

**Getting on With It: Conservation, Art, and Why the Contemporary Still Matters. Visiting Contemporary Conservation Limited, New York**

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In this article I set out to disarm the persistent (art)-historical trope of “the contemporary” by a close engagement with the work and processes that contemporary art conservation entails. By stressing the aging—and by extension, the inevitable death—of contemporary art objects, I hoped to find an end-point to the curiously ahistorical category of the contemporary as well. Through the extreme generosity of Christian Scheidemann, president of Contemporary Conservation Limited in New York, as well as his team of conservators, I was able to conduct interviews and visit the studio on several occasions. The ensuing intersections of the material and the theoretical did not create an escape hatch from the contemporary; however it offered surprising and generative new perspectives in terms of the art object’s subjectivity, the deceleration of time in the conservation process, and *longue durée* art history.

La figure du « contemporain », utilisée en histoire de l’art, est persistante. Dans mon article, j’essaie de la désactiver en prenant en compte avec précision le travail et les processus requis par la conservation de l’art contemporain. C’est en mettant l’accent sur le vieillissement – et même, par extension, sur la mort inévitable – des objets d’art contemporain, que j’espérais mettre fin à la catégorie, étrangement anhistorique, du contemporain. Grâce à l’extrême générosité de Christian Scheidemann, président de la Contemporary Conservation Limited à New York, ainsi qu’à son équipe de conservateurs, j’ai pu faire des entretiens et visiter leur studio à plusieurs reprises. L’approche

matérielle a ainsi recoupé l'approche théorique, mais cela ne m'a pas ouvert une porte de sortie du contemporain. Toutefois, cela m'a offert de nouvelles perspectives, surprenantes et prometteuses, quant à la subjectivité de l'objet d'art, à la décélération du temps dans le processus de conservation, enfin quant à l'histoire de l'art appréhendée dans la longue durée.

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Until recently I had never heard of the conservation of contemporary art as a profession. As a scholar of contemporary art, this would seem an incongruous oversight at best, and a gross lapse in scholarly responsibility at worst. However obvious it may seem now, this gap in knowledge of the field is not unreasonable amongst those who traffic in the academic and theoretical world of contemporary art. Owing to the lack of real-time, curious investigation of the material reality of the work itself; the emphasis on concept and historical context and the sheer plenitude of works to digest; and the troublesome, curiously ahistorical category of the “contemporary” in which we find ourselves, the idea of the ageing and upkeep of contemporary art is in fact easy to miss.

### **The long half century: the 1960s and the problem of the contemporary**

In terms of art, “contemporary” includes work made in the past 50-odd years, from the 1960s to the present. The inherent contradiction of grouping a half-century of chronological time under a heading that connotes now-ness is immediately apparent. The inability to move beyond this epoch represents, as Pamela Lee has articulated it, “a kind of no exit to history that some might damn with faint praise as postmodern.”<sup>1</sup> It is not a coincidence that it is in this storied, and seminal, decade of the 1960s that the contemporary as a historical category, and an object of anxiety, arises.

The post-war period of emerging technologies and communications and their promise of instantaneity and perpetual newness contributed to an increasing awareness of what the philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck

<sup>1</sup> Pamela Lee, “Presentness is Grace,” in *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 81.

has described as late modernity's "peculiar form of acceleration."<sup>2</sup> In her book *Chronophobia: On Time and Art in the 1960s*, Lee has charted a "chronophobic" tendency among artists and art critics of that decade, characterized by an obsession with marking, controlling, and manipulating time which seemed to perpetually exceed one's grasp: consequently, any foothold by which one might gain one's bearings relative to the past, and the future, was consistently denied. Mesoamericanist and architectural historian George Kubler declared that 1960s society stood "too much inside the streams of contemporary happening to chart their flow and volume," which ensured that the present remained unavailable as historical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In response to this condition, much of the artistic and critical work of that decade was concerned with "projecting a liminal historical moment, for which there was no clear perspective on the social and technological horizon to come."<sup>4</sup>

In his essay, "What is the Contemporary?", Giorgio Agamben uses a different metaphor that nonetheless describes the same problem of presentness: "This is the reason why the present that contemporariness perceives has broken vertebrae. Our time, the present, is in fact not only the most distant: it cannot in any way reach us. Its backbone is broken and we find ourselves in the exact point of this fracture."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Change*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>3</sup> George Kubler, quoted in Lee, *Chronophobia*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Lee, *Chronophobia*, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 47. In contrast to Lee and Kubler, Agamben's notion of contemporaneity is not concerned with the 1960s' specific preoccupation with the contemporary, but is defined as a transhistorical phenomenon, and in contrast to Lee in particular is not referring to the question of contemporary art.

