trained registrar, but those collections professionals not familiar with modern or contemporary art may not at first grasp the importance of step number

three- determination of meaning. This step is crucial in the conservation of Modern and Contemporary artwork.

In a chapter entitled *Christiane Bernes and Working Group Registration and Documentation: New Registration Models Suited to Modern and Contemporary Art*, two registration models are offered: data registration and condition registration. (Hummelen, 2005, pp. 179-195) Christiane Bernes, a curator at the Van Abbemuseum, Einshoven, participated in the Conservation of Modern Art project specifically because the museum was dealing with registration problems. They had no permanent conservator on staff and worked with independent conservators; therefore, the curator was responsible for conservation at her institution. (Hummelen, 2005, p.175)

In *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, regarding the discussions on documentation and registration of artists' materials and techniques, it was concluded that artist interviews are preferable to questionnaires and should be performed at the moment the artwork is acquired, a checklist for interviews and common terminology should be developed, and interviews should be done by two people from different disciplines. (Hummelen, 2005, p. 390) A basic checklist is offered for interviewing artists. (Hummelen, 2005, p.378) This could be distributed to collections managers who have interests in performing artist interviews.

As a result of the 1997 symposium held in Amsterdam “Modern Art: Who Cares,” the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage and the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art (Dutch abbreviation: SBMK) began a research project for interviewing artists. The project sought to provide a method for conducting artist interviews so that conservators and curators could get the information they need to preserve contemporary artwork. The idea is to collect information on the artist’s materials and methodology, their meaning to the artist, and the artist’s attitude towards aging and conservation. The article compares different techniques: collecting data by written questionnaire, oral interview, oral interview recorded on video, as conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro has done since 1990; the ultimate decision is that oral interviews recorded onto videotape is the preferred method. A general outline of a checklist of how to conduct an interview is provided so that certain kinds of questions are not left out of the process. The group’s purpose was to begin developing a method of collection, documentation, and communication of data from artist’s interviews. The authors set preconditions for interviewing an artist, one of which is that the interviewer be knowledgeable about the content of the work, having done their research beforehand. Another is that the interviewer should have the skills to conduct an interview. (Hummelen, 1999, p.314) [With the understanding

that collections managers are not usually trained in interview methodology, I would suggest that specialized training in conducting artist interviews be offered at professional conferences for registrars. I will explain this more fully later in this project.]

Observing that artists often employ the use of common products of daily life or ephemeral materials in works of contemporary art, IJstrand Hummelen and Tatja Scholte saw the need for reconsidering preservation strategies for museum collections. The authors investigate methods for improving communication between museum and artist for the purposes of advancing conservation of contemporary art using unconventional media. In order for preservation and presentation of these works to happen, documentation of the sharing of tacit knowledge between the museum professional and the artist, such as artist interviews, is essential. They discuss the conversion of artistic intent into meaningful information that can be used for preservation. Capturing other people's knowledge, such as assistants and preparators can also be invaluable. The authors compare this process with the documentation of historical artifacts, as the challenges in materials can be similar. They discuss the need for a comprehensive worldwide archive of artist information, but dismiss the full realization of such a "super-archive" as impossible for various reasons including ethics and legal issues, namely legal variations between countries on copyright

issues. The authors describe the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), an international group of conservators and curators from contemporary art institutions who have been building an information network since 1999. This network focuses on collecting information on artists and developing methods for capturing this information. Challenges for INCCA are presented, and the authors introduce ideas for how a network should ideally function. At present, the INCCA Database for Artists' Archives exists online, accessible to its members. It provides references to sources of documentation (other museum members). (Hummelen, 2004, p.208-212)

For example, if museum professional X were a member of INCCA and wanted access to an artist interview of artist Y, he or she could look it up on the database and see that museum professional Z housed that interview. But then X would need to contact Z and ask directly for a copy of the Y interview. This circumvents the copyright and privacy issues. While this is a clever way around some of the copyright challenges for now, time will only tell whether professionals will consistently use this indirect methodology since it is somewhat convoluted in nature.

Past Efforts to Address the Issue

Seeing the need for artist input in order to conserve contemporary artwork, the Variable Media Initiative was developed in 2001. This initiative asks artists to contribute to decisions about how their work should age over time. The project focuses on digital art but also complex works made from a variety of media. The Guggenheim Museum partnered with other institutions to share resources and expertise creating the Variable Media Network (VMN). The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology funded the project. A collection of essays by various participants in VMN includes the Variable Media Questionnaire, a tool for documenting requisite information for addressing variable media works. The project approaches categorization of contemporary artwork in nontraditional ways, encouraging artists to define their work independently from medium. This study was an important attempt to bridge the communication gap between contemporary art museums and contemporary artists working in unconventional media. (Depocas, 2003)

In reaction to the symposium “Modern Art: Who Cares?” in 1997, individuals from organizations from all over the world created the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA). (Hummelen, 2005) INCCA developed a website and databases including a substantial amount of artists’ information. In one project found

on the website, almost one hundred artists' interviews were conducted and from this experience a "Guide to Good Practice: Artists' Interviews" was created. The purpose of the guide "...suggests and recommends different approaches to artists' interviews. It does not prescribe how information should be gathered, but suggests which issues should be covered depending on the artist, their works and their use." (Introduction, ¶ 3).

As a sub-group of the international network, INCCA North America (INCCA-NA) was formed. INCCA Member Administration website was established for members to create and edit their own records for the INCCA Database for Artists' Archives, and search the database for artists' archives and other INCCA members. (<http://www.incca.org/>)

"Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art" was a research project spanning three years 2004-2007. The project's research goals were to develop guidelines for the care and administration of works of installation art. Although this project focused on installation art specifically, many of the same issues are applicable to contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials by living artists. Also, many installation artworks can be included within the category I address in my project.

One of the research areas of the "Inside Installations" project was about artist's participation and was conducted by the Conservation

department at Stedelijk Museum Aktuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent, Belgium. The webpage showing the results of this project includes the topic of interviewing and designing qualitative research, specifically in preparation for interviewing artists. The authors explain the necessity of approaching conservation of contemporary art in new ways, and the idea of including the artist in this process:

An entirely new arsenal of materials, and especially combinations of them, has found its way into museums. In the field of conceptual art, the idea takes precedence over the materiality and the erection of installations outside the museum walls challenges restorers in more ways than one. At the same time, there is a whole new range of opportunities and possibilities because the context in which contemporary art is being produced has fundamentally changed compared to earlier periods. For example, the source material, which can be analyzed by scientists, can give new dimensions to scientific research and restoration. And one of the most crucial opportunities for the conservation researcher is that the artist himself can often be consulted as a primary source, through an interview or in direct collaboration. (Huys & De Buck, 2007)

This project shows that interactions with artists are essential for the long-term conservation of this art:

Ready-made answers for dealing with these works do not exist. Here, research lies at the heart of the quest for solutions and is preferably the framework for an interactive thought process between artist and researcher. Interactive research resulting in guidelines for individual works of art is the basis and often the only guarantee for the continued existence of the work.

Huys and De Buck explain the need for interview and transcription training and for dissemination of resulting information to other museum

professionals. They describe the workshops organized by the conservation department of S.M.A.K.:

Although conservators are often confronted with interviewing an artist, the majority of conservators have never undergone training for this. Nevertheless, in their communication with the artist they need to be familiar with certain basic principles so that the required information not only is acquired efficiently but also that the interviewee is not offended in any way. Thus, on the second day of the seminar, a workshop for interviewing techniques was organized. During the interview the interviewer usually collects copious amounts of information. This material also needs to be processed; it must be usable and therefore applicable in relation to the conducted research. Furthermore, it is clear that the information also needs to be accessible for third parties, such as in our field colleagues within and across museums. In other words it is advisable that the interview be transcribed. A workshop on this topic was also organized. By means of these two workshops, the interview training and the transcription workshop, a possibility was created of applying the acquired knowledge at a scientific level in the field of the conservation of contemporary art.

The authors conclude that professional conservators should be trained in interview and transcription methodology. Taking this a step further, I see the need for collections staff to perform this work if there is no conservator on staff in a museum that collects contemporary art.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS

“The Object in Transition” Conference

I attended a conference January 24-26, 2008 called “The Object in Transition: A Cross Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art” at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. In an article that was published after the conference, Kenneth Baker eloquently describes the conference, which both he and I attended:

Art conservators from around the world, and a lesser number of art historians and artists, convened at this nonpublic event to discuss issues of interpretation, repair and preservation raised by the peculiar forms art has taken in the past half century. The Getty has since put the entire conference online at links.sfgate.com/ZCMZ. (Baker, 2008)

The conference was advertised to focus on the conservation of contemporary art and the collaborative possibilities for conservators and other museum professionals working with this artwork. I found that in actuality, the collaborative possibilities were aimed at conservators, art historians/curators, and artists. The few artists who were present had been invited to serve on panels and talk about specific cases, but I did not notice that many artists attended the overall conference. There was hardly any mention at all of registrars or art handlers.

The artists on panels who work in nontraditional ephemeral media made statements that gave me some insight into their points of view. Artist

Rachel Harrison said that each artist has different intentions for his or her work and those intentions may differ from piece to piece. Artist Paul McCarthy said that over time, an artist could feel differently about their work. For instance, at the time of creation an artist may not want his work to be preserved, but as the artist matures and may gain fame, he might change his mind and come to value its preservation. Still, one of the conservators at the conference stated that most artists do not become aware of maintenance issues until artwork needs repair.

