

# CONSERVATION MAKING ART HISTORY

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## ABSTRACTS

Ina Archer (National Museum of African American History and Culture)  
LOVES LABOR (EVENTUALLY) LOST

*“We have to be able to go into the apparatus, interrogate it on every level, break it down, sometimes, very hypothetically and retroactively at this point in the camera’s development, almost as in science fiction and say, ‘What if we had put the apparatus that we understand as cinema in Africa five hundred years ago? What would we have now?’ If you take a hand-cranked camera—which as I’ve said is a more appropriate tool with which to realize motion that has a certain level of plasticity (much like a talking drum)—how can we go back and say, ‘Wow, why was that ever abandoned?’”*—Arthur Jafa

My job in time-based media conservation intersects productively and sometimes distractingly with my work as a multimedia artist, the aim of which has always been to remake/frame a history of cinema in which I am a key player. This was a lonely effort until I intuited a need, widely discussed by artists, scholars, and media conservators, to diversify the practice and culture of film preservation in analog and digital formats, philosophies, and methodologies. In this talk, I will present examples of linkages between my video work—which remains without conservation or proper storage—and the work that I do as both an advocate for film preservation and as a media conservation specialist at Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, working with analog home movies and videos that have been digitized through the institution’s Great Migration Home Movie Digitization project.

Jennifer Bajorek (Hampshire College)  
BUT WHO DECIDED? EPISTEMES AND POLITICS OF DECAY

*“But who decided that a history, that history as such, must be a visible accumulation of ruins?”*  
—Simon Njami

Simon Njami, remarking on what he calls “the monstrousness of Western materiality,” underscores the incompatibility of Western notions and experiences of time, memory, history, and materiality with their African counterparts. To Western preoccupations with duration, monumentality, and the visible or recoverable trace, Njami opposes the ephemerality of African art and the fluidity of African orality, adding: “It was necessary to devise a different method.” Art historical approaches to African art have changed radically since the end of colonialism, and the discipline has become at least conversant with postcolonial and decolonial arguments. But the substance of Njami’s critique remains as appropriate as ever. My talk engages with these and other tensions vis-à-vis specific photographs and photographic collections in West Africa. It reflects on the multiple temporalities and culturally specific philosophies of time involved in writing about, and intervening materially in the life of, prints and negatives. Parallel to my research, for years I have also been involved in preventive conservation projects undertaken with museum and cultural heritage professionals in collections in West Africa. These projects, while urgently necessary, have often highlighted and even amplified the frictions between Eurocentric philosophies and protocols of conservation and West African realities. This presentation attempts to respond to these frictions. It addresses writing as a form of conservation, and with conservation, considered in conventional (chemical, material, or institutional) terms, “as a critical act.”

Chương-Đài Võ (Asia Art Archive)

#### SOUTHEAST ASIA: PERFORMANCE ART AND THE BODY POLITIC

This talk discusses the archiving of performance-based practices in Southeast Asia, and implications for artistic work, critical discourses, and art histories. Artists in Southeast Asia have used performance to break from the conventions of institutional training, disrupt dominant narratives, create their own networks, defy the commodification of art, and elude the control of the state. This talk will focus on the 1993–1994 Artists’ General Assembly (AGA), a weeklong festival that the collectives Fifth Passage Artists Ltd and The Artists Village organized at Fifth Passage Gallery in Singapore. Among the many projects and screening of videos, AGA included two performances that became sensationalized spectacles in the media. A series of events would lead to the National Arts Council’s de facto policy of not funding performance art in Singapore for a decade. This talk examines a turning point in the development of performance art practices in Singapore, and the role of archival collections in preserving obscured histories.

