Conservation Interview with Artist Maria Hupfield

October 26, 2023

**Caitlin Gallupe (CG)**
Could you tell us about the history of the artwork and when and how it was originally constructed?

**Maria Hupfield (MH**)
Absolutely. I mean, I'm kind of sad looking at this artwork now. It looks like a sad story, but is actually a happy story just in a sad place at the moment.

Well, I'm a performance artist and at the time when I made this particular work, I was collaborating with another artist named Charlene Vickers and we were invited by Ryan Rice to go to the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe and give a performance during Indian Market.

So how Charlene and I typically work is we get together in her studio or my studio and we just start mashing things up and we usually bring things. We're like, “Hey, look what I found, look what I got, let's combine it.”

This particular work comes out of that kind of setting or environment where we were working in that way that we usually do.

Charlene had these amazing red gloves which I instantly fell in love with and I was like, “OK, let's use these.” And so, we used them in the performance, and then after we divided up some of the objects and I ended up loving these so much that I took them and added these bells on them, the jingle bells to give them some extra spark.

And yeah, I was pretty excited about it. But of course, this was really coming out of, you know, just what we had at hand thinking about the nature of performance art where you're just using, you know, sort of DIY, you're using what you have, not necessarily thinking about longevity or what happens next, just mashing things up, bringing together materials.

**CG**
Great. Yeah, it sounds like a very organic process.

You just described what led you to using the materials you used, but could you speak on the method of construction?

**MH**
Yeah, OK.

A couple of things about the materials: the gloves were sourced from, I think, a Sally Ann or a Salvation Army that Charlene had been to. As a result we didn't know what their origin was or where they were purchased or anything. They just were really a pair of gloves we found that we liked and looked fun for performance.

How I was working at the time was just kind of using a basic stitch, so no glue or adhesive.

I like to sew things together and I typically use industrial felt, that's a material I've been working with.

I thought, why don't I just use some regular felt as a backing?

And I could stitch the jingle bells on the felt and match the red of the gloves with the color of the felt and then attach that to the surface.

This was one of the few times where I was like, oh, we'll stick it on there and so I used the adhesive, and at that time actually, you know, I thought (now that I'm remembering everything and looked back at the documentation) I originally thought, it's Charlene's fault, we used the glue she had in her studio. But actually, no, it is totally mine of course. I was in my studio after I used whatever I had at hand. And it's probably gel medium because that's what I used for archival purposes, and I just used something I had at hand to adhere it on the surface.

The result is two different techniques, the stitch of the bell onto the felt, and then the felt adhered to the surface of the gloves.

**CG**
Great. That's all very good information. I love learning about exactly how things were made.

So what has been the life of the artwork since its original creation? Could you tell us a bit about that?

**MH**
Yeah. That was kind of it. I think we may have worn them again for another performance. I have to go back and take a look at the dates exactly.

But yeah, I think we wore them in Montreal for--we were calling ourselves Vestige Vagabond for a conference with the Hemisphere Institute and we'd pull them out.

It had this sound component and we're, you know, trying it out.

And, you know, they just look so brutal because with the bells it becomes a weapon.

Like, it's not just a defense, it's like something you can really do serious damage with, but also looks good, which I love.

So, you're asking me what happened with them after.

Well there was a very short period of time where I might have used them and then I was like, OK, I'm done.

That often happens with my work where I'll make something and I'm like, OK, I'm going to kind of retire it. It's not always retired. I started to sometimes put in the contractual sale that I will still have access to it in the future for a performance and I can borrow it back.

 In that way it keeps, you know, it keeps a connection in a way.

But in this case, I was OK with it going to the sale of a private collector.

I wasn't necessarily thinking that I would perform with it again or if I did, I'd probably make a different iteration.

Since then it's basically been on display in this collector's home, you know beautifully placed in the living room or whichever room it was in, until I recently was contacted by e-mail by this collector who was like, “Maria, something's going on!”

**Carl Magarro (CM)**
I have a follow up question. I’m curious about your performances.

How often do you go back to your collectors and ask them if you can borrow your pieces back to do a performance?

**MH**
So far, It's only happened once.

I have a piece in Montreal at the Museum de Beaux Arts, and they have a piece called the Jingle Spiral.

And that was a piece I made where it was a circle with, in this case, tin jingles that spiraled into the center.

And there was a little head flap cut out so I could pop my head through there and wear it like a poncho.

But it was so heavy and I was like, OK, I'm not going to use it, but I still thought there was something I might use it for in the future.

So, I sold it to them. [Then] my dealer, Hugues Charbonneau really worked with them, he knew the curators and we wanted this to be our first attempt at trying this.