An ethical question was raised: Who is the conservator responsible to: the artist or the museum? One conservator said that he feels responsibility towards the artist first. It became apparent to me at this conference that conservators, for the most part, are sensitive to artists' intentions. But I wondered if museum staff as a whole is attuned to the artist's role after the work has been made and whether staff places value on the artist's role.

The subject of interviews with artists came up and some problems with this method became apparent. Context is important. This was illustrated by the example of an interview with an artist who is asked about a piece he made ten years ago. The artist views the work from a completely different mental space than he did at the original time of its creation. Also, he may not remember the process very well. An art

historian pointed out that the documentation itself of an artist interview may result in being another text to be interpreted, just as art historians interpret artworks.

When trying to get information from the artist about a piece, Jack Cowart, Founding Executive Director of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation said that artists can really only give so many instructions. Indeed, there is no sure way of getting all the necessary information from the artist before problems arise later. There are always limitations in attempting to plan for every possible disaster.

In discussion of a James Turrell piece, conservators presented an artwork they had reinstalled that was nearly impossible to document. (The work of art by Rosana Castrillo Díaz in a case study referred to later in this paper is also very difficult to document because it is nearly invisible in photographs.) The Turrell piece was being re-installed and no one, including the artist, could remember exactly how it had originally appeared. In the end, after several parties adjusted the piece, no one who originally saw the piece as it had looked in its original installation was satisfied with the re-installation.

Lynne Cooke, Curator at the Dia Art Foundation, believes that it is unrealistic to think that anyone is able to plan for all the contingencies because one can never know how an artist will react. But Carol Mancusi-

Ungaro thinks it is best to do a series of interviews to get a good sense of the artist's intention. Glenn Wharton reminded everyone that we all (museum professionals in attendance at conference) have artist interviews and documentation, and he encouraged people to contribute to the INCCA artist archive database to share useful information.

In discussion of a debatably unfinished painting by deceased artist Piet Mondrian, Isbrand¹ Hummelen referred to the process of trying to uncover the mysteries of the artist's intent after the artist's death as "the painting as a black box" and "archeology." The conservation team used Photoshop to reconstruct what the painting may have looked like before the artist added "in process" tools such as tapes and pins. The state of a piece of artwork being finished is also a large question. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro quoted Alexander Calder, "When is a work of art finished? When it's time for dinner." Every day, a piece may seem done, and then the next day the artist starts again. As long as an artist is alive, he or she may feel that he should be able to continue to work on a piece. Often, artists are not ever satisfied with a piece and never call it finished. In other words, artists may feel entitled to go back and work on a piece of art even after it has been sold. But this causes problems for the new owner because it

¹ In my research I found that, depending on the text, this first name is spelled either Ysbrand or Isbrand; however, this is the same person.

challenges the authenticity of the work bought in its purchased state. The value of the piece actually changes.

On the second day of the conference, artist David Novros talked about his involvement in the restoration of one of his paintings in collaboration with conservators. He prefers not to be involved in the process of restoration. But because he feels a responsibility to his work, he participates in the process. In contrast to what many conservators and owners of artwork believe, Novros also thinks that he should be able to work on his own art, whether the pieces are considered finished or not, throughout his life. This poses problems because the original work that was bought then vanishes. There was a discussion of whether artists have the right to continually work on their art. What is in place now? Who makes these decisions within the institution? Conservators? Curators? Directors? Lynne Cook thinks that there should be discussion of this with all the museum professionals involved.

An audience member reminded everyone that the private owner is also a stakeholder and there may be conflicts of interest. Jim Coddington, Agnes Gund Chief Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art, also brought up the fact that the vast majority of contemporary artworks are indeed in private hands. This is a very important issue to note because one can assume that many private owners will eventually give or sell their

work to museums and then the museum will need to take over care. David Novros asked about private owners “What is their responsibility to get work restored? If it’s not worth a lot, why should they do it?” This is a good point; private owners may have their monetary investments in mind, but museums may have other driving factors for conservation treatment, such as exhibitions or loans and a core mission to care for its entire works, regardless of their monetary value.

Tom Learner, Senior Scientist, Getty Conservation Institute, said that it is the artist’s responsibility at the time of creation to leave instructions now on what to do when the art deteriorates later. Although this situation would be ideal, it is unrealistic to expect artists to proactively document and offer this information when they make each piece of art. But if the museum has the foresight to ask these questions at the time of acquisition, it benefits all stakeholders to have the artist’s intent, process, materials, and any instructions on record.

As registrars handle artworks upon acquisition, practice preventative conservation, and document pertinent information about them, they should also be participating in the activity of documenting the artist’s intentions, materials, and process, especially if no conservators are on staff at the museum and the work is unorthodox.

INCCA-NA Database Entry Training Session

At this conference, I attended a training session for INCCA-NA on how to enter artist archive information into the INCCA database. One must become a member in order to do this and the membership fee is to contribute at least five entries per year. It seems natural that conservators and art historians/curators would have material to contribute. Although INCCA claims to be a resource for artists and other museum professionals besides conservators and curators, I came away with questions about how artists, registrars, or art handlers could become members, as they might not be able to contribute as required. However, these people might find the database to be a useful resource. So I investigated further into INNCA-NA by talking with the Acting Executive Director.

Expert Interviews

Glenn Wharton

After “The Object In Transition” conference, I interviewed Glenn Wharton, the acting executive director for INCCA-NA. In speaking with him, I discovered more about this organization, its limitations and goals. The North American chapter of this international organization is in its infancy and just beginning to develop programs and build its database. There are plans to become a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and have a board of trustees, develop fundraising and eventually hire an executive

director staff person, but the organization is not even at that level yet.

They have very large goals for the organization but are still working on building their internal structure.

As mentioned previously, membership to INCCA-NA is not based on monetary dues, but individuals can become members by contributing five entries per year to the artist archive database. When I asked him about this, Wharton said he realizes that not everyone is in a position to do that because not everyone is doing appropriate research, but he told me that there are several other ways that one can become a member. People can join in groups. For instance, all the conservators at one museum can join as one member and collectively contribute five entries per year. Or private conservators can band together as a group, or associate themselves with a local museum.

Regarding database contributions, Wharton said, “It could be just as little as, or as insignificant, seemingly, as how to install it (an artwork)-instructions for putting it up in the gallery.” So art handlers or preparators could join as they are often the museum staff members with this knowledge. He said that conservators are joining up first simply because this organization was started by conservators and those are the people they all know. But they want to reach out to other interested people as well. He says:

Even conservators who feel that they want to help the organization but they're just not in a position to add to the database, they can contribute in other ways, like helping with public events, doing behind-the-scenes work for the organization as it grows. There are other ways to contribute. (G. Wharton, personal communication, February 24, 2008)

This opens up membership to more people, but these opportunities are not necessarily obvious from viewing the INCCA website.

Although artists are not yet very involved with INCCA-NA, Wharton told me about a famous artist, Janine Antoni, who works in nontraditional ephemeral materials and approached him about submitting some documents regarding her works to the database. Apparently, she does not particularly trust museums. When museums acquire her works, she gives them a great deal of documentation on how to recreate an installation work, or how to install a complex sculpture. She said that she is just not sure that the information is always going to be there. It could get lost, or maybe the person that she trained individually might quit and move on to another job. She worries about this institutional knowledge being passed on. This artist thinks that the INCCA-NA artist archive database would be a good place to park her documentation as a type of back up method. So INCCA-NA is in conversation with her about this and they are open to the idea of the artist as a direct link to the artwork.

When I asked Wharton if INCCA-NA is attempting to reach out to other professionals in the museum field, he said that they do have an events coordinator who is putting together public events at conferences. They had a panel discussion on work by Nam June Paik last year at the Museum of Modern Art in connection with the College Arts Association (CAA) conference. They gave the workshop on how to enter information into their artist archive database that I attended at “The Object In Transition” conference. They also hosted the workshop on interview methodology for conservators that I participated in at the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) conference in Denver, Colorado.

I told him that I am want to make a connection between those training workshops and getting registrars/collections managers involved, an idea that he was enthusiastic about. Training workshops for registrars would be well attended at registrar conferences. Wharton and I both agree that the fields of conservation and collections management overlap a great deal and that each field should look into what the other is doing.

Wharton hopes that registrars, collections managers, and others join INCCA all the way up to the board of trustees, the steering committee, and events committees. He wants others to get involved, so that it is not solely a group of conservators. They are working on branching out.

Wharton sees the database as the core activity of INCCA-NA, but he wants to also have public programming be a part of the organization as well. He suggests:

As we grow, there could even be small groups in different cities who do their own activities. Or, just organize our efforts to put on panel discussions like at the CAA conference. I think there's a lot of work that we could do with artists and art schools- training artists in materials and methods where a bank of conservators and others could be tapped to give special lectures, and eventually we could put together materials that could be given out. So there's a huge amount that we can do. (G. Wharton, personal communication, February 24, 2008)

There is real potential to use this organization to get registrars more involved in preventative conservation of contemporary art, particularly with nontraditional ephemeral media. To invite INCCA to offer training workshops at registrar conferences would be an important step in getting registrars involved in the process of documenting living artists' information.

Jill Sterrett

I spoke with Jill Sterrett and got a sense of how SFMOMA approaches collecting and conserving contemporary art, which includes nontraditional ephemeral artwork. It seems that their philosophy is more progressive than some other museums. Although trained as a conservator, Sterrett, as the director of the collections division at SFMOMA, oversees many different areas that all fall under the umbrella of collections. She

manages registrars, conservators, the library, and the database. So the idea of shifting roles they have put in place at SFMOMA is realized as the collections division.