Sven Dupré (Utrecht University and University of Amsterdam)

#### ART HISTORY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SKILL

This talk is a reflection on skill in art history. What is the place of skill in the historiography? Although related to concepts such as technique, skill plays a remarkably limited role in the discipline of art history. Michael Baxandall’s narratives of making, as developed in *Painting and Experience* and *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, are probably the most important exceptions that immediately come to mind. How might art history profit from opening a

dialogue with conservation and its emphasis on the temporality of art and the processual character of art-making, as well as further exchanges with (historical) anthropological work on “techniques of the body” (Marcel Mauss) and archaeologies of materials and skills focusing on the reconstruction of the *chaîne opératoire*? Given the ephemerality of skill, the questioning of the role of skill in art history also raises the issue of the possibilities and limitations of hands-on reconstruction, which as a performative methodology is much more widespread in conservation. While art history is a relative latecomer to the adoption of hands-on methods, the discipline can build on sustained methodological reflection that considers re-enactment as part of the toolbox of art history since Erwin Panofsky’s *Art History as a Humanistic Discipline* (1938). While for Panofsky and other art historians, re-enactment was only mental, I argue that dialogue with conservation can help art history to re-think re-enactment as material, bodily, and sensuous. In this talk I elaborate on the consequences of this re-thinking of re-enactment for the discipline. What sort of art histories will we write if, following the recent scholarship in conservation, we move skill and technique to the core of the discipline?

Noémie Étienne (University of Bern)

#### CONSERVATION IN CONVERSATION: ART HISTORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE MAKING

This presentation is part of a longer research project focused on restoration and conservation practices as forms of active reception that reveal various political, aesthetical, and philosophical contexts. In my first book about the restoration of paintings in France (1750–1815), I argued that eighteenth-century conservation both reflected and constructed art historical values and agendas: at the time, art history was not only a written science, but also a material practice elaborated through the physical selection, updating, and presentation of paintings. In this talk, I would like to take the argument further, and observe past and present debates about conservation in a cross-cultural context. In this perspective, debates and consultations with artists and communities are key methods for conservators: but what do those discussions tell us? What is embedded in the frequent controversies? How are practices and debates both informing us about art historical positions, as well as aesthetical and political agendas? I will consider three cases studies, focusing on a variety of media (namely paintings, furniture, and sculpture). These examples come from different historical, cultural and social contexts. Nonetheless, they all show that conservation—taken here in its broadest sense—is a dynamic practice building up a material and political history of art and of cultural heritage.

Fatima Fall (Centre de Recherches et de Documentation du Senegal)

#### HISTORY OF CONSERVATION PRACTICES AT THE CRDS

The Centre IFAN (French Institute of Black Africa) was founded in 1943, following a decree that created subsidiary branches of IFAN in each territory of what was then the A.O.F. (French West Africa). Later renamed the Centre de Recherches et de Documentation du Senegal (CRDS), the Centre is now part of the Gaston Berger University in Saint Louis. The Centre houses one of the

oldest libraries in Francophone Africa; a history museum with 1,005 objects; a refurbished storage facility; a photographic collection holding a wealth of 42,971 documents; and a collaborative workspace. Our expertise in issues of conservation is often solicited on the national, indeed the international, level. Moreover, the museum is distinguished in its commitment to teaching and learning. Our Heritage Crafts Section within the research and training program Civilizations, Religions, Arts, and Communications (CRAC) at the University Gaston Berger is a striking example, in which the CRDS provides pedagogical support for practical or supervised work. None of this could have been accomplished without staff training and capacity building in institutional management, cultural mediation, and conservation through international cooperation with institutions like ICCROM-Université de Paris 1, EPA, and others. This talk shows how we have struggled to get to this point. I will also discuss what could be done in the other institutions of Senegal and West Africa, particularly in the areas of training, conservation (documentation, inventory, exhibitions, etc.), and cultural mediation, to enhance the value of their collections and documentary archives.

Annika Svendsen Finne (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)  
REPAINTED MADONNAS IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY SIENA AS ARTWORKS AND  
ART HISTORY

In early 1300s Siena, several large Madonna and Child panels were partially repainted by artists in the circle of Duccio. It is tempting to understand these repaintings as Vasari's vision of art history set into action, over a century before his time. The older Madonna panels were appreciated, but important features were also painted over and eclipsed as a new generation of artists "modernized" the work of their predecessors. The partially repainted Madonna panel becomes an artifact whose stratigraphy performs the progressive development of artistic practice over linear time. This talk overlays this narrative with a new reading, wherein the repainting intervention does not only update but also re-completes the earlier artwork. While the newly repainted faces of the Madonnas looked physically and stylistically different from the older painted zones they neighbored, these fissures could actually be internalized by the earlier painting, as the panels already contained other, analogous stylistic fissures, which corresponded to the painting's content. I argue that in these instances the pre-existing painting and the repainting fused together into a single, *longue-durée* artwork, whose discretely layered but conceptually entangled stratigraphy simultaneously illustrates and unsettles the Vasarian historiographic paradigm. The reworked Madonnas problematize not Vasari's basic observation that new styles did supersede earlier styles, but instead his premise that an internally cohesive macro-narrative could account for painting's history. Rediscovered as asynchronous artworks, these repaintings require us to entertain multiple, apparently contradictory historiographic narratives, and to rethink how Italian paintings are today valued and conserved.