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The fact that we consider ourselves as belonging to the same historical period because we cannot see beyond it indicates that the attitudes and anxieties about time, technology and social futures have not changed in kind as much as in acceleration.<sup>6</sup>

### **The uses and limits of metaphor: enter the material**

It is clear that metaphors have been and remain useful in helping us form an image of time, especially of the omnipresent and elusive subgenre of the contemporary. Following Barthes' avowal that "the metaphor does not stop"<sup>7</sup>—and is therefore perfectly suited to the seeming infinity of contemporaneity—I am keeping these linguistic images with me and will inevitably allow some of my own. I do so, however, with caution, because metaphor—like an unchecked concentration on theory and social-political context in academic circles—is a symptom and cause of the mystification and abstraction of contemporary art from its material life. While an entry point to thinking through the contemporary as a historical conundrum, the use of metaphor simultaneously works to obfuscate the specificities of the artworks themselves, which seems to only reconstitute and feed the fetish of the contemporary. By extension, it is a curious (if logical) effect of time and

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the question of the contemporary has preoccupied artists, art historians, and philosophers for the past fifteen years in particular. Apart from Agamben's meditations, Terry Smith's two volumes on the subject, *What is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity, and Art to Come* (Sydney: Artspace Critical Issues Series, 2001) and *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Hal Foster *et al.*, ed., *October* 130 "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'" (Fall 2009); and the volume edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Contemporaneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), are just four more amid scores of recent investigations.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, "Requichot and His Body," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 225-226.

information that the dizzying variety and substance of art objects that come under the umbrella of “contemporary” can become lumped together eventually in a kind of mental shorthand.

When the opportunity arose to work with Christian Scheidemann, the director of Contemporary Conservation Limited in New York, I recognized the chance to redress the shortcomings I described at the outset. Scheidemann and his team of conservators deal with the stuff of art on a practical, even chemical, level. I was interested in starting with the material basis of art objects and developing an idea about ageing contemporary art that would help chip away at the strange ahistorical veneer of the contemporary, by pushing, and eventually eviscerating, the contradiction between “the contemporary” and processes of time. I was looking for a point of intersection where the material fortunes and constitution of an art object begin to answer the pressing question of the longevity of the term and category itself.

As our conversations progressed—beginning with emails and leading to visits to the studio—it became clear that my ambitions were driven by the same flaw that I was trying to move away from: I was instrumentalizing art to perform a conceptual manoeuvre, an irresponsible, if common, tendency in art scholarship.

The field of contemporary art conservation did not destroy or dismantle this obdurate trope so much as enable a reconciliation of sorts, in quite (inter)personal and unexpected ways. Necessarily failing to usher in a new historical period, the perspectives gained from the practice of conservation rather redistributed the effects of the contemporary while simultaneously revealing the tremendous nuance in the warp and weft of its current weave.

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### **Different kinds of times**

High atop a shelf overlooking the common area of the studio sit three of Janine Antoni's soap busts, made 20 years ago and presently in a state of material collapse. They are constituents of her work *Lick and Lather* (1993), an installation of busts of the artist which were cast in soap or chocolate. The soap busts she took into the bath with her and the chocolate busts she licked, until the features wore down to such a degree that they appeared almost fetal. Over time, and on dry land, the soap has continued to degrade to a point beyond repair. I was told that Antoni has the forms to make them again, but they are of her own face, made 20 years ago. Ageing is here occurring on two registers, in the works themselves and the human that they represent. A re-casting of a twenty-years-younger artist's body would have big implications for these works, and a decision has yet to be made. For the time being, they remain up there, watching the activity below as they continue to grow older.

Another longtime resident of the studio, in fact a permanent fixture, is a twelve-year old Idaho potato from a work by Matthew Barney. I held it in my hand, feeling its lightness and marveling at its perpetual state of ripe perfection. Scheidemann also told me of another potato artwork, in which the artist had wanted a certain amount of rot to set in before halting the process chemically and preserving it in that moment. As with the soap busts, it was difficult not to draw an analogy with human skin and flesh, and our own desires to halt the ageing process and control the ravages of time.

The processes of conservation itself are often very slow. As the combination of media in many recent works are experimental, and their chemical makeup unstable, consultations with various labs and fabricators are often necessary to solve a conservation problem. The compounds and materials are constituted and applied with extreme care. Due to protracted

communications with dealers, collectors, museums or artists, a work can lay-over at the studio for some time. Over the course of three visits I observed the arrival, treatment and disappearance of works, each at their own speed.

Although the studio is extremely busy, the much-remarked-upon acceleration of contemporary life does not appear to apply. In fact, these objects that I have described, and the work that goes into them, suggest rather a state of being out of time, even anachronistic. This is, interestingly, the very definition of the contemporary that Agamben has recently proposed. Following Barthes, who noted in a lecture at the Collège de France that “the contemporary is the untimely,” and Nietzsche, who in his own moment observed that to be contemporary is to be aware of one’s disconnection with one’s time, Agamben suggests that “those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands.”<sup>8</sup> In short, the various temporalities at work in the studio surely do demonstrate the character of the contemporary, as a container in which different times butt together without resolution. Yet because this has been shown in tangible and concrete ways, their