SFMOMA has decided to collect ephemeral art intentionally because of its importance within the framework of art history as it pertains to the present time period. Jill said,

So we bring such works into the collection and we have argued, to the contrary of traditional thinking, that we do so *because* of the issues of ephemerality; that we must make them our highest priority for acquisition, not the other way around. (J. Sterrett, personal communication, February 15, 2008)

SFMOMA appears to be a safe-haven for many works made of nontraditional ephemeral media precisely because of the museum's interest in collecting contemporary art [more that the museum understands that these works cannot be conveniently excluded from the collection], but this driving factor may not be so evident in other institutions that have only a few pieces of contemporary art in their permanent collections. Other museums' attentions may not be focused on the need to think of and care for this type of art in a distinct manner.

Sterrett also thinks of collections stewardship as more than simply preserving material aspects of artwork, it may involve preserving the concept of the work:

And the works are deemed so important; so important that we feel we should try to be the keepers of memory. So we'll do everything we can to preserve the material aspects of those works, but extending beyond that working with our curators, we will also attend to memory if the materials science isn't working with us. (J. Sterrett, personal communication, February 15, 2008)

In the collections division at SFMOMA, for instance, if the concept of a piece is the most important factor and the artist's hand is secondary to the piece, they communicate with the artist and ask if the artwork could be re-created. This is an example of how the memory of the artist's concept is conserved. This method of conservation demonstrates a progressive approach.

We also talked about ways that museums are changing their methodologies to react to current challenges:

We can get locked into one method of management of objects forgetting that we made that method in response to earlier challenges. We may need to recalibrate it to respond to current challenges. (J. Sterrett, personal communication, February 15, 2008)

SFMOMA is approaching care of collections by looking further than just the medium, but at what the work means and what is variable:

But this is one of the ways in which museums are shifting to be able to respond, because we don't think of ourselves as only expert conservators, we think of ourselves as being a collective where this conservation "stuff" happens. That involves regular interconnected collaborations between conservators, but the rings extend to include our installation crew, to include our registrars, to include our curators, very importantly, because everybody has a role in

caring for this object. (J. Sterrett, personal communication, February 15, 2008)

This museum is approaching collections care in a holistic way with many staff members working together with living artists to find the most beneficial ways to conserve contemporary art.

In speaking with Sterrett, I learned that she had received a Fulbright scholarship to lecture on the Conservation of Contemporary Art at the University of Porto in Portugal in 2007. Her colleague, Michelle Barger, was kind enough to give me copy of Sterrett's guide from her teaching experience called *Interview Tips*. Although it is an unpublished document, this guide could be a wonderful resource for anyone who is interested in learning to interview artists in front of a video camera for conservation purposes.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: Untitled (Mud Animal), 1999, Kathryn Spence



Figure 1.

Kathryn Spence

Untitled (Mud Animal), 1999

Stuffed animals, mud, furry bathrobes, wood stool

Collection of the San José Museum of Art

For *Untitled (Mud Animal)*, I interviewed the artist Kathryn Spence and three independent conservators, one of whom regularly works with this museum. This piece is made of stuffed animals, mud mixed with a binder, furry bathrobes and the animal figure sits slumped on a custom

made wooden stool. There are strings that expressively hang down from the animal figure and appear to be delicate.

Artist interview: Kathryn Spence.

When I spoke with the artist Kathryn Spence about her piece *Untitled (Mud Animal)*, I gained some insight on her relationship with the San José Museum of Art. She has had no communication with the museum at all, as her gallery handled the sale of the piece. Also, any staff members who had been at the museum when the piece was acquired have all since left. So there is no relationship between this living artist and the museum that owns her piece. If a conservation issue should arise, the museum would need to build that relationship from the ground up in order to work with the artist to get necessary information needed to pass the piece on to a conservator.

In interviewing Spence, as a small part of my inquiry, I asked her to describe her process of making this piece. This was a valuable learning experience for me about the nuances of interviewing artists with the goal of getting pertinent information to use for both preventative conservation and also future conservation. When I asked her to describe her process, she did not tell me that she uses a binder or glue along with the mud. This information only surfaced later when we were talking about something else and she casually mentioned using glue. As she was the first artist I

interviewed, it is no surprise that this information was nearly overlooked. Museum professionals need training in interview methodology in order to get the best information possible from their subjects.

In talking to Spence about her work, it became evident that her choice of materials is directly related to the concept of the piece. Spence said, “The concepts for the work drive the material choice.” (K. Spence, personal communication, February 29, 2008) Often, artists who work with ephemeral materials intentionally choose those materials because of the ideas behind the work. Although it at first seems more important from an art historical standpoint, this information should not be underestimated in its relation to conservation data. For instance, when the artist is no longer living, conservators can use this information to make informed choices about whether or not to replace certain materials in a damaged piece, or whether they should use only original materials or newer kinds of material.

I asked Spence some hypothetical questions about her materials. What if her piece got damaged and the museum wanted to repair it, but the binder she had originally used with the mud has gone out of production? What would she want them to do? Her reaction was that she would have to experiment with something else, or the museum would just have to use something else instead. But she does try to use materials that will last

longer. For instance, when making a different series of work, she had begun by using rubber bands. But when she realized that the rubber bands break within a couple of years, she switched to a different material that she thinks will last longer. She is aware of some of the conservation issues, but because the concept of her work drives her material choice, this seems to outweigh concerns for the physical long-term survival of the work.

Conservator interview: James Pennuto, Milada Machova, and Sven Atema.

Because the San José Museum of Art does not have a conservation laboratory and no conservators on staff, I asked museum staff to refer me to a freelance conservator who would work with on this piece and the recommendation was James Pennuto. I went to Pennuto's conservation studio to interview him and there were two other freelance conservators working with him that day who agreed to be interviewed as well: Milada Machova and Sven Atema. The four of us had a spirited discussion on how they might hypothetically consult on the Kathryn Spence piece and about roles in museums surrounding collections care. To clarify, none of these conservators have ever treated the Kathryn Spence piece and there is no record, to my knowledge, that any conservators have ever been consulted on this piece since it entered the permanent collection at the San José Museum of Art.

Pennuto is a conservator who has been working in the field for over thirty years and has seen many changes in museums, while Machova and Atema are younger conservators. There were differing opinions on roles in museums and who should be doing what. Pennuto thinks that when a work is accessioned, the registrar should work with a conservator to inspect the work, but Machova says that although that should happen, it rarely does in reality.

Machova sees the importance of the registrar getting the artist involved early on. When talking hypothetically about the Spence piece and how it might be handled, she said:

But also I would say now, if I were in that position (as a registrar taking in new work) I probably would suggest that we should contact the artist and talk to her and make a record of her materials so it's known and it's documented." (M. Machova, personal communication, February 28, 2008)

Machova acknowledges that some pieces may need special considerations in a collection, "But if it is material which is actually a little more unorthodox, then I guess it needs to be a little more paid attention to." (M. Machova, personal communication, February 28, 2008) This is a different stance than what I heard have heard from some registrars who have said that all pieces in their collections are treated with the same standards of care.

When I asked, “What do you feel is the artist’s role/responsibility in working with the museum to preserve his/her art after the museum has acquired it?” Pennuto firmly answered that artists have none. But then he said:

...unless they’re asked, but once the piece leaves the studio... Unless the artist specifically recommends that the work be monitored or whatever... Otherwise, it’s up to the museum and the conservator to maintain the pieces. Sometimes you want to keep the artist *out* of the business. If any of the work goes back to them, they tend to change it, which is a big problem. Because if you had documented the work, and you’ve got catalogues out there in the world, and on the web and other places, and then you give it back to the artist to restore or conserve, you’re liable to get something different. (J. Pennuto, personal communication, February 28, 2008)

Pennuto makes a strong point and museums should be careful about using artists to treat their own work. It is dangerous to risk the artist changing the piece, and that risk should be carefully considered. It seems safer to get information from the artist, but to get a conservator to actually treat the piece. Consulting with an artist on their process, materials, and intent is one matter, but they should probably not treat their own work because they no longer own it. But as seen from “The Object In Transition” conference from the session with artist David Novros discussed previously, this subject is debatable.

I asked them about the registrar’s duty to care for collections and when registrars should instigate conservation. There was a debate about

roles in the museum, which echoes the conversation I had with Jill Sterrett on how roles in museums are shifting. Machova said:

I think that there's a lot of unclear ground or vague ground because there is not (a) set system of when the new work arrives. Actually, it should go into a quarantine room, you know, because it might be infested with insects or something. And the registrar should contact the conservator to come look at the piece and view the condition, if there is any problem. Because I have come across pieces where the registrar- they can see a lot of things, but not necessarily see everything that the conservator can see. So it's always good, when it arrives, to have the conservator examine it. (M. Machova, personal communication, February 28, 2008)

But then, there was a disagreement:

Pennuto: Once the work is in the collection... I don't know if it is the responsibility of the registrar to maintain observance of this work. I think once it's in the collection, then it's the lab, the conservation lab's duty.

Machova: It *never* happens that way!

Pennuto: Well then the curator has to be, or the director...

Machova: Oh no. Not at all. (J. Pennuto and M. Machova, personal communication, February 28, 2008)

A discussion followed on the history of registrars and what their roles were in the past and Pennuto said that conservators used to inspect entire collections regularly. But I think this rarely happens now. In many museums, there are no conservators on staff and so the responsibility of checking conditions of work usually falls to the registrar.

