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Reconciling Authenticity and Reenactment

An Art Conservation Perspective

ABSTRACT: Locating authenticity in artworks that are remade (all or in part) or re-performed over time presents a unique challenge for art conservators, whose activities have traditionally been oriented toward caring for the material aspects of art objects. The paper offers a brief overview of perspectives on authenticity and discusses various theoretical models that have been developed to conceptualize how media, installation, and performance artworks are displayed and cared for over time. These include the score/performance model, the concepts of autographicity and allographicity, the concept of iteration, and authenticity as a practice. The author proposes a theoretical model based on the ritual aspects of presenting artworks, arguing that authenticity, repetition, and community participation can be reconciled within a ritual context.

KEYWORDS: art conservation; time-based media; ritual

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Conservators are responsible for the care and long-term preservation of works of art. They not only treat artworks but also apply their knowledge of art history, artists' methods and techniques, properties of materials, non-invasive analysis, and mechanisms of aging and deterioration to manage change in the artworks under their care. Traditional conservation theory, established in the nineteenth century, equated ethical conservation practice with the preservation of the physical integrity of the unique art object, which included minimizing losses of original material.[1] The object itself was thought to possess the special quality of authenticity, derived from its endurance over time and its accrual of meaning.[2] In contemporary practice, conservators preserve that meaning by taking non-material as well as material aspects into account when they intervene in the life of an object to bring it to a

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1   Pip Laurenson, 'Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations', *Tate Papers*, 6 (Autumn 2006) <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7401> [accessed 17 July 2019].

2   Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–51 (p. 221).

desired state through conservation treatment.[3] The physical and conceptual consequences of any intervention (repairs, additions, erasures, or even cleaning) are carefully considered.[4]

Postmodern and contemporary art present conservators with an added challenge: the artwork as defined by the artist may not consist of a unique object to preserve. In this case, physical changes to the work are not analogous to the changes and losses undergone by traditional art objects.[5] Terms related to re-creation, including 'reenactment', 'reconstruction', 'restaging', and so on, suggest that an artwork has a vital connection to a past event but also a meaningful difference, often a physical one. Curators, conservators, and art historians have attempted to categorize these kinds of artworks and develop appropriate approaches to their preservation. The term 'variable media' was coined to describe artworks with medium-independent aspects and behaviours that may be more important to preserve than the original physical media.[6] Elements of these works can be replaced, refabricated, reformatted, or reprogrammed in a way that is acceptable to the artist, because the artwork itself is not compromised by these material changes. The term 'time-based media' describes artworks with a durational element, and it includes moving-image, performance, and interactive artworks. These works often exhibit variability from one instantiation to the next, ideally within parameters set by the artist.

For conservators, installing variable media and time-based media artworks over and over again necessitates making decisions on each occasion that affect the appearance and experience of the work. Developing conceptual models, ontology, and terminology to undergird this decision-making process is an ongoing effort within the conservation field. What follows is an overview of some approaches and ideas that have been central to this effort, as well as a suggestion: viewing the mu-

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3   Barbara Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology* (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2010), pp. 14–16, pp. 65–119.

4   Brian Castriota, 'Meditating Meanings: Conservation of the Staffordshire Hoard', *Postmedieval*, 7.3 (2016), pp. 369–77 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-016-0003-5>.

5   Laurenson, 'Authenticity, Change and Loss', p. 4.

6   Jon Ippolito, 'Accommodating the Unpredictable: The Variable Media Questionnaire', in *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, ed. by Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), pp. 46–53 (pp. 48–50) <http://www.variablemedia.net/pdf/Ippolito.pdf> [accessed 05 February 2018].

seum as a ritual setting can shed new light on the practice of preparing these artworks for public display. While 'variable media' and 'time-based media' are relatively new terms applied to recent art, a ritual model evokes behaviours with longer histories.