Caroline Fowler (Clark Art Institute)

## DOES IT MATTER? CONSERVATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

This talk examines the language of conservation as an alternative mode of description and vision within art history. While there has been extensive attention in historiography to rhetorical modes—from *ekphrasis* to formalism—there has been little consideration of the ways in which attending to the marking of time and damage within the surfaces of objects demarcates an alternative mode of visibility and rhetoric within art history. I will ask what it means to read the texts composed about these surfaces. How does the textual record around condition engage with larger histories of value, insurance, mobility, and finally, the canonization of art? This talk will consider how modes of description often deemed factual, scientific, or purely descriptive are part of larger institutional histories about inclusion, exclusion, and how we see the world.

Erma Hermens (University of Amsterdam)

## CHOREOGRAPHIES OF TECHNICAL ART HISTORY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The fire that destroyed parts of the Notre Dame in Paris led to a discussion of its restoration, demonstrating how, in the field of built cultural heritage, historical buildings are considered living entities, their material and conceptual composition continuously evolving due to ageing, loss, political or cultural impact, or disasters. In considering objects as dynamic entities, an unraveling of their biographies reflects the relationship between object, maker, and environments over time. We may consider the artist/artisans workshop as a similar kind of organism, wherein tasks are often shared among different individuals offering specific expertise and experience, from apprentice to master, in a system wherein each member knows his or her role in the choreography of making. To understand these structures, we may apply empirical methods from anthropology and history of science, such as reconstructions and re-enactment. The increasing application of scientific analyses in conservation research, combined with digital 2D and 3D imaging methods, places complex demands on the humanities and social sciences to provide intersecting narratives. The form of interdisciplinary research often referred to as technical art history offers a new paradigm for the study of environments of artistic production, premised on collaborative research and dialogue. This holistic approach, which integrates the interpretation and contextualisation of such data into object biographies, may transform the way art historians study cultural heritage, shaping notions of authenticity, artistic intent, longevity, and preservation. This talk addresses some of the epistemic questions this kind of approach raises through several case studies on the choreography of artist/artisan workshops as well as of current interdisciplinary teams of researchers in the field of technical art history.

Yukio Lippit (Harvard University)

## JAPANESE PAINTING: MOUNTING, MEDIATION, TRANSMISSION, RENEWAL

The display of most Japanese paintings, and hanging scrolls in particular, was specific to the occasion. Artworks were typically unrolled only for the duration of a specific event, whether a poetry gathering, tea ceremony, social visit, or religious ritual. After the span of a day or even several hours, the painting was promptly rolled up and stored away, only to be replaced by another work whose selection was calibrated for another occasion. The apparatus in which a painting was embedded—inclusive of backing talks, decorative silk mountings, and a dowel around which to roll and unroll the work—would evolve to accommodate both occasional display and compact storage. At the same time, the mounting apparatus could also serve the purpose of mediating between the work and its surroundings, both visually with the architectural interior and semantically vis-à-vis a painting's audience and occasion. Whenever a painting was conserved (ideally once a generation but in practice more infrequently), not only was surface damage treated, but the paraphernalia that framed it could be replaced. Thus the silk mountings, the backing talks, and the dowel constitute something of a parallel history of Japanese painting in which vestiges of the history, time, use, and pedigree of the object could be discerned to varying degrees. This talk imagines just such a shadow history, identifying several important case studies as well as the insights yielded—and further questions raised—by sustained attention to the mounting apparatus. Where does the artwork end? Why is the viewing experience of paintings so textilic? How have the practices of renewing the apparatus been internalized and transmitted by conservators, and how does this embodied knowledge influence art history in the present?