Machova links the problem to lack of funding in museums:

What happens, nowadays, is that museums are not federally funded anymore very much. So what happens is they are understaffed and they actually don't have enough. The conservators are involved in real treatment and it's almost like you're putting down the little fires. You are not having enough time to go and invest unproductive time into going into storage and check on paintings. (M. Machova, personal communication, February 28, 2008)

This discussion digressed a bit from the Spence piece, but the issues are relevant because it emphasizes the fact that having a conservation lab in a museum is rare. So registration departments without conservators on staff need to find creative solutions and systems for monitoring the work in their museum's collections.

Case Study #2: Untitled, 2006, Rosana Castrillo Díaz

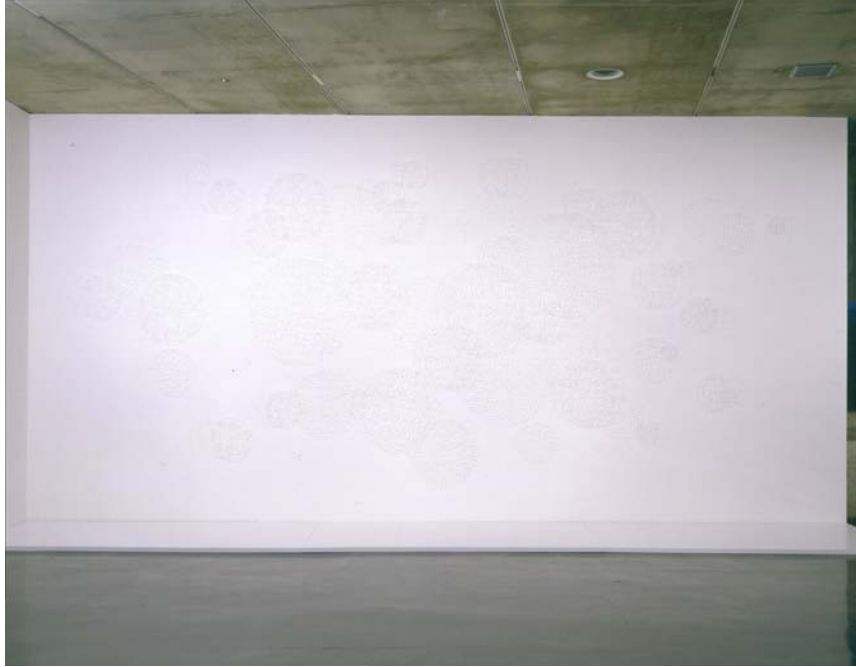


Figure 2.

Rosana Castrillo Díaz

Untitled, 2006

Matte finish transparent tape

Collection of Berkeley Art Museum

Purchase made possible through funds provided by the Herringer Family Foundation

Image courtesy of Anthony Meier Fine Arts

(*Note: The image of this piece is difficult to see in print because of the delicate media. To see a clearer image of a similar piece, refer to Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6.)

For the Rosana Castrillo Díaz piece, I interviewed the artist, the director of registration at Berkeley Art Museum where the piece is in the permanent collection, and a conservator who had some information on this piece who occasionally performs treatments and consultations for this museum as a freelance conservator. However, there is no conservator on

staff at the Berkeley Art Museum. I also had the opportunity to speak with the exhibitions designer who collaborated with the artist on deciding the best way to transport and store the work. This piece was a bit different than the other two artworks I studied because it was commissioned for the Berkeley Art Museum as a response to staff seeing a very similar piece at SFMOMA that was part of its Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA) awards exhibition.

Artist interview: Rosana Castrillo Díaz.

When I asked Castrillo Díaz if, for instance, the specific type of tape she was using were to go out of production and that is the ideal tape that she would want to use, but something ripped and needed to be replaced, does she have plans for updating the media? She replied, “I certainly have not planned for that, maybe because I trust that Scotch tape never goes out of production! But if it did, and if I heard about it, I would certainly have to plan for that.” (R. Castrillo Díaz, personal communication, March 8, 2008) However, she does not see herself making art out of this material for the rest of her life. So at some point, she said, “things go for as long as they go and then they just stay there.” (R. Castrillo Díaz, personal communication, March 8, 2008)

As we talked, it became clear that although tape is the artist’s media, *light* is just as important to the artwork. In fact, the way a person

sees the piece is completely reliant on the way light hits the piece. This kind of information would be really important not only to a conservator, but also to an art installer and of course, a curator.

The artist also shared with me that when she began to make art with Scotch tape, she researched its qualities going so far as to contact the manufacturers of the product, 3M to attempt to discover how it would age over time, whether it would become brittle, liquefy, or have some other type of negative effect. No one could tell her what would happen. But it is notable that at some point, she was interested in knowing the limitations of longevity of the material. Ultimately, it did not matter because she proceeded with the piece using this material without knowing its fate.

Registrar interview: Lisa Calden.

When Lisa Calden and I met, she told me that Berkeley Art Museum has a collection care committee of staff members with a subgroup that deals with the sort of issues that I am addressing. The head of this group is also the head of the digital media department who is interested in these issues because digital media poses very similar challenges. This group is currently working on, essentially, an artist questionnaire, which she believes is an ideal tool to interview the artist when the museum acquires the work. The questionnaire allows them to

anticipate as many issues as possible and receive artist feedback. Then they can have the interview transcribed for their files.

The museum staff had several detailed conversations with Rosana Castrillo Díaz about this piece at the time of commission, although notes from those conversations are not currently in the registrar's files and Calden's recall of the conversations is not exact. Calden said they did acquire the piece with the understanding that it was going to be a difficult piece to own. Therefore, they wanted to involve the artist as much as possible, and asked the artist to inform them about how to best handle the work. (L. Calden, personal communication, February 20, 2008)

This museum is in the process of developing a system to handle nontraditional ephemeral works, but has not quite gotten to the point of using the system yet. There are several reasons for this, such as budget constraints and a lack of resources that sometimes limit staff ability to follow through on projects in a timely manner, despite their best intentions. Still, this museum is taking positive steps toward finding solutions to the challenges posed by the museum's collection of unusual contemporary art by living artists.

I asked Calden what she thinks of the museum's decision to acquire the Castrillo Díaz piece and she said that they asked themselves:

Are we willing to spend this much money on the work even if it may not exist in ten years?' And the answer was 'yes.' So my feeling is, as long as those issues are really fully explored up front and people are comfortable with it... it makes it easier to proceed. (L. Calden, personal communication, February 20, 2008)

Berkeley Art Museum is taking the time to explore what it means to own this nontraditional ephemeral piece and they are aware of the limitations and special considerations. Calden also understands that artists may not always be available to help the museum over time, so getting as much information from them as possible up front, and anticipating as many questions as possible is very important.

However, the museum has not yet fully documented this particular artist's intentions, although Calden maintains that they intend to follow through on this. Calden remembers that a decision was made to only display the piece for six months at a time, but the artist had told me that she had asked the museum to only show the piece for three months at a time. (L. Calden, personal communication, February 20, 2008)

Documentation would be ideal to clarify issues of this kind, not only for individual museum files, but also for inclusion in the INCCA artist archive database.

Exhibitions Designer interview: Barney Bailey.

I briefly spoke with Berkeley Art Museum's Exhibitions Designer Barney Bailey about the Castrillo Díaz piece. Calden suggested that I talk

with him since he worked with the artist during the time the piece was being made and she thought that he might have some memories of how the piece was handled and be able to provide information that may not have been included in the files.

Bailey, along with others from Berkeley Art Museum, met at the artist's studio as the piece was in progress and made suggestions for transport and storage. He said that the artist made the piece for Berkeley Art Museum in separate sections and that his understanding is that the piece made for SFMOMA previously had been created in pieces and assembled on site, making it impossible to transport as one unit if at all.

They developed the idea of transporting and storing the sections in archival boxes that resemble large pizza boxes lined with silicone release paper, which is an archival material least likely to stick to the tape. Some adhesives sometimes do stick to silicone release paper but it is the best option in this case. These boxes would be transported and stored horizontally so that the tape loops would not sag. However, there were a few larger sections that could only be transported by tilting them up horizontally in order to fit through the artist's studio door. So they decided to lay the larger pieces on a piece of archival corrugated cardboard, use fine pins to secure the sections to the cardboard, and place the whole unit, tape section pinned to cardboard, in a larger box. This method allows the

person transporting the work to tip the piece on edge to fit through a doorway. Explanation of this procedure would be a perfect contribution to the INCCA database.

He said that institutions have to find out what the parameters are and where they have flexibility. He believes that museums need to get an understanding of artist intent but it has not happened with a lot of new works in many institutions, as the acquisition process does not always present the opportunity to interview the artist. Often the artist does not think to, or realize the need to offer an extended explanation. (B. Bailey, personal communication, March 13, 2008)

Apparently, at BAM, some of these issues come up at initial meetings, but he thinks that there is a standard questionnaire Berkeley Art Museum gives to artists. I told him that from my meeting with the registrar, I don't think there are yet consistent practices. He replied that actually, interviews would be more ideal, so you can hear the artist's voice. He said, "We try to figure it out as we go. You take anything you can get your grasp on towards understanding and documenting the artist intent." (B. Bailey, personal communication, March 13, 2008)

Conservator interview: Michelle Barger.

Although Michelle Barger, who is the objects conservator at SFMOMA, has never treated this piece for the Berkeley Art Museum, she

did refer to SFMOMA files from her colleague, paper conservator Amanda Hunter Johnson, who was not available to speak with me at the time of my research. Hunter Johnson worked with the artist on a very similar piece that was made prior to the Berkeley Art Museum commission and shown at SFMOMA. Barger consulted Hunter Johnson's files from the SFMOMA installation and sent me some notes on the installation of the SFMOMA piece, which is called *Untitled*, and made in 2005. The images in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the SFMOMA piece from their conservation files and show details of this similar work by the artist, making the artwork and process clearer. From Hunter Johnson's notes:

Rosana made many small panels of tape loops at her studio and designed a grid for placement. The work was installed beginning in the center and moving outwards. The tape loops rested on rods secured in the wall. (Hunter Johnson, 2005)

Hunter Johnson's installation notes are detailed and would undoubtedly be helpful for any museum professional seeking to install either this piece or the Berkeley Art Museum work. This kind of information would also be ideal to add to a database such as INCCA's artist archive database.

