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Conserving the Ephemeral: A Philosophical Problem for Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT. The objective of this paper is to reassess the role of conservation in light of developments in contemporary art. Conservation, traditionally defined as the practice of maintaining the original condition of a work of art over time, encounters a difficulty when dealing with what we might call transient art forms like installations, performance, and conceptual art. In this paper, I propose two potential approaches for rethinking conservation in contemporary art. The first, termed the positive approach, emphasises preserving the conceptual identity of artworks, irrespective of the persistence of materials. The second, the negative approach, dismisses the possibility of conservation, asserting that embracing the ephemeral nature of these art forms is crucial to respecting their originality. The presentation critically analyses the limitations and possibilities of each proposed approach, contributing to the delineation of the future of conservation in contemporary art.

1. Introduction

Several works of contemporary art utilize ephemeral, perishable, or unstable materials. Confronted with artistic kinds such as installations, performances, and conceptual art one can legitimately raise

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questions concerning conservation and the transmission of our artistic heritage to future generations. Described as the practice of preserving the original condition of the work of art over time, conservation has historically translated into meticulous material care, aimed at preserving the identity of works of art.³ While this practice has been effective for centuries, it now seems to face a difficulty considering developments in contemporary art and its ontological peculiarities. Therefore, it is useful to reconsider the role of conservation amid these changes with the aim of, on the one hand, better understanding the practice of conservation itself and, on the other, shedding some light on the ontology of contemporary art.

In this paper, I individuate two approaches to contemporary art conservation. The first, which I term *positive*, recognizes the feasibility of preserving works of art in spite of the problematic persistence of their material, emphasizing the importance of the conceptual aspect in identifying the work. The second approach, labelled *negative*, rejects the possibility of preserving these art forms since respecting their originality entails accepting their unique nature and, consequently, their ephemeral character.

I will explore these two alternatives, highlighting the pros and cons of each. Specifically, in section 1, I will discuss the positive approach, distinguishing between two possible positions within it; in section 2, I will discuss the negative approach. Finally, in section 3, I will defend a pluralist approach, and I argue that it has the potential for overcoming the shortcomings of both the positive and the negative approaches.

2. Positive Approaches

The first approaches I will consider are “positive” since they argue that the work of art can be conserved because it is not to be identified with its material aspect but rather with its conceptual

³ ICOM defines conservation as “all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations (...) All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item.” (ICOM 2008) [ICOM-CC | Terminology for conservation \(2008\)](#); while UNESCO describes it as: “Conservation includes effective and active measures that can be taken by States Parties to ensure the identification, protection, presentation and transmission of heritage.” [UNESCO World Heritage Centre - Compendium](#). For a definition of the conservator’s work see also: [Burra Charter 2013 \(Adopted 31.10.2013\) \(icomos.org\)](#).

component. Conservation should focus on preserving the latter rather than the physical object. We can distinguish two different “positive” approaches depending on whether the conceptual component is considered either a) as a set of rules for execution or b) as a self-standing set of ideas.

2.1. Rule-Conceptualism

The position I dub ‘rule-conceptualism’ considers contemporary art, especially installation art, as a two-stage art form, in which we can identify a first normative moment and a second executive moment. Rule-conceptualism fits well with Sherri Irvin’s (2005; 2008; 2022) theory, according to which the identity of artworks consists of rules specified by what she calls “the artist’s sanction”.

As a case study Irvin considers Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) whose display consists in a group of candies placed on the ground (weighing about 80 kg), which the public is invited to consume as a symbol of the progressive deterioration of Ross’s body due to AIDS. Irvin notes that the identity of Gonzalez-Torres’ work does not reside in the candies themselves, but in the rules that govern the appreciation of the work by specifying how to display it, interact with it, and take care of it. From this perspective, the candies are just means to the appreciation of the work that can be substituted from time to time without altering its identity. In works such as *Untitled*, originality and authenticity pertain not to the physical material, but to the set of instructions that the artist has established for the construction of the installation.