Murad Khan Mumtaz (Williams College)

## 'STRUNG INTO WRITING, ENCHAINED INTO PAINTING': CONSERVATION IN THE PERSIANATE ALBUM

The Persian word for album is *muraqqa'*, which literally means “patched” or “patchwork.” The same word is also used for the patched cloak of the wandering dervish. Starting from the late-fifteenth century, the album in elite Persianate culture provided a space where text and image came together as a patchwork. Prized pieces of calligraphy and painting were carefully conserved, through copying and reusing, aiding in the making of new albums. These specimens from previous periods and locales were curated into albums compiled in South Asia as examples of ideals that contemporary artists could emulate and reconstitute in their own work. A European engraving of St. Catherine, for example, coexisted with a sixteenth-century Persian calligraphy from Central Asia, coming together on the same page to create new meanings for a seventeenth-century patron in India. In its heyday between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries, the Persianate world encompassed the geographical expanse from the Balkans to Bengal. Focusing on select examples from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal India, this talk explores the role and meaning of conservation for an early modern Persianate audience in South Asia. Using the practice of conservation as a conceptual framework, this talk

examines how the album mirrored, on a microcosmic level, the act of divine creation itself. This creative act was one that emperors and nobility, as patrons, were keen to project to give an aura of order and equilibrium to their own rule. Despite major discontinuities, this obsession with conservation—through copying, repurposing, and referencing—is a key convention that ties contemporary miniaturist practice in Pakistan with traditional Indian painting.

Brian Michael Murphy (Bennington College)

#### THE BETTMANN MORGUE: COLD STORAGE, DIGITIZATION, AND ARCHIVES OF RACIAL VIOLENCE

This talk narrates my research experiences in the Bettmann Archive, both the analog images in cold storage at Iron Mountain's National Data Center and the ever-changing digital databases in which a small fraction of the Bettmann has been reproduced (eg., Corbis and Getty). I examine the ways in which the preservation practices of cold storage and digitization shape the proliferation of possible meanings of the Bettmann's images. These preservation practices do not simply save what currently exists, but rather generate entirely new contexts for viewing and interpretation. This presentation argues that the creative categorization and organizational strategies deployed in the preservation of the Bettmann challenge dominant scholarly definitions of historical events and processes. As a case study, I analyze the Bettmann's expanded conception of lynching imagery, and elaborate the several ways that this conception productively disrupts long-held scholarly perspectives on historical images of racial violence.

Alva Noë (University of California at Berkeley)

#### ON DEATH AND ENTANGLEMENT: SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT LIFE, LOVE, AND THE AIMS OF ART CONSERVATION

This talk outlines an approach to art conversation drawing on reflections from philosophical biology.

Iwataro Oka (Oka Bokkodo Co., Ltd., Conservation Studio for National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties)

#### THE INFLUENCE OF CONSERVATION PRACTICE ON THE VIEWING AND APPRECIATION OF JAPANESE PAINTING

Japanese paintings are typically painted on either paper or silk and can assume a variety of formats, including hanging scrolls, handscrolls, folding screens, and sliding-door panels. Common to the mounting structure for these formats is reinforcement of the painting ground on its backside with several layers of *washi* paper affixed with wheat starch paste. It is this reinforcement that makes possible the rolling and unrolling, or the opening and closing, of such paintings. A fundamental step in Japanese conservation practice is the dismantling of this structure and the removal of backing paper to address damage to a painting over time. Damage can range from folds and tears in the support to the loss of pigment, all of which hamper smooth handling of the artwork. On these occasions, the backing paper is replaced by new

ones. Because traditional painting supports such as silk and talk are porous to light, the color of these backing talks can affect to no small degree the way a painting appears from the frontside. There are numerous examples of paintings from the late Edo period (1603–1868) for which conservation records document the intentional use of darkened backing talks—often dyed with *sumi* ink—in order to add a sense of gravitas to a painting or to render surface damage more obscure. In conservation practice today, it is increasingly common to consult art historians in determining the most appropriate color for newly applied backing talks. In addition to the color of backing talks, conservators also consult art historians as to which colors to use to fill in losses in the pictorial support. Since the late 1960s, it has been frowned upon in Japan to attempt to recreate the original ground color. Rather, a color is chosen from the artwork’s palette that will most harmonize with the missing area’s surroundings. Needless to say, because the color of the infill is so important to the appearance of an artwork, limits on attempts to approximate an original ground color requires further debate.