Barger gave her professional opinion about the Berkeley Art Museum's decision to acquire the work, the involvement the artist should

have with this piece, and different ways the museum could work with the artist to accomplish this:

This work, which is clearly an installation piece, and an installation work has to be created... I didn't know you could collect it! They have to be very committed to being part of the installation next time it's installed. And if I were (staff at) Berkeley (Art Museum), and this had to be installed again, I would really want them (the artist) to be part of that role because tape fails. It's not designed to last a long time. And so the adhesives are going to fail.

In this case, because (of its characteristics as) an installation space piece... I would want them (the artist) to be committed to at *least* one more installation and ideally through the lifetime of the work, whether they're physically living in the area or not. You can get at that in different ways- by installing it and taking good photographs of it and sending them to her. "Is this good? Does this represent what you are thinking?" You know, if you reinstall it enough times, and understand the different variables, if that is part of the piece, you can get a better sense of where the limitations are in the variabilities of this work. (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008)

Barger talked about her recommendations for planning for the piece's future:

I think preserving and protecting this piece is not about the current materials, it's about developing a preservation plan, because you know the current materials aren't going to last. In traditional conservation, if you're trying to pump life into the old materials, you're Band-Aiding something that's not going to get at what she's looking for. It's not the preciousness of the tape; it's her idea, I think. So how do you get at developing a preservation plan that involves the artist in making this work, if you are indeed making this a permanent piece? It's not about the permanency of the materials; it's about the permanency of how to remake it. That's what I think about it. But the artist might say, "Oh no. It's the actual original piece. It's about the actual original tape." I doubt

she would. (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008)

This recommendation, again, stresses the importance of interviewing an artist about his or her intentions for the piece at the earliest possible date.

*Conservation images of Untitled, 2005, Castrillo Díaz installation at
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*



Figure 3.
*Untitled, 2005, Rosana Castrillo Díaz, detail of
acrylic dowel*



Figure 4.
*Untitled, 2005, Rosana Castrillo Díaz, tape loops
on artist's hand (process)*



Figure 5.
*Untitled, 2005, Rosana Castrillo Díaz, detail of
acrylic dowels installed*



Figure 6.
*Untitled, 2005, Rosana Castrillo Díaz, tape piece
deinstall detaching the poly 4*

Images Courtesy of Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio,
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Case Study #3: Untitled, 1997, Carlos Mollura



Figure 7.
Carlos Mollura
Untitled, 1997
polyurethane and polyethylene
dimensions variable
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
New Forum Fund purchase
© Carlos Mollura

For the Carlos Mollura piece, I interviewed the artist, the senior preparator in the registration department at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art where the piece is in the permanent collection, and the objects conservator on staff at SFMOMA.

Artist interview: Carlos Mollura.

Mollura and I talked about the ideas behind the piece and his choice of materials, and he told me, “It’s structural, it’s inflatable, it deals with light and space, California art. It’s fairly architectural. It’s all about space and non-space and created big space.” (C. Mollura, personal communication, March 5, 2008)

When I asked him about his goals for the museum in collecting, presenting, and preserving his piece, he said that he was satisfied with his experience at SFMOMA because museum staff asked a lot of questions and wrote down the answers. All he could ask for is that the museum asks questions. I also asked him, because of the nature of this particular piece and the fact that it was constructed in a factory, if he would consider simply giving the “blueprints” for the piece so that others would be able to re-make it. He agreed and said, “The last thing that I want to do is for that thing to die, somehow.” (C. Mollura, personal communication, March 5, 2008) This indicates that the design and idea for the piece is central to its existence. Who physically builds the piece is irrelevant; it is the artist’s concept that makes the piece his own.

At the same time, when I asked him what decisions he would make if the plastics he used were to go out of production and something needed

to be replaced, his reaction was cavalier because of his expertise with the material stemming from his occupation working for a plastics company:

I work with these materials all the time. I have a shop, and we do a lot of commercial work and all kinds of different work for different industries. So I'm in contact with these materials everyday. So I'm pretty up to date on the materials and what's available. I mean, I could replicate that piece fairly easily, or fix it, or replace any parts. (C. Mollura, personal communication, March 5, 2008)

He seemed confident that he could handle any challenge that came his way in terms of the materials because he is so proficient with them. However, in hindsight, I do not think he understood exactly what I was asking and I should have made that more clear. I meant to imply in my question, when he is no longer living, how would he want the museum to proceed if the materials could only be replaced with newer materials? The act of asking questions like this is very delicate and with more training and experience in interview methodology, I am sure I could more effectively and diplomatically make this clearer. Would he want the museum to use alternate materials? Or would he prefer the piece to remain with the original materials and simply fade away? However, he did say this of the materials he chose to make the piece:

...that's what gives it its special qualities that are intrinsic only to that piece, which made itself, which allowed it to be as successful as it is... It's just intrinsic to the piece. You know, you can't change it. I mean, if I make that thing out of another clear plastic, you know, acrylic it's not the same. (C. Mollura, personal communication, March 5, 2008)

We talked about his decisions to make his art out of plastics, which have been famously problematic in art conservation for quite some time. In fact, in 2005, there was a symposium completely dedicated to the subject of plastic conservation called “Theory and Practice: Perspectives on Polyester, Polyurethane and Polyethylene” at the 5th symposium on conservation of synthetic materials held at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany (Kessler, 2005). Mollura compared the use of traditional media in art to choosing nontraditional media:

Nontraditional work, I mean, that comes with the territory, right? That’s what makes it interesting. I mean, that’s why they tell you to paint in the first place. Because, good or bad, it’s going to last a long time and you don’t have to worry about that, right? And traditional sculptural materials, say clay, steel, wood, same thing. But it’s only when you want to get weird, and try for things that aren’t as traditional, and then you’re dealing in uncharted territory. And you know, we don’t have thousands of years of history to back up steel or wood as being good materials for long-lasting sculptures. So people use other things for different reasons. We take our chances but still end up with great new art. (C. Mollura, personal communication, March 5, 2008)

The artist could not have made this piece by choosing traditional materials because it would have been an entirely different piece. His choice in materials is part of what makes it an interesting piece worthy of a museum’s collection.

Preparator/ Registrar Interview: Doug Kerr.

Doug Kerr is the Senior Museum Preparator at SFMOMA, but his position is in the Registration department, which is part of the larger Collections department. His role grew from his part in permanent collection installation and is fairly unique because he is a preparator in the Registration department, but he handles many of the storage questions. He manages locations storage on-site. Since Kerr has been employed at the museum for almost twenty years and has come in contact with most of the artwork in the permanent collection, he may very well have the most institutional knowledge, in a physical sense, of the permanent collection. So, in lieu of a registrar that would have attended to this piece, I decided to interview Kerr.

When we talked about the Mollura piece, Kerr suggested that if the piece were to become damaged in the future, that it could possibly be remade. The heart of the art piece is the concept rather than the physical object. Although the following does not necessarily apply to the Mollura piece, Kerr explained how this has been addressed with other conceptual art pieces, “The art exists on a piece of paper that we call a certificate of authenticity, meaning that it’s an artist’s statement saying that this is how it should be made and installed.” (D. Kerr, personal communication, March 13, 2008) His opinion was that the Mollura piece, because it is so

much about the concept, could be re-created in the future “if we were to record artist’s intent, dimensions, things like that.” (D. Kerr, personal communication, March 13, 2008)

One major task that Kerr performs that registrars might be responsible for in other museums is packing and storing the work. I asked him about the process for this at SFMOMA. When Kerr approaches a piece and he is unsure what materials to use for packing, he meets with Michelle Barger, the objects conservator. He remembers that he consulted with Barger on the Mollura piece:

... because what’s different about this piece is that it’s inflatable. In other words, the shape of it installed is radically different than how we store it. And I would imagine that ideally Michelle (Barger) would rather have it partially inflated. But we just can’t do that. (D. Kerr, personal communication, March 13, 2008)

He told me that the reason it cannot be stored inflated is because the amount of storage it would require would be prohibitive, and also the air would inevitably leak, necessitating the use of staff time to constantly monitor and re-inflate it regularly. For this piece, they chose to store it deflated, folded, and wrapped in poly (polyethylene sheeting) in boxes with enough room in the boxes for the piece to not be crushed.

When I asked him whether he keeps in contact with the artist, he told me that conservators do this. He said “when a piece comes in the collection, and it raises flags for us for the future, we do an artist

questionnaire.” (D. Kerr, personal communication, March 13, 2008) A committee is formed consisting of a conservator who usually leads the team, often Kerr, and others on staff. They talk about the work and decide what questions they want to ask the artist. The team consists of different staff members depending on the type of artwork.

We talked about the conservator’s role in museums and he said, “...the conservator, in most institutions, is kind of the lead role in almost everything, because ultimately, they get to decide what’s best for the art, the care.” (D. Kerr, personal communication, March 13, 2008) While this may be true in a museum with a conservation lab, in other institutions, the collections manager is responsible for monitoring the condition of the collection.

Conservator interview: Michelle Barger.