This approach bears similarities to how we perceive musical compositions. In music, we recognize a primary stage of the work in the normative auditory structure identified by the score and a secondary stage in its performance. From this perspective, Pip Laurenson (2006) claims that what she calls ‘time-based media installations’ should be viewed as analogous to musical compositions since “they belong to the category of works of art created through a two-stage process [...] where what is experienced is the performance, created at the beginning and then performed at later times”.⁴ Such a comparison between works of contemporary art and works of music prompts

⁴ Laurenson draws on the works of Stephen Davies (2001) and Lydia Goehr (1992) on musical ontology. The full text is available at: [Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations – Tate Papers | Tate](#).

us to reconsider the role of conservation not in relation to the transient performance, but to the enduring rules. Just as the work of music can be preserved simply by preserving its score, the work of contemporary art might be preserved simply by preserving its rules.

This approach to conservation, however, faces serious issues. First, the practice of explicitly specifying rules is much less common in contemporary art than in music. While works of music usually have explicit scores, the rules for displaying works of contemporary art are often left implicit by the artist and, as time passes, it may be complicated to properly identify them in order to preserve the work. Furthermore, there are cases in which the rules may prevent the performances. This occurs when the artist's guidelines include conditions that are unrepeatable, such as being linked to a specific time and place or specific participants.

Among the conditions of unrepeatability that conservators encounter, we should also consider obsolescence. The scarcity of materials, for instance, affects video art due to the rapid advancement of technologies. Conservators of video art are often faced with the need to replace the medium to ensure the continued accessibility of the works. Such material substitutions may sometimes conflict with the artist's sanction. In these cases, the conservator must determine the extent to which the rules should be revised without compromising the identity of the artwork (van de Vall, 2015).

An example of this dilemma can be found in Nam June Paik's "TVs", such as *TV Garden* and *TV Buddha* made in 1974. Paik's televisions are constructed using obsolete technological components, such as cathode ray tubes, which deteriorate over time and become increasingly difficult to replace or repair. Although Paik established a rule allowing for the replacement of token cathode ray tubes with other tokens of the same type, he did not address the possibility of replacing them with tokens of different technological types (Irvin, 2022, pp. 179-182; Hölling, 2017). With the obsolescence of these components and the passing of the artist, it falls upon the conservator to interpret the artist's intentions and determine whether the replacement of the tubes with tokens of different technological types (for instance, digital ones) irreversibly compromises the identity of Paik's work.

In such situations, an age-old debate widely discussed in philosophy of art regarding the artist's intentions resurfaces.⁵ Translated into the context of contemporary art conservation, it pertains to determining how faithfully the artist's directives should be adhered to (Dykstra, 1996; Maes, 2010; Wharton, 2015). This problem arises both when the rules are not explicit, requiring the conservator to interpret the artist's intentions (Van de Vall et al., 2011), and when the rules are explicit but challenge the interests of the conservator.

The wide variety of materials used in contemporary art often requires conservators to decide whether to prioritize the artist's prescribed display or to do what they believe is in the work's best interest to keep it accessible as long as possible. Starting from an assessment of the individual work, it may sometimes be more convenient to amend the rules or establish new ones to prevent irreversible damage; in other situations, however, preserving the subject matter may risk betraying part of the work's meaning by limiting proper enjoyment. Consequently, depending on the context, conservators may adopt an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist approach (Muñoz-Viñas, 2014; Irvin, 2022).

2.2. Idea-Conceptualism

Considering the identity of the work as a set of rules, as the above discussed "Rule-Conceptualism" advocates, presents difficulties for the conservator. In certain cases, conservators must review the rules to preserve the work's identity and adapt them to the new context, but it is not clear whether they are entitled to do so. The alternative position which opts to take the identity of the work to an even higher level of abstraction, might solve this problem. This approach, which I dub 'Idea-Conceptualism', makes the concern with execution secondary, allowing the focus to be on the conservation of the work's fundamental concepts, rather than on the contingent conditions for instantiating them.

⁵ Philosophers have engaged with this topic extensively, especially since the 1960s. See, among the many publications: Livingston, 2005; Carroll, 2000, pp. 75-95; Iseminger (ed.), 1992; Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946.

This position draws inspiration from one of the artistic genres that seem to pose the greatest challenges to traditional conservation: Conceptual Art.⁶ Following the principle of conceptual art, which states that “the idea is king” (Kosuth, 1969), the identity of the artwork is located on a purely conceptual level. For this reason, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens introduced the “Idea Idea”⁷ (2007; 2009), suggesting that in conceptual works, what matters is the idea, while the physical material is a secondary and replaceable accessory: “In conceptual art, there is no physical medium; the medium is the idea.”