Fernando Domínguez Rubio (University of California, San Diego)  
ON MIMEOGRAPHIC LABOR AND THE ARTS OF CREATING THE SAME

This talk offers an empirical exploration of what I call “mimeographic labor,” the labor of *creating* sameness. I emphasize create because it is often assumed that this type of labor is “merely” reproductive, and ultimately inconsequential, since it does not introduce any significant difference into the world. The same is not, in fact, given, but must be artificially built into the world. Moreover, I propose that the same is not just an artificial creation, but is fragile and temporary, and must be continually maintained and recreated. Building these arguments empirically by looking at how mimeographic labor works in the case of contemporary art conservation, this talk examines such questions as: What specific kind of sameness does the mimeographic work of conservation need to create in the case of art? How is it done? And in what specific way can conservation be said to be creative? In addressing these questions, the presentation shows how sameness is always a site of struggle, forever trapped in the contested in-between space that lies between identity and difference, continuity and change, order and disorder. Moreover, not all forms of creating sameness are the same. Each form of mimeographic labor entails a specific regime of worth, and with it, a particular way of defining which differences can be tolerated and which must be eliminated in the name of maintaining the same.

Kavita Singh (School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal University, New Delhi)  
CONSERVING MONUMENTS, REVIVING TEMPLES: COMMUNITIES, MONUMENTS,  
AND POLITICS IN SOUTH INDIA

This paper describes two voluntary organizations in South India that are involved in architectural conservation work. One is a religious foundation that sponsors the careful excavation of medieval temples; the other is an association of heritage-lovers that rebuilds ancient temples while scrupulously adhering to conservation norms. These groups value the

temples they excavate and conserve for their art historical worth, but their goal is to make these neglected temples fit for worship once again. In doing this, they cross the tense boundary between two regimes that have fought to exert control over the objects of India's art history: the regime of religion, and the regime of the secular state. Time was when one could easily distinguish between Indian artifacts and monuments that had remained sacred and those that had been secularized through their "look," which in turn derived from the protocols applied to them. For things placed in the museal regime, utmost attention was paid to the preservation of physical bodies: icons were to be stripped, cleaned, and protected from touch and from sources of corrosion; temples had to be preserved in their original form without additions, alterations and coats of garish paint. An entirely different regime applied to temples under worship that could be expanded and altered to serve changing needs, while icons under worship had to be nurtured through regular lustrations and offerings of clothing and food. The two organizations studied here exemplify an emergent trend of "crossovers," acts that follow the norms and protocols of the museal regime are being applied to temples and icons—as a form of devotional care. What are the implications of the merging of the museal and the sacral in the actions of these individuals and groups? How does this phenomenon intersect with Hindutva politics of today? And what are the implications for the future of the secular domains of archaeology and art history in India? This paper offers some conjectures.

Gabriela Siracusano (National Research Council, Argentina, and MATERIA: Centro de Investigación en Arte, Materia y Cultura, Buenos Aires)

#### MINIMUM WORLDS: MATERIAL POETICS BETWEEN TIME, DETAILS, AND FRAGMENTS

Art historians, curators, museologists, and museum curators tend to be great consumers of internal coherence, of the illusion of the whole organized, of the control of entropy, of tranquility that offers the balance; in short, of the finished work, prey to a frozen, static, and drowsy time. As far as contemporary art is concerned, this has begun to reverse, for in the production of the nineteenth century and before, these needs persist in a sustained way whenever we choose a piece for an exhibition or for the pages of a catalogue. Just make a comparison between the set of objects displayed in the halls of a museum and the one that constitutes its deposit to identify that the works with their committed structure, with small or large losses, prey to the deterioration of time, nature or human action, or turned into fragments are precisely those who will not be invited to participate in our speech. In this sense the historiography of art reveals a certain degree of material discrimination: We want the finished work! We want you complete! We love your beautiful continuous surface, no breaks, no gaps! But...doesn't this overriding desire for completeness hide a deep fear of dealing with the universe of minimal worlds that make up a work, worlds in which different times coexist, and a fragmented, hidden materiality, in constant change and appearance? From different case studies, I propose to discuss certain concepts and methods that start from considering an anthropology of matter and an archaeology of artistic making for the study of images.