And then when I had a show in 2017 called “The One Who Keeps On Giving,” we put that to test and actually asked them could we borrow it for the exhibition.

Now when we originally made this proposition the thinking of course was the museum was like of course Maria can come to the museum anytime and wear it at the museum with us, by us, for us here in the space.

But the request really put it to test because they made a crate for it, shipped it to us in a big truck, and drove it to Parry Sound my hometown with a personal driver who unpacked it and helped with the handling.

We did a performance with it, and in the performance I wasn't wearing it--my sister-in-law, Deanne, was wearing it. She was nine months pregnant at the time.

And then after the performance, the person packed it up and then took it to Toronto for the exhibition.

So that was the one time.

And then this past year I recently was invited to a conference at the same Museum, they had a conference on conservation of artwork and they invited me back to wear it and talk about it and I did a performance with it and I have an amazing transcript from that as well.

But the whole idea was about the topic of restoration.

What do you do with work over time as it ages, at what point does it affect the integrity of the work?

And you know, all of these other questions. What does it mean to have a living artist wear or connect with a work of art?

And what questions does that raise?

So that's why I say once I actually really did it and when I did it, we really went the whole way.

And it hasn't necessarily been the case since.

I mean, now I'm more like, I have a pair of Jingle Pants and my dealer is like, “Maria, those Jingle Pants, do you want to put them in the show? Do you want to sell them in the gallery?” And I'm like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa.”

I'm going to hold on to the Jingle Pants a little bit because the nature of my work is that I'm not making like 500 pairs of Jingle Pants unless there's going to be 500 people wearing them.

So it's a different kind of process where my creations have a life with me and intimate relationship as a personal belonging.

**CM**
Great.
Thank you.

**CG**
So in your video interview with Native Feminism, you talk about aesthetics in a piece as an important point of connection.
The aesthetics of this piece have changed.

Has the meaning of the artwork changed for you over time?

**MH**
Yes, the aesthetics are terrible!

From my view, what I'm imagining is, oh, in a performance, if something happens, it becomes part of an archive of that work, a record of that work.

In my mind it's only adding value to the work.

But that's in a performance.

So it's quite different.

Like, I've done a performance before with Social Health Performance Club in Brooklyn NY, where I gave the other members of the collective each something of mine to wear in the performance.

And I remember because I had these felt gloves that Lorene Bouboushian wore and Lorraine had red lipstick and at some point the lipstick got on the glove and at first I was like oh no but, well, that's part of the work now, right?

And another performance artist, I had these white beautiful evening gloves with long white fringe and when Whitney Hunter who was wearing only underwear put them on and picked up a glass of wine, red wine from an audience member and walked around suddenly his body as a gay black man and choreographer was pulled sharply into focus in the best most complex ways.

That is so [like] performance artists because we're like, “Whatever! We go with the moment” and magic happens. Things come together and our bodies codify and recodify objects, the space, and each other when there is a live audience.

But the artist also said it changed for them to be performing with something that I had really put a lot of thought and care into the making of it.

It's quite different when there's a disposability or less of a connection versus when something has a lot of significance and how it's made and all of that.

It really changes how you use it.

And that's a big part of my work. I see my work in a tradition of making that comes from the specificity of my Anishinaabe cultural knowledge and ways of being.

In this case, we're looking at an example that's a little bit different because this works condition did not happen from a performance, right?

This is just the material over time.

Something has happened because the material has a certain lifespan that was not anticipated or known about when I made it. In the beginning it was just “it looks beautiful.”

And there is another piece I have that where there's a similar kind of effect.

At that time, I was also using red vinyl.

I have this massive pony bead that I made out of red vinyl and it's having a same kind of aging process because of the nature of that vinyl so I have held on to it to live with the material and keep an eye on it.

These are things to think about.

And you can see that with other artists: like Claes Oldenburg has work when you look at it now that might not have that same energy and puffiness and vibrancy and freshness that it had when it was first sewn.

These are, you know, things to think about, especially around being a living artist or even using bright colors.
I use a lot of bright colors.
I'm wearing bright colors.
Those are [not] light fast.
They don't have that same longevity as other hues.
So I'm very mindful of this in general and I'm learning that about different materials as my relationship with those materials develops and deepens over time.

**CM**
So I think we're going to move focus from the background of the objects to questions related to the care of it.

How do you envision the artwork to be used, displayed, and stored in the future?

**MH**

In general with my work, when it's displayed it's, you know, sometimes it's just covered under plexi to protect it from dust and out of direct sunlight.

But with this particular piece, the question is more whether it is still an art piece that I see moving forward as an art piece.