Regardless of the possible objections that could be raised against the “Idea Idea”,⁸ this position seems to solve the conservation problem left open by the first positive approach. Thanks to the identification of the work exclusively with the idea, the theory proposed by Schellekens and Goldie avoids the problem of the inapplicability of the rules and of the consequent failure of instantiation of them. According to idea-conceptualism, the conservator should preserve the idea that constitutes the work of art, regardless of the materials through which it is expressed since the latter do not affect its identity.

Prominent examples of conceptual art that prioritize the idea over physical form can be found in the works of Joseph Kosuth (such as ‘One and Three Chairs,’ 1965) or Robert Barry (such as ‘Inert Gas Series,’ 1969). For these artists, the instantiation of the work is incidental; they employ a physical medium only as a means to convey the idea they wish to express. If the idea is not effectively conveyed, the preservation of the work is considered incomplete.

The first challenge faced by this approach lies in correctly identifying the underlying idea of a work. How can we ensure that the ideas attributed to a work are accurate? This problem existed even in ‘traditional’ art, where restorers had to discern the artist’s intentions to reconstruct the work.

⁶ Conceptual art can be understood in two ways: as a specific art movement from 1966 to 1972 (Lippard, 1973), or more broadly as any art form using ideas as its medium. Here, I refer to conceptual art in the broader sense.

⁷ Conceptual art, as articulated by Sol LeWitt (1967) and Joseph Kosuth (1969), redefines art as involving ideas that constitute both the creative process and the object of appreciation, regardless of sensory and material aspects. This definition transforms the artist into a thinker. Building on the positions of LeWitt and Kosuth, Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens (2007; 2009; Schellekens, 2022) use the expression “Idea Idea” to emphasize that in conceptual art, the idea is both the process of creation and the object of appreciation.

⁸ Objections to the ‘Idea Idea’ have been raised by Julian Dodd (2016) and Wesley D. Cray (2014). Although not directly mentioning the thesis of Schellekens and Goldie, an opposing position can also be found in Stigter (2016; 2017; 2023).

Similarly, conserving contemporary (conceptual) art entails the risk of misunderstanding the artist's statements or neglecting pertinent information for proper archiving (Hölling, 2017).

A second challenge relates to making documentation and archival work accessible over time to make the artist's intended idea also accessible. Given the rapid evolution of culture, the conservator of the future might even be forced to update the conceptual content of the work to make it understandable to new generations. Balancing accessibility with respect for the idea is the central challenge posed by conceptual art to conservation. One can address this challenge by drawing on the 'Biographical' approach to conservation proposed by Renée van de Vall, Hanna Hölling, Tatja Scholte and Sanneke Stigter (2011). This approach is based on the idea that each work has its own history or biography, which each new installation updates. The task of the conservator is to document the "life" of the work through archival practice and to use this documentation to enhance the public's engagement with the work. According to this approach, the conservator becomes an interpreter, a mediator, or even a co-producer of the work.

3. The Negative Approach: Particularism

An alternative approach to conserving time-bound and other ephemeral artworks involves rejecting the notion that conservation, defined as the preservation of identity over time, remains pertinent for them. This idea recalls Charles Baudelaire's (1863) claim that the signs of modernity are the transitory, the fleeting, and the contingent. In accordance with this perspective, some contemporary art adopts transience as a premise. Art critic Achille Bonito Oliva (1996, p. 186) characterizes contemporaneity by stressing the ephemeral nature of materials and the consequent perishable and transitory function of the work of art. In the face of a fleeting and transitory idea of contemporaneity, Massimo Carboni (2007; 2014) criticises conservation, preservation, and restoration activities aimed at contemporary artistic production, calling them "aporetic" and "contradictory", as they seem to contradict the identity that artists have chosen for their works. According to Carboni, contemporary art represents its own disappearance, so temporariness becomes a central aspect of its identity. Carboni suggests that the conservator should no longer strive to prolong the work's existence, but rather to ensure respect for what he calls the work's 'right to disappearance'. If the

idea of preserving the identity of works of art finds its highest expression in Romanticism, it is necessary to consider the possibility of contemporary art overturning priorities, embracing the fleeting and transitory as an integral part of its essence.

By advocating the essential transience of contemporary art, scholars such as Bonito Oliva and Carboni seem to presuppose a particularist ontology according to which the work of contemporary art is a particular concrete object or event having its own singular location in space. Works of contemporary art, from this perspective, ontologically resemble traditional works of art such as paintings and statues, except for the fact that, unlike the latter, they often deliberately challenge preservation.