SCORE/PERFORMANCE MODEL

In a wide-ranging article stemming from the seminal 2000 United States symposium 'TechArchaeology', conservator William Real suggested that perhaps performance could provide a model for caring for time-based media installations, since both have dimensions of experience, movement, sound, and time.[7]

Pip Laurenson, a pioneer in the conservation of time-based media art at the Tate, put forth a score/performance model in 2006.[8] She looked to the work of the philosopher Stephen Davies, who had examined the notion of authenticity in the performance of music. In discussing the tradition of Western music, he wrote that 'a performance of a given work is authentic if it faithfully instances the work, which is done by following the composer's work-determinative instructions as these are publicly recorded in its score'.[9]

Laurenson adapted Davies's thinking to the conservation of time-based media installations, suggesting that the 'work-defining properties' of an artwork must be maintained to ensure authenticity, but other properties of the work could change.[10] She showed how variability and change of the original material elements of time-based media installations could occur over time without compromising the authenticity of the artwork. Rather than thinking of an artwork as an object in a particular material state, she suggested using the concept of 'identity' to describe 'everything that must be preserved in order to avoid the loss of something of value in the work of art'.[11]

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7   William A. Real, 'Toward Guidelines for Practice in the Preservation and Documentation of Technology-Based Installation Art', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 40.3 (2001), pp. 211–31 <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/jaic/articles/jaic40-03-004_indx.html> [accessed 05 February 2018].

8   Laurenson, 'Authenticity, Change and Loss', pp. 4–6.

9   Ibid., p. 5.

10   Ibid., pp. 7, 9.

11   Ibid., p. 12.

Conservator Joanna Phillips subsequently noted that artists might alter the 'work-defining properties' and create new conditions for display as part of the evolution of the work, so conservators should not attempt to define those properties prematurely.[12] Instead, at any given moment while the work is being exhibited, conservators should document the essential characteristics, conditions, and team decision-making processes of the artist, studio, and museum staff, so that over time a complete picture of the identity of the artwork can emerge.[13]

ALLOGRAPHIC AND AUTOGRAPHIC WORKS

One conclusion Laurenson drew from applying the score/performance model to time-based media art installations is that they are allographic in nature. Seeking to resolve fundamental questions about authenticity in art, philosopher Nelson Goodman created a distinction between autographic and allographic works. Goodman stated that 'a work of art is autographic if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine.'[14] Goodman defined allographic works, on the other hand, as those for which authenticity hinges on the faithful performance of the 'score' of the work, such as a musical score, script, or blueprint expressed in a standard notation system.

Allographic works cannot, by definition, be forged. While the score/performance model suggests that perhaps time-based media artworks are allographic, there is no standard notation system for them. Moreover, some artists' practices, such as editioning or creating certificates of authenticity, create a significant distinction between the artwork itself and unauthorized identical copies that are not the

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12   Joanna Phillips, 'Shifting Equipment Significance in Time-Based Media Art', in *The Electronic Media Review*, 1 (2012), pp. 139–54 (p. 152) <http://resources.conservation-us.org/emg-review/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2016/07/Vol-1_2010_Ch-6_Phillips.pdf> [accessed 12 February 2020].

13   Joanna Phillips, 'Reporting Iterations: A Documentation Model for Time-Based Media Art', *Revista de História da Arte*, 4 (2015), pp. 168–77 <http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAw4.pdf> [accessed 25 September 2017].

14   Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976), p. 113.

work.[15] By Goodman's definition, then, whether variable media and time-based media artworks are autographic or allographic depends on the artist's intention and instructions.

ITERATION, RECOLLECTION, AND REPETITION

Art historian Tina Fiske rejects allographicity and prefers Jacques Derrida's notion of iteration, which in the context of literary theory is related to citationality. Unlike mere repetition, citation connects a text to its source but also introduces contextual differences.[16] In this way, an artwork is to an exhibition as a literary quotation is to new writing in which it is embedded.