That's more the question.

Has it compromised the meaning in some way?

So that's the question I'm looking at with this: is it even worthy of display?

Do I feel like it represents me and my work well?

Yeah, those are the questions.

**CM**
OK.
And so then what is your opinion?
Do you think it does represent or not represent its original intent?

**MH**

Well, I think now it just makes me sad because I loved it so much. It was a gorgeous piece.

When I got the e-mail I understood it that the adhesive material somehow was compromised
I didn't realize it was the surface of the actual object that was compromised.
So that changed it.

When we opened the box there were a lot of little red flakes everywhere.

It wasn't even a minimal thing that could be contained.

I was kind of like, just dip it in red paint! Or start over.

This would be different if it was hundreds of years in the future or even a hundred years, but it's only been, I don't know, this work isn't that old.

**CM**
Would it be OK for a repair to be noticeable or would it be better for it to go unnoticed if we were to repair this in any way?

**MH**
Yeah, I think that's a good question because part of this work that could make it repairable is that little turtle logo on it.

I love it so much.

Really that turtle’s so much a part of that object.

And they're not made anymore and it's a logo.

So I don't know.

Although in time that little turtle's going to flake right off, just like the red paint.

You're asking me some tough questions. I'm thinking that probably early on I was wondering about these things as well, whereas now I'm more like I just am going to need to replace the gloves altogether.

**CM**
I guess I have a follow up towards that.

With what you've previously stated, I'm just wondering, what's your flexibility in terms of what can be done to this artwork?

**MH**
I mean, I guess the question is when do you make that call.

There's kind of two ways I look at it.

One is that it just continues to break down and I and I don't attach anything back on and I let the nature of it [be].

Interestingly enough, you're bringing me to another art piece, basically making a whole new work.

I'm making these connections I didn't even know were there, but they're totally there.

I don't know if you know this, but I have another work at the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian, that’s made of paper.

And it's not just made of any paper, it's made of like--OK, so maybe this is part of what I do, but anyway, it's made of just simple blend, you know, ruled 3 hole punch paper that I bought at like a Shoppers Drug Mart or something.

It's just, it's not archival paper.

It's just like notebook paper.

It's this Jingle Dress and it's all made of paper.

And when Kathleen Ash-Milby the curator at the time approached me about buying it, she said, “Maria, here's the thing, it's made of paper, so we don't know if we can buy it.”

And I said, “What are you talking about? You have rawhide, you have wood, you have every organic thing in this museum.
I'm sure you can handle paper.” Even photographs age and nobody questions how it will age.

So then it became a question of, OK, what's the plan moving forward with it because eventually it's not going to last.

Well, let me tell you right now that that paper is doing a better job than these gloves because it still looks really good.

I thought it might have yellowed by now, but they're really minding the conditions to reduce and care for it with this understanding that the material will age. And that's a good example of why I just like using the [sewn] stitch because it's all just sewn and it's all stayed together.

But anyway, so the plan with that was we'll just keep showing it and eventually it's going to brown and fall off the dressmaker's form, but you'll have the photos, and then there'll be maybe another display strategy while it ages and that is kind of exciting to me to know it has a life to it.

But to me, it was more apparent [then] that that could happen in the future, whereas in this case, less apparent when I made it or maybe when I made it I wasn't even thinking that eventually I would sell it or how rapidly it would break down.

I don't even remember.

I think at that time when I made it I probably wasn't even working with a dealer.

I don't think I had representation.

I really was just making things.

It's quite possible or if I did [have a dealer], it was quite early in that relationship.

**CM**
OK, interesting.

There is something to be said about plastics having just a bit of an unknown to them.

So they will kind of degrade when they want to.

**MH**

Go with your materials! Or make them.

**CG**
Yeah, really interested to see that paper dress, have to look that up.

**CM**
So yeah, I guess this leads to the next question.
How would you feel if part of the original work then were to be replaced?

So for example, like we found replacement gloves on eBay or something that had the same image or something similar.

**MH**

A great idea.
That was something that came to mind right away as well.
And actually Emy looked, and, you know, right away she was like, oh, Maria, here they are.

But the immediate concern then, of course, was even if they're brand new, they're still the same material.

So their fate's going to be the same.

I think Emy and I did order a second pair.

You can see one online that might be a little bit in better shape, but we know the same outcome is expected which is probably why they're not made anymore.

I think they're children's gloves, like they were never meant [to last] more than a few years.

It's not like the really good old old days where things would just last forever, right?

There's a disposability to a lot of materials these days. Switching out the gloves isn’t on the table. It just isn’t an option.