I spoke with Barger about the role of the museum when it acquires works of art and she had this to say:

If you start with that work of art as your starting point, and the artist is alive, it’s so important for the institution to start their relationship with the artist, for these exact reasons that we’re talking about, especially when they’re ephemeral... you want to really figure out what it means to collect this piece. And we typically pull together people, at the point of accession- conservators, curator, registrar, installation, media- if it has electronic work in it, intellectual property. And we ask these questions- What does it mean to own and care for this work? What will it mean? Can it be lent? Is it site-specific, so it can’t be? All of these questions that are typically best answered by the artist. And

so that's the beginning of your commitment to the piece. It's really getting "buy in" from the artist too to understand why you're asking these questions, and why it's important; how that we're wanting to care for this piece over time and that they won't always be alive, nor will we, and so much of it's the documentation and building that history. (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008)

Everyone I spoke with regarding the Mollura piece wanted to see it on display more often, but Barger had her own motives for exhibiting the piece more:

I'd like to see it shown a little more so we understand (it). I don't know what's going on in storage. I don't know if the plastics are fusing together or if some plasticizer is exuding out of it. I don't know. So I would love to see it shown more to be able to revisit those things and then give me the chance to make it a priority for me because it's on my workload. Then I could ask some of the questions of Carlos. And what I would like to have seen done is asking some of those questions of Carlos. I don't think any of us were quite there yet (at the time of acquisition). (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008)

SFMOMA has not always had such a sophisticated approach in asking questions to the artist at the time of acquisition in thinking of the long-term preservation. I asked Barger if she would have handled this case differently if she were to revisit it now and she said that she would have asked him "If the plastic starts to fail, can it be remade? And if so, would it have to be while you were alive?" (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008) She also said,

It's hard to ask artists these questions... You saw at the ["The Object In Transition"] conference, no one wanted to say "When

you're dead..." I was like "You're not going to be around forever." And it's hard to ask those things, but you try and get at them or let them try and realize what you're asking. 'When none of us are here anymore, and the plastic runs its course, how do you feel about it being remade?'" (M. Barger, personal communication, February 29, 2008)

I did try to ask Mollura this question and it was indeed awkward, but important to ask (see interview with artist above).

Barger repeatedly stressed to me the necessity of interviewing artists in order to practice conservation. It is central to what conservators do when they care for nontraditional ephemeral artwork made by artists who are still alive. Sometimes, however, artists might give vague answers. For example, Barger shared that when she asked Mollura about the specific plastics he used to make his piece, his reaction was very casual. He seemed to indicate there was no cause for concern because he works with these materials so much. He believes they are going to last for a long time and said that they will be fine. It was a very similar reaction to the one I received in my more recent interview.

In my case studies, I investigated the artists' points of view and what they believe their role is with the museum in conservation of their work. All of the artists expressed willingness to assist the museums that collect their work to find methods to preserve the work. Possibly because

these particular artists happen to be in the earlier stages of their careers, they all seemed somewhat unconcerned about not always being available to go back and assist the museum. It did not seem to occur to them that the museums are invested in the work for the long-term and that the artists will not always be around to give the museum information about the work that could be essential to its preservation. But the artist's role is to make the work, not necessarily to maintain it, or to even help the museum maintain it. If the museum wants to collaborate with an artist on this, they should initiate the relationship with the artist as soon as possible upon acquiring the work.

The museum professionals I interviewed had different views about the preservation of the artwork. At some museums, when the condition of a piece calls for repair, the museum looks to the artist to fix the piece before consulting a conservator. The independent conservators I spoke with expressed caution in asking an artist to repair his or her own work, but they value consultation with the artist when they treat the work and even collaborate with the artist. At Berkeley Art Museum, they are very aware of the issues that nontraditional ephemeral works pose and are in the process of developing an artist questionnaire to assist them in gathering information that will help them take care of the work. However, until this process is developed and put into practice, information is

slipping from memory and institutional knowledge of this work could be lost as staff members move on. At SFMOMA, undoubtedly because they work with mostly contemporary art, and because they have professional conservators on staff, they have had the time and experience to develop efficient and effective systems to tackle these issues. Staff members are aware that certain works need to be addressed more carefully than others. They take the time to fully explore considerations with these artists. I suspect that the awareness of special issues surrounding artwork made of nontraditional ephemeral materials is also linked with the amount of this type of artwork each institution holds in its collection.

I saw differences in the relationships museums have with the artwork according to whether or not they had conservators on staff. Two of the three museums do not have conservators on staff and consultations with outside conservators are an expensive proposition. But in the one museum where conservators are part of the staff, consultations at the stage of accession are much more accessible and feasible. The presence or absence of in-house conservators in the museum affects the collections managers' awareness and practices regarding conservation of work made with nontraditional ephemeral materials. How can collections managers become more involved in current issues of preventative conservation when they are not in constant communication with conservators?

All staff members at museums are overwhelmed with responsibility. This is especially true at smaller institutions where staff members are often forced to take care of multiple duties that several people would handle at a larger museum. How can registrars approach interviewing artists who make nontraditional ephemeral work when they already have more duties than they have the resources to handle?

Interview Methods for Conservators training workshop at American Institute for Conservation conference

I attended a training workshop called “Interview Methodology for Conservators” at the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado on April 21, 2008. International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, North America (INCCA-NA) hosted this workshop and several leading experts in the field of conservation presented.

At the workshop, I not only learned techniques for how to interview artists, but I was given a binder full of texts and a suggested reading list. The binder is divided into three sections: “Defining Your Project”, “Mechanics of the Interview”, and “Notable Projects.” Many of the texts I refer to in my literature review were included in the binder, but I learned that there is also a great deal of literature outside the field of

conservation that relates to this topic. For instance, the field of oral history is very relevant to this topic.

Richard Cándida Smith, Professor of History at University of California, Berkeley is also Director of the Regional Oral History Project. He was one of the presenters at this workshop and led participants in exercises about interviewing for facts, exploration and investigation. He also gave many useful tips and guidelines about how to best conduct interviews with artists. Through this workshop I discovered that Cándida Smith has been working with SFMOMA to help train staff in artist interview methodology.

Jill Sterrett presented the artist interview program at SFMOMA, its history, and showed two different types of videotaped interviews. One interview was formal and suitable for public view either at a museum or on a museum website. The other interview was less edited and appeared to be more valuable for use in conservation efforts. I learned how these interviews could be used in a variety of applications in an institution. Interviews are valuable for conservation, but can also be used in education, programming, and marketing.

There was an interesting discussion at the workshop about a subject's (interviewee) memory and how often he or she subconsciously tells "scripted stories". That is to say that people often learn to talk about

things in a certain way and develop a “script” that they pull from memory and it becomes a standard answer or story that does not change. We have all heard someone tell the same story over and over. But often that story is not necessarily based in truth but has been constructed. Cándida Smith gave different tips on how to get past these “scripted” responses as an interviewer and help the subject reach his or her true memories. His expertise on the subject of interviewing was invaluable for this workshop.

Dr. Joyce Hill Stoner, Director of the Preservation Studies Doctoral Program, University of Delaware Professor and Paintings Conservator, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation spoke to the group. She gave a presentation on interviewing not only artists, but also interviewing conservators, and she compared the two processes. She founded the oral history project for the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC), which focuses on conservators interviewing conservators.

She spoke extensively about her ongoing interviews with the artists Andrew and Jamie Wyeth spanning several years. She not only interviews the artists, but also their family members, studio assistants, and any other people close to them. It was fascinating to listen to her talk about the ongoing relationship she has had with this family of artists, and lessons she has learned about interviewing artists.

Glenn Wharton discussed some of his past interview-based projects in Hawaii and his involvement with communities surrounding conservation of two public sculptures that are also sacred cultural artifacts. He talked about the conflict between an artist's original intent versus a culture and community sculpture. This presentation really emphasized how complicated research surrounding conservation can become.

Wharton also talked about his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where he works with media-based art conservation. His team meets every two weeks to discuss acquiring work and sends out an artist questionnaire first. Then he looks through all the files and does research to investigate whether the work warrants conducting an interview. It is important to note that not all contemporary artwork necessitates interviewing an artist. There are many factors involved which one should evaluate carefully before spending time and resources on interviewing artists.

There was a discussion involving both the panelists and attendees surrounding legal issues. We discussed release forms and whether or not verbal consent is acceptable as a substitute. People talked about informed consent and Cándida Smith spoke on the way this issue is handled in oral history projects. He referred to a 1976 copyright law that says all people in an interview have ownership and so permission must be obtained from all

parties in order to use the documentation of the interview. He spoke of human subject protection rights, and legislation stating that any institution accepting federal funding must abide by this law, or else funding can be ceased. In the end there was no definitive answer to these questions, and legal matters surrounding interviews, documentation, and dissemination of that information proves to be quite complicated, warranting further investigation into legal protocol.

Another topic of interest and debate was whether or not to involve students in the interview process. Some panelists argued that the relationship between individual interviewer and the sole artist is a long lasting and trust-based relationship and those students, because of their transitory nature, might interrupt this relationship. But then others argued that students are able to spend more time preparing for interviews and that the experience is invaluable as a training tool. They also have the opportunity afterwards to analyze successes and failures of the interview. This discussion continued on in-depth but is too long to include here.

Jill Sterrett made an important point at the end of the workshop. The interview is just one part of a process. First interviewers should perform preliminary research, then conduct the interview, and next should evaluate the information. In my opinion, the last step should be disseminating that information to a wider group of professionals who can

use this information. This is where the INCCA artist archive could prove to be very useful on a broader scale.