Fiske, drawing from Derrida, writes of 'tethering' an iteration to its 'source'.[17] Perhaps this 'tether' can also extend into the future; Kierkegaard believed that repetition was actually memory, working forward. He wrote, '[R]epetition and recollection are the same movement, but in opposite directions.'[18] This statement could be true for variable and time-based media artworks that are exhibited many times. Perhaps they are not reenactments, but simply enactments.[19]

Consider the celebration of a birthday, in which a child is the central performer. Some material elements are always present, such as the cake and candles, but every birthday is a personally defined authentic iteration, not a reenactment (Fig. 1). His future birthday celebrations will be just as authentic as the ones in his past — an example of repetition and recollection as one movement in opposite directions.

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15   Amy Brost, 'From "Certificates of Authenticity" to Authentic Iterations in Variable Media Art' (unpublished master's thesis, New York University, 2016), p. 34, presented on 22 March 2017, online video recording, Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/211559056> [accessed 11 April 2017].

16   Tina Fiske, 'White Walls: Installations, Absence, Iteration and Difference', in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, ed. by Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 229–40 (pp. 232–33).

17   Ibid., p. 232.

18   Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Howard Hong and Edna Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 131.

19   Martha Buskirk, Amelia Jones, and Caroline A. Jones, 'The Year in "Re-"', *Artforum*, 52.4 (December 2013), pp. 127–30 (pp. 127–28, 130).

Figure 1. Birthday ritual at age 1, 2, and 3. Photographs of the author and her son. Courtesy Harvey Wang.

AUTHENTICITY AS A PRACTICE

Authenticity can also be viewed as a practice. Dr. Vivian van Saaze, a social scientist, used ethnographic research methods to study collaboration in realizing artworks in museums. By experiencing multiple installations of the work *One Candle* (1988) by Nam June Paik, she observed that authenticity could be seen as 'an enactment or performance' and showed how it was more related to continuity than to the maintenance of a fixed state.[20]

She was struck by how institutions perpetuate the notion of the static, unchanging original to the public, while the reality is that 'doing artworks' as a team results in far more variety, conflict, and transformation than is apparent to the casual viewer.[21] She asserted, then, that authenticity 'is not something out there waiting to be discovered.

20   Vivian van Saaze, 'Authenticity in Practice: An Ethnographic Study into the Preservation of *One Candle* by Nam June Paik', in *Art Conservation and Authenticities: Material, Concept, Context*, ed. by Erma Hermens and Tina Fiske (London: Archetype Publications, 2009), pp. 190–98 (pp. 192, 197).

21   The title of Vivian van Saaze's 2009 PhD dissertation for Maastricht University and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage was 'Doing Artworks: A Study into the Presentation and Conservation of Installation Artworks' <https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/publications/48896dc1-48e5-4691-9d6f-6d2e5f045916> [accessed 25 November 2020].

Rather, it is part of practice and can be studied as being "done".[22] She suggested that the way in which museums label these works could acknowledge, and make more transparent, the social activity of museum staff.[23]

Sociologist Howard Becker similarly observed that the decision-making process that informs the installation of these artworks is shared, and that the artist's voice, while critically important, is but one in a chorus of voices. According to Becker, works of art are 'joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence'.[24]

Conservator Glenn Wharton and sociologist Harvey Molotch suggest that the role of the conservator could evolve to that of a coordinator — one who can marshal the expertise of a network of specialists to sustain these works. In this way, they write, 'The museum itself becomes less a collector of things and more a mechanism of collaboration and an arranger of experiences.'[25]

RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR RITUAL ACTION

Theatre and music are not the only practices with similarities to variable media and time-based media artworks. Religious practices demonstrate how authenticity, repetition, and community participation are reconciled within a ritual context.

One such example is the Jewish ritual of the Passover Seder. Rabbinic guidelines determine what makes the Passover Seder authentic, or *kosher*. These requirements are like the 'work-defining properties'.[26] There is a set of material elements that are required, some reused and

22   Vivian van Saaze, 'From Singularity to Multiplicity? A Study into Versions, Variations, and Editions in Museum Practices', *The Electronic Media Review*, 1 (2012), pp. 87–96 (p. 94) <http://resources.conservation-us.org/emg-review/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2016/07/Vol-1_Ch-12_VanSaaze.pdf> [accessed 12 February 2020].