Significant examples of artworks that assert the right to oblivion, by challenging conservation, include Gustav Metzger's *Self-Destructive Art* and Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1992-1999). Both artists deliberately stage the disappearance of their works. Gustav Metzger is known for creating self-destructive art, where the destruction of the work becomes an integral part of the creative process. Zoe Leonard's work exemplifies decay by displaying fruit peels stitched by the artist, which rot over time until they disappear completely. In these examples, the artwork is identified with the process of decay, and any intervention to alter this condition only compromises the work's identity.

Still, accepting ontological particularism as a negative approach to conservation has questionable consequences. Firstly, the refusal to preserve ephemeral works of art overlooks the importance of transmitting contemporary art as part of our cultural heritage across generations. Secondly, this position seems to downplay the importance of documentation in contemporary art conservation, reducing it to mere photographic reproductions of paintings and sculptures found in museum bookshops. However, important artists such as Marina Abramović and Allan Kaprow meticulously document their performances, which then become the subject of museum exhibitions. Consequently, can we truly assume that Abramović and Kaprow's works are limited to performance? Many works of contemporary art can be primarily enjoyed through documentation, so not assigning an identity value to it restricts the experience of contemporary art to a very small number of people. By elevating transience as a distinctive feature of the contemporary, this position renounces the idea of art as a shared experience.

4. The Pluralist Approach: Experientialism

The last approach I discuss is experientialism. Unlike the previous positions, it presents itself as a pluralist approach, not excluding any proposed alternatives but suggesting that, depending on the work, one can choose the most appropriate conservation strategy. This pluralist solution is inspired by Jean-Pierre Cometti's (2016) theory that the primary objective of art conservation is to maintain the function of the artwork. If, as Enrico Terrone (2024) argues, the artworks are "experiential-artefacts" whose function is to generate experiences, the question of contemporary art conservation can be addressed by considering the types of experiences that contemporary artworks are intended to generate. Specifically, each of the three approaches to conservation we have considered so far presupposes a different conception of the experience to be generated by works of contemporary art.

By conceiving of the work as a system of rules to be instantiated, Rule-Conceptualism involves the conceptual appreciation of the rules that constitute the work through the perceptual appreciation of its instances, just like a work of music as a system of rules specified by the score can be appreciated by listening to its performances. The appreciative experience, in this sense, is conceptual in virtue of being perceptual: one conceptually appreciates the system of rules in virtue of perceptually appreciating the instances (that are constructed by abiding by those rules), thereby drawing inferences from these instances to those rules.

The other positive approach to conservation, namely Idea-Conceptualism, differs from Rule-Conceptualism by giving up the mediation of instances that must be perceptually appreciated in order to conceptually appreciate the work. The appreciation of contemporary art, from this perspective, is conceptual all the way through. However, by acknowledging the possibility of a cognitive phenomenology (Pitt 2004), one can claim that the appreciation of works of contemporary art as ideas remains experiential despite not being essentially perceptual. Cognitive phenomenology, in this sense, reveals that the appropriate experience of conceptual art is not a matter of perception but rather of understanding, reasoning, conjecturing. Perception, at most, just offers some cues to enter such high-level cognitive states of appreciation.

While Rule-Conceptualism involves a mixed perceptual-conceptual appreciation, and Idea-Conceptualism favours an essentially conceptual appreciation, the third approach to conservation we have considered, namely Particularism, gives a central role to the perceptual (and possibly agentive) experience of the work. The reason why Particularism denies the preservation of contemporary art, indeed, comes from the conjunction of the need to perceive and the transience of what should be perceived. By casting perception (possibly supplemented by action) as the appropriate experience of the work, Particularism acknowledges that, when the work can no longer be perceived, it can no longer be appropriately experienced, hence no longer exists. The appropriate experience of the work, in this sense, is a perception accompanied by a sense of ephemerality of what is perceived.

Experientialism recognizes that different contemporary artworks may necessitate different conservation approaches based on the experiences they offer. For instance, Rule-Conceptualism is ideal for works appreciated through their construction principles, Idea-Conceptualism suits works best understood conceptually, and Particularism applies to works whose experience hinges on their transience. Experientialism offers us an approach to conservation that does not force us to select one option but rather enables us to conserve works of contemporary art by relying on the plurality of rewarding experiences they are capable of generating.

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