In conclusion, I seek to discover a practical solution to this dilemma of how registrars and collections managers at museums without conservators on staff can approach interviewing artists who make nontraditional ephemeral work. The workshop on interview methodology for conservators was very informative and I believe that collections managers, registrars, and others in the museum field could learn practical techniques for interviewing artists by attending similar workshops. Because I see the importance of collections managers conducting artist interviews for the long term care of this work, I also see a need to find a realistic method for them to execute this work economically, and effectively.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When dealing with contemporary artwork made with nontraditional ephemeral materials created by living artists, some museums are lacking in communication, training, and preservation planning. Much like digital artwork, museums should approach the care of this artwork differently than traditional artwork. Collections managers should collaborate with other museum professionals to prepare for and conduct artist interviews.

Conclusions

1. If artists are alive and available to be interviewed, museums should approach collections care of their works differently than if the artist is deceased.

When the artist is living and available to communicate, museums should take advantage of the situation by capturing and documenting the artist's intent, process, and media. As soon as possible when the museum decides to accession the work, this information needs to be captured as part of a responsible preservation plan. It is important to acknowledge an artist's mortality and get the most information possible to anticipate conservation needs for the future. It is crucial to conduct artist interviews at the point of accession and sustain an ongoing relationship between artist and museum. The fact that an artist is alive and available is an important factor to consider when acquiring a piece of artwork.

2. Artists often create contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral materials to exist temporarily; in keeping it, museums change the art into permanent artwork.

Much of contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials was intended by the artist to be temporary. Some of this work was made specifically for a temporary exhibition, some of it was made to be site-specific and shown for a limited amount of time, and much of this artwork is installation art meant to exist in a specific place with controlled surroundings. Often, museums decide to keep this kind of artwork permanently. When the work was originally created with the intention of being temporary art, and a museum chooses to keep it as a permanent object, there will inevitably be challenges in terms of long-term conservation. Museums that acquire this type of work must take special considerations when planning for its care.

There are many other reasons artists make art with nontraditional ephemeral materials. Some artists simply like to use certain materials for their visual qualities, while others choose the material specifically to convey a concept. It is difficult to know the artist's intent without doing research.

3. Museum professionals should consider artists' points of view about the conservation of their work.

Most artists are more focused on making art than planning for its preservation unless it is brought to their attention. While some museum professionals see this as a lack of awareness of the issue on the part of the artist, the artist's responsibility is to make the art, not to keep it. Keeping and caring for art is the museum professional's responsibility.

Some artists are generally willing to assist museums when asked, but this willingness should not be taken for granted. If the artist chooses to help the museum, this should be considered a gift (unless the museum has the artist sign a contract, of course). Again, the museum should always keep artist mortality and availability in mind and not make assumptions that the artist can or will assist in the future.

Many artists do not intend for their artwork to survive long-term. In fact, an artist may have intentionally made the work in such a way that it will decay rapidly. This information is crucial for museums to capture before decisions are made to accession the work. This information is important not only in an art historical context, but in terms of collections care.

4. Communication between the museum and the living artist is essential for conservation.

Often, the artist is expected to help out the museum only when there is a problem with the artwork. But what insurance is the museum giving the artist that they will take care of this piece if they don't gather as much information as they can from the artist on the work at the time of acquisition? The relationship between museums and artists needs to be developed further and this could be accomplished by museums starting the relationship sooner- at the time of acquisition of the work by conducting interviews.

It is advantageous to the museum for its staff to initiate and sustain continual communication with the artist. Maintenance of a good relationship between the museum and the living artist is integral to the long-term conservation of the artwork. The museum needs to build the relationship to keep enough information about the work to effectively care for it. The artist is also more likely to assist later if there is already an established relationship with the museum.

5. As art changes, conservation techniques and philosophies evolve; therefore, the field of collections management must also evolve.

For traditional artwork, conservation focuses on materiality. But as there are shifts in art making, there are shifts in approaches to art conservation. Contemporary art conservation aims to mediate change, not

necessarily intercept change. This shift affects not only art conservators, but also collections managers. Professionals need to acknowledge the shift in collections management as well and account for this in practice.

Collections managers' and conservators' roles are overlapping more now than ever before. Professional conservators are often not employed by small and midsized museums, and independent conservators might only be consulted by museums when absolutely necessary. Therefore, collections managers should be more aware of contemporary issues in conservation in order to fill in some of those gaps. Institutional structures and methodology from the past no longer apply to contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral media. Roles are shifting in museums and there is often confusion about who assumes what responsibilities. Collections managers are often responsible for duties a conservator might perform otherwise. Whenever possible, professionals should collaborate and consult each other when making decisions about caring for this special artwork.

6. Developing a standardized approach to creating a universal artist questionnaire or form is difficult.

When I began this project, my initial goal was to create a standardized guide for collections managers to refer to as they create questionnaires or forms to gather information from artists. There are

indeed some resources that exist which attempt to serve as guides and are somewhat useful. From my research, I found that each case should be handled individually to a certain extent. The diverse nature of the work in concept, execution, and media and the variation in artist intent make the standardization of a questionnaire or form difficult and impractical.

Museum professionals must consider artwork made with nontraditional ephemeral media individually, ask themselves important questions about what it means to own the work, and research existing documentation about the work. Finally, they should interview the artist asking questions specific to the work and its long-term preservation in the museum.

Some documentation of artist intent does already exist and should be utilized. Museum staff should conduct research to find out if there is any existing documentation of artist interviews, intent, process, or methodology. If there is, they should add this information to their museum's documentation of the work. However, part of the problem with this approach is that it is not necessarily simple to find and access this information. INCCA and other organizations offer some resources, but completely open access is not possible at this moment for various reasons described previously.

7. Collections managers need access to prior documentation of artist intent, within legal and copyright constraints.

INCCA provides the online artist archive database, but many collections managers seem to be unaware of this resource. While it is not ideal to all collections managers' needs because it cannot provide instant access to documentation, this resource could help registrars plan for ongoing care of this type of art. Until collections managers become aware of the available resources, they will not use them. INCCA and other organizations offering archives of contemporary art information should reach out to the collections management community.

8. Collections managers lack training in how to communicate with artists.

Collections managers should be trained in artist interview methodology, even in institutions where there are few works of contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral materials by living artists. From my research it is evident that there is a lack of interview training, but this training is necessary in order to conduct effective interviews to produce relevant information for long-term conservation.

Communication between collections managers and artists varies from museum to museum. But when there is no conservator on staff, it is especially important for collections managers to communicate with artists and keep ongoing documentation of that communication as it relates to

conservation.

9. There is a lack of specialized preservation planning.

Collections managers often do not have specific preservation plans for individual pieces of artwork. When there is no conservator on staff, conservation is sometimes considered as a “fix it only if it’s broken” approach. But preventative conservation of contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral materials should include a preservation plan specifically because it has different needs than traditional artwork.

If preservation plans do exist, there is a need to regularly set those plans into action. Documentation of artist intent, process, and materials should be part of a preservation plan and implemented as early as possible and continually. Often museums intend to conduct artist interviews or questionnaires, but this practice does not always happen consistently.

10. Collections managers need simple, economical, effective resources to approach the care of contemporary artwork made of nontraditional ephemeral media made by living artists.

Museum collections managers are often overwhelmed with responsibility; therefore, they need a simplified approach to researching contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials. If a museum has only a few pieces of this type in its collection, a collections manager might not realize that this work needs extra care. The collections manager may decide not to spend additional time and resources on

individual pieces. But if they have received the interview training and have a set of steps to follow to create a preservation plan and document artist input, the extra effort would be feasible.

Recommendations

1. Organize workshops at museum conferences involving INCCA-NA:

International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art North America can disseminate information about their artist archive database and encourage more museum professionals to actively participate and contribute to the archive. INCCA can train registrars and other museum professionals in artist interview methodology. I recommend museum professionals organize sessions at museum conferences such as the American Association of Museums Annual Meetings, the California Association of Museums conferences, or the Western Museums Association annual meeting. Many professionals go to museum conferences for continuing education on practical matters to take back to their museums. Involving INCCA-NA with the wider museum community would help to increase awareness of this issue.

2. Think globally; act locally.

Another idea is to invite INCCA-NA to train people at large conferences to teach interview methodology locally to more museum professionals and perhaps offering a certificate of training. There could be

a trickle-down effect of training from larger to smaller institutions, and bigger cities to smaller towns. Larger museums with more contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials in their collections that have conservators on staff could offer training to smaller museums without conservators who have fewer pieces of art of this type in their collections. In effect, INCCA-NA could create specialists to disseminate information to professionals taking care of more general collections.

3. More cross training needs to happen between collections managers and conservators, especially when dealing with nontraditional ephemeral media.

More preventative conservation training in regards to contemporary art should be offered in collections management academic programs and museum conferences. Conservators also should be trained in collections management practices. There should be more collaboration and communication between the two fields.

Caring for contemporary art made with unusual media poses unique challenges, but some registrars are unfamiliar with the conservation issues and lack knowledge necessary to confront those challenges. This confirms the need for registrars to be better trained in contemporary issues in conservation.

When I attended “The Object In Transition” conference, I had assumed that the discussions on conservation might be intimidating for

someone with training in collections management but with limited training in conservation. However, I followed all the sessions without any difficulty. I also easily followed the “Interview Methodology for Conservators” workshop at the AIC conference and found it to be extremely informative and useful. Registrars and other museum professionals should be more involved with conferences and workshops like this. I would recommend that conservators reach out more to registrars and other museum professionals regarding conferences like this, and vice versa.