**CM**
Yes, I'll ask this last question and then if anyone else has a follow up question then they can ask you.

Would a replacement artwork made of new materials be acceptable?

**MH**
Yes, yes.

**CM**
Is there any kind of material that should be avoided in your opinion?

**MH**
Yes.
Anything like this one.
You know, I think that, yeah, we can circle back to the two approaches.

One is really just starting from the beginning where I have some leather and then I can know exactly what the brand of paint is being used, if I want them to be red I can hand paint. That way I know what it is that's going on.

And then as the artist I hand design and build the glove, you know do the fabrication in my studio, and then I know exactly [what it is at every level] and if there's stuffing in there, I know what it is.

So that would be one approach.
The other thing would be to look at maybe another found object that has more, that's made to last and that is more durable.

Something like a model that has been designed for a heftier glove that's made to last.

**CM**
And then to add on to that, if a replacement were to be made, what should happen to the original gloves?

**MH**
Well, I think generally what happens with an artwork, whether it's an exhibition photo that's just meant for exhibition is that they're destroyed.
And then I would need to do it myself or request evidence that they're destroyed.

Or for myself, I might keep them in a box as kind of research, but they're no longer for sale or hold up the original idea as the object or work of art anymore.

They're ceasing to be in that form. I might cut them up or something to really look at them.

They're just reduced back to material now.

The bigger question around this is that they're owned by a collector.
So then the question is do I make a new iteration, a new version as a replacement and then give them the option that they then have in place of the other one and/or just refund them.

At which point I'm bringing my dealer back into the conversation around it, which is, you know, it's great to be working with people who just really love art and are up for having conversations with me around this. For now I recalled the work to take a closer look and get a material expert to take a look using science.

And that's something that's quite different when you're dealing with a living artist versus an artist who isn't around anymore.

And then maybe when we think about a sale of a work, who has ownership of it, right?

Is the collector caring for it?

Is the museum caring for it?

And even broader questions, does it belong to a community? Depends how it is used or why it was made and what its purpose is.

What say did they have in its fate or what happens to it?

Can they come and use it?

So there's all different relationships around accessing the art object or the belonging, right?

Who does it belong to?

Where does it belong?

**CG**
Yeah, very interesting.
Does anyone have any other questions, anything to follow up with?

**MH**

Maybe my question for you is what would you do?

Like, what would you recommend if you had bought this, knowing what you know?

What would be the ideal?

**CM**
That's a tricky one.

I think that's such a personal question, right?

**EB**
So I think with any approach, I mean I'm just a first year, but so far from what I've learned with any new projects, one of the first things that should be done is to do some tests, really look into what the material is, how the adhesive has affected the vinyl.

And what would be a method of say stabilizing the vinyl as opposed to replacing it all together or if it is unsalvageable then you would explore the replacement option.

**CM**
To add on to that, there are treatment options that you know we try to come up with.

And so trying to go through the pros and cons of those lists that we create based off of the information that we have.

So a lot of it has to do with what are we going to get out of a particular approach versus what's going to be the long lasting effects.

So a lot of that has to do with some pre-planning before we actually make a decision.

And I know that doesn't really answer the question as to what we would do specifically.

But right now, yeah, I think it'll be more so trying to brainstorm what we should do.

**MH**
Yeah.

Thanks for that.

**Emily-Claire Docking (ECD)**

Looking more directly into possible options, I looked a little bit into the opportunity to consolidate the surface.

But whether or not that coating saves it for a couple years and it's able to extend the lifetime for a shorter period of time or a longer period of time depends on the intensity of that material.

And then making decisions about how to reattach the bells, whether trying to do what you did in the beginning adhesive-based or just sewing it directly onto the glove just so it's there and sort of accept that the coating at some point will sort of just fall off.

And then it's just the bells and I know that the iconography on the gloves is really important.

So figuring out if there are ways that have more longevity, but you'll still have the crackling and the coating falling apart.
So it is a sort of difficult question.

How much energy is put in to save it for how long is kind of the balance.

**MH**
That's a really good point.

You're reminding me why it's so useful when a collector purchases a piece of work to go as the artist and visit it to see where it's situated.

Sometimes it's just in a store, a warehouse.

But in this case, my understanding at the time was we really thought that the glue had given out.

And I thought it just popped off the bells on one glove.

But once I saw it, it was like, Oh no, I don't think it was that, something else is going on.

It was actually the surface had broken down and gave away. The glue was still working.

It was just the surface, and that's why it popped off.

And I was quite saddened to see, I didn't realize that the whole surface had aged so poorly and that it was cracked all over.