23   She adds to the argument put forth by Jon Ippolito in his paper 'Death by Wall Label' in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, ed. by Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 106–33.

24   Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 35.

25   Glenn Wharton and Harvey Molotch, 'The Challenge of Installation Art', in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas, and Uncomfortable Truths*, ed. by Alison Bracker and Alison Richmond (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 210–22 (p. 220).

26   Laurenson, 'Authenticity, Change and Loss', p. 7.

some procured every year. These material elements are arranged in clockwise order on a Seder plate — *Chazeret* (lettuce), *Karpas* (vegetable), *Beitzah* (roasted egg), *Zero'ah* (roasted bone), *Charoset* (nuts and dates) — with *Maror* (bitter herbs) at the centre. The table must have three pieces of unleavened bread (*matzot*), specially arranged and covered, and a bowl of salt water. There is a time requirement (the Seder cannot begin until sundown) and a sequence of words and actions, organized into fifteen steps that the leader must perform. Seders are incredibly varied, because once the requirements are fulfilled, the remainder of the decisions are open for interpretation. If artworks are performed as a practice or ritual, then they are authentic every time.

Of course, in human history, ritual action preceded formal religion, so it is not surprising to find this long-established aspect of our humanity intersecting with contemporary art. In her book *Civilizing Rituals*, Carol Duncan argues that Western art museums are ritual structures that are not only physically modelled after temples and palaces but also provide a stage setting upon which visitors enact ritual behaviours — including pilgrimage, procession, and contemplation — with the goal of achieving a transformative or enlightening experience.[27] Duncan says of the ritual nature of a visitor's experience of the art museum:

> Once we question our Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation between religious and secular experience — that the one is rooted in belief while the other is based in lucid and objective rationality — we may begin to glimpse the hidden — perhaps the better word is disguised — ritual content of secular ceremonies.[28]

Duncan focuses her analysis on the visitor's experience, but the corollary suggests that museum staff, like the temple priests or Seder leaders, program the ritual site for the pilgrim or guest. Some of the recent art practices that appear to challenge us in wholly new ways may in fact have deep histories, connecting us to behaviours that are fundamentally human.

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27   Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1, 2, 7, 12–13.

28   Ibid., p. 8.

RITUAL MODEL

Using ritual as a conceptual model for continually presenting and re-presenting artworks takes more aspects of doing these artworks into account than the score/performance model does. Both models incorporate the notion that variable media and time-based media artworks have work-defining properties, multiple allowable interpretations within limits defined by the artist, and programmed spectator experiences. However, the ritual model also accounts for diverse instruction systems beyond the idea of a 'score', which suggests a formal notation system.

With ritual settings, physical space is a part of meaning creation, physical objects may be required and their placement may be specified, certain gestures and recitation may be required, and participation may be required and even welcomed. This model allows a series of defining elements without which the entire iteration would not be authentic, and, perhaps most importantly, it provides a conceptual basis for the iteration as an authentic enactment, without necessitating the addition of the prefix 're-'.

Moreover, the defining elements become the core structure of the installation, around which collective participation and interpretation come into play as positive social activity, just as curators, exhibition designers, preparators, conservators, and others play their roles in realizing iterations of works of art in the museum.

These ideas represent an ongoing effort to reconcile various viewpoints and realities, as conservators strive to present variable media and time-based media artworks in an authentic manner over and over again. In conservation practice today, understanding the complete identity of an artwork is central to understanding what is needed to preserve it for the future.

These models help explain why the museum keeps a set of specific televisions for one video artwork but not for another, or why one artwork must be shown on a film projector while another, which also originated on film, can be shown on a video screen. They explain why conservators repeatedly interview artists to better understand the lives of artworks, why repeatedly installing artworks is critical for their survival, and why documentation models and strategies figure so prominently into their care.

With so many artworks now combining traditional media and new technologies, it is essential for conservators to continue to develop and test models for preservation that are built upon the shared foundation of conservation ethics and methodology that has been established for all cultural heritage. Only through collaboration, across the conservation field and beyond, can long-term preservation of these artworks be achieved.

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