4. Educate artists on the role of museums and how to work with them.

Many artists, particularly emerging artists, are often unprepared to work with museums. Art schools could offer more instruction about working with museums. Museums could offer training sessions for artists to acquaint them with their museum practices and philosophies. If the museum establishes a relationship with the artist when a work is acquired, an information exchange can happen. Museum professionals could work up some guidelines to give to artists about their practices and philosophies and at the same time welcome artists into the museum.

5. Educate museum staff on the role of artists and how to work with them.

Museum staff members are often so removed from thinking about the origin of artworks that they forget about the points of view of the

people who created them. Museum staff members often make assumptions about the intent or abilities of an artist without ever actually consulting the artist. Training sessions could be held periodically to reacquaint museum staff with the role of artists and refresh staff on how to work with artists. Gaining artist insight can aid staff in finding the best ways to care for the art.

6. Before acquiring this artwork, museums must account for staff responsibilities to care for it.

Art museum workers, especially those in charge of collections stewardship, are already overwhelmed with responsibilities to care for collections. Those who make acquisitions decisions in institutions that collect contemporary art must be educated about the extra time and resources caring for this type of work requires. When acquiring this work, museums must ensure they have adequate resources available to care for the work. Outside funding may be available for interview projects or museums might seek to collaborate with universities or other organizations involved in oral history projects.

7. Most of all, interview artists.

Museums with contemporary art made of nontraditional ephemeral materials by living artists should interview artists at the point of accession in order to capture intent, process, and materials. Video interviews of

artists with the artwork are ideal, and should include interviewers from several disciplines within the museum asking questions. Questionnaires should be developed individually for each artwork, at the very least for each artist. If there is no conservator on staff at the museum, the collections manager should lead this effort. If the collections managers do not take the initiative in performing artist interviews in these institutions, in many cases, no one else will do this valuable work for the benefit of the future of these wonderful pieces of art.

CHAPTER 7: PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

I will present this topic at a session, “Up and Coming: New Research in Collections Management” at California Association of Museums conference February 25-27, 2009 in San Francisco, California. This session shows what recent Museum Studies Masters graduates focusing on collection management issues have uncovered in their thesis research projects.

Also, the following letter was sent to the editor of *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, a collections management publication that provides information on handling, preserving, researching, and organizing collections. I have proposed to publish an article based on this thesis paper to instigate further discussions within the collections management field about interviewing artists and about the special needs of contemporary art made with nontraditional ephemeral materials.

CHAPTER 8: PRODUCT

Jennifer Levy
cosmodandy@yahoo.com

Pamela White Trimpe
pamela-trimpe@uiowa.edu

Dear Ms. White Trimpe,

Currently I am a graduate student at John F. Kennedy University in Berkeley, California working towards my Master of Arts degree in Museum Studies. Recently, my thesis advisor, Marjorie Schwarzer, informed me of *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*. After reviewing past issues of the journal, I feel that my Masters project is relevant to the field of museum collections management and would fit in well in your publication.

For my Masters project, I investigated how museums holding contemporary art in the United States can more effectively communicate with artists in order to conserve artwork made from alternative media and accessioned into museums' permanent collections. This type of art is made from non-traditional materials that conservators are not typically trained to care for.

Artists and all museum staff should be educated about this type of art and its unique conservation needs. To investigate this topic, I reviewed literature, conducted case studies, attended a conference on contemporary art conservation, and participated in a training workshop on interview methodology for conservators. My Masters project focuses on conducting and documenting artist interviews at the time of accession. Interviews can capture information valuable for conservation such as artist intent, process, and materials used.

In the field of conservation, training for interviewing living artists is becoming increasingly valued. However, when there are no conservators on staff at a museum holding this type of contemporary art, collections managers should become involved in or even instigate an interview program, and should receive training on how to interview artists. As a form of preventative conservation, capturing this important information and documenting it as soon as possible when acquiring a work can be invaluable for future conservation efforts.

I am inquiring about writing an article for your publication. This article would be a version of or part of my Masters project and it would be

submitted in the summer of 2008. You may contact me either by email or by phone. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Levy

Chapter 9: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND APPENDICES

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Artists

1. First, would it be acceptable to you if I record our conversation?
May I cite you by name in my paper?
2. As an artist, in general how do you feel about your experience working with the museum?
3. How do you feel about museums as collectors of artwork made of nontraditional ephemeral media?
4. Could you please describe your piece and the process of making it?
5. What do you feel the role of the museum was when it acquired this piece?
 - a. To make it accessible to the public?
 - b. To preserve it for posterity?
 - c. To interpret it educationally?
 - d. Of these, which do you think is most important?
6. What would you like to see the museum do with your piece in terms of collecting, presenting, or preserving it?
7. Communication with the museum:
 - a. Do you keep in contact with the museum regarding the preservation of this work?

- b. If not, would you be willing to assist the museum in determining the best way to preserve it?
 - c. If you already do communicate with the museum, are you willing to continue to communicate with the museum about this work?
 - d. Or do you feel that your role as an artist ends when the work is acquired by the museum?
 - e. Other thoughts?
8. Do you have plans for storing your artwork and finding ways to update the media, if necessary?
9. How do you decide what media to use? Do you use media that you know may go out of production? Is this a factor that surfaces when deciding on materials?
10. Are you concerned about preserving your artwork in terms of the media that may become unavailable in the future?
11. Is there anything you think museums should know about nontraditional ephemeral art or artists who make this type of work that you think they might not already know?
12. When my research is complete and I have draft of my paper, I would like to confirm any quotes that I use with you. At that time,

would it be okay if I email you the section where I use a quote
from you?

13. Is there anything you would like to add?

14. May I contact you again as I develop my project?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Registrars

1. First, would it be acceptable to you if I record our conversation?
May I cite you by name in my paper?
2. As a registrar, have you worked directly with the artist? In what capacity?
3. What do you think about museum's decision to acquire this piece made of nontraditional ephemeral media?
4. What procedures do you follow to ensure that nontraditional ephemeral work is cared for? Is there a system in place for caring for this type of work specifically?
5. How do you ensure that this work will be properly cared for if there is no conservator on staff? What is your conservation plan for this piece?
6. If the museum does not have resources to use an outside conservator, how do you proceed?
7. As a registrar, how do you prioritize work that needs to be professionally conserved? Is it based on:
 - a. Upcoming requests for use in an exhibition?
 - b. Requests for work to be loaned out?
 - c. Monetary value of the work?

- d. Intent of the artist?
 - e. Other factors. Please explain.
8. If there is no conservator on staff in your museum, do you keep in contact with the artist? Have you ever documented the artist's intentions for the future of the piece? If so, where is that documentation stored? Is it accessible to other museum staff?
 9. What do you feel is the artist's role/responsibility in working with the museum to preserve his/her art after the museum has acquired it?
 10. What do you feel is a conservator's role/responsibility after you have identified the need for conservation of the work?
 11. What would you like to have seen the museum do with this piece in terms of collecting, presenting, or preserving it? If time, money, and all other resources were not factors, what would be the most ideal way to care for this piece?
 12. When my research is complete and I have draft of my paper, I would like to confirm any quotes that I use with you. At that time, would it be okay if I email you the section where I use a quote from you?
 13. Is there anything you would like to add?
 14. May I contact you again as I develop my project?

Appendix C

Interview Questions for Conservators

1. First, would it be acceptable you if I record our conversation? May I cite you by name in my paper?
2. As a conservator, have you worked directly with the artist? In what capacity?
3. How do you feel about the museum's decision to acquire this piece made of nontraditional ephemeral media?
4. What do you feel the role is of the museum when it acquires a piece of this type of art? Should it be cared for consistently, or only when there is a priority because of a loan request, its inclusion in an exhibition, or its monetary value?
5. What do you feel is the artist's role/responsibility in working with the museum to preserve his/her art after the museum has acquired it?
6. Has the artist been willing to assist you in determining the best ways to preserve the work?
7. What do you feel is the collection manager or registrar's role/responsibility in instigating the process of conservation after the museum has acquired the work?

8. If resources, time, and availability of all parties were not a factor, how would you ideally preserve this piece?
9. What would you like to have seen the museum do with this piece in terms of collecting, presenting, or preserving it? What would be the best-case scenario?
10. When my research is complete and I have draft of my paper, I would like to confirm any quotes that I use with you. At that time, would it be okay if I email you the section where I use a quote from you?
11. Is there anything you would like to add?
12. May I contact you again as I develop my project?

Appendix D

Interview Questions for Glenn Wharton, Acting Executive Director,

INCCA-NA

1. First, would it be acceptable to you if I record our conversation?
May I cite you by name in my paper?
2. I understand that membership to the INCCA is not based on monetary dues, but on active participation- each member must contribute at least five artist archive records per year. How would other invested parties be able to access the artist archive database even though they may not be able to contribute? How might the following people be able to join INCCA and access the archive?:
 - a. Artists
 - b. Registrars/Collections Managers
 - c. Art Handlers
3. How is INCCA-NA attempting to encourage museum professionals to contribute to the artist archive?
4. How is INCCA-NA attempting to make itself known as a resource to museums holding contemporary art?
5. Is INCCA-NA attempting to contact museums with contemporary art as part of their collections- those that may not be considered as strictly museums of contemporary art?

6. How might INCCA-NA market itself as a resource to smaller museums with contemporary art in their collections that might not have a conservator on staff?
7. Is the INCCA-NA considering offering training workshops of this kind for other museum professionals, such as registrars/collections managers or curators?
8. When my research is complete and I have draft of my paper, I would like to confirm any quotes that I use with you. At that time, would it be okay if I email you the section where I use a quote from you?
9. Is there anything you would like to add?
10. May I contact you again as I develop my project?