And that was when I had to make a decision that only I can, as the artist and maker.

Because if I had perhaps caught it earlier and reached out to an expert or experts such as you’re aspiring to be yourselves, then I could have saved it, right?

In a way it's kind of like when you get a symptom, you go to the doctor.

If you don't go to the doctor, you're like, oh, that's fine.

But if you wait, it could be something more serious, right?

In this case, it really was more involved and much bigger than anticipated.

**CM**
I have a question regarding that then.

Ideally, how long of a lifespan did you want for this piece?

**MH**
Well, I imagined that this would at least last my lifetime.

Or maybe I take it so personally because maybe it mirrors my life.
So when it was new, it was, you know, like a younger pair of gloves and it looked younger.

And now it's like, I'm going to be turning 49 on my next birthday and I'm like, is this what 49 looks like for the gloves? The gloves are on an accelerated life span and look 100 years old.

I'm like, Oh no.

So maybe actually it might be closer than I realized.
I am feeling a little rough like those gloves.

But the other thing I'm realizing is even the gold bells, I just bought those as well from a craft store.

Even that coating seems faded as well, which I would have anticipated, but perhaps even more than I would have thought, because if you look at a photo, the photo documentation of them, they look pretty amazing.

It's kind of like the cover of a magazine, they're high gloss.

Like, have those gloves been airbrushed?

I would say if I'm an older artist, like a senior artist and the gloves look like they're a senior work, you know, I might feel less bad about it, but because they look really rough, I'm like, oh…

**CG**
Yeah, I like that, living alongside your art.

**MH**
I'm outliving them, right?

Like I'm surpassing them and that just makes me sad.

**CM**
So maybe it's like a Dorian Gray relationship.

**Emy Kim (EK)**

If I can just chime in, I think it's really interesting that you said that you'd consider keeping the gloves and sort of observing them, maybe running tests on them in the future.

So how would this sound to you: if we repaired them so that they could be secure for a while longer and then you can live with them and see how you feel about it, and then you'll have the originals back.

And there's a lot of possibilities still in that way.

**MH**
Well, that sounds salvageable, like there's something salvaged.

Yeah, that would be great.

I'd be very curious to see what that looks like.

And whether I do another iteration with a different glove as an option for the collector, Or if we go back to this, there is a sensibility that matches my own practice where the inclination would be, well, they're just going to age.

That matches the thinking with the paper Jingle Dress, right, where that's the nature of these materials.

This is how it unfolds.

I feel a little surprised by this particular one.

But yeah, I think that would fit in nicely around my work in terms of thinking of discussions of how to conserve the work in this history that I have with my work.

The Jingle Dress, the gloves, the Jingle Spiral, right, yeah, all the jingles.

**EK**
It's a wonderful continuation of something really potentially joyful.

We appreciate that.

And so you and I spoke in the past about using an alternate method of attachment for the felt and the bells and we specifically discussed doing new stitches.

And I think that is interesting, especially in the light of the fact that you sew.

Would it matter to you whether you did the stitching, if that's a way to reattach them in a more potentially robust way or just trying a different method, or if I did the stitching?

**MH**

I think that [whoever does] the labor of the repair is OK.

It doesn't have to be, “Only I can touch it,” though I think that that's part of it.

As the artist, the things that I start to think about are how it's more about how the repair may change the meaning or alter meaning or add new meaning.

And so those are the reasons why having the repair and sitting with that and living with that a little bit would give me time to really take that in in a thoughtful way before putting it back out in the world.

**EK**

Wonderful.

Do you have questions, Any other questions?

**MH**
I mean, it's a little different because my husband Jason and I always go back to, you know, when I sold the Jingle dress, I was like, it's paper, but it's not a cake, right?
And museums have collected cake.
When we make the object that we give it to the museum then it's not our problem in a way.

But yeah, I think in this case because I'm so aware of materials and I do feel a close relationship to them that is something I'm [considering]. I want them to last unless that is part of the work. I aspire for the concept to match the materials.

**CG**

 It's been really great talking to you because we deal with so many materials but we so rarely get the chance to actually talk to the artist who has a relationship to the material in their own way.

And it really does change how we would choose to treat something, the goals and the processes.

So it's really great to talk.

**MH**
I think if I had, for example, a performance where I had these gloves and then I was doing the repair, then it would be important perhaps that it was me, unless I then brought in Emy as a guest in the performance to do the repair with me. But then I start to move in new territory and am creating new work.

So those are more the types of decisions that come to mind for me in the making of a work or the altering or the changing of a work.

I mean, all artists are different, but, yeah, I think that matches my way.

**EK**
Well, this has been really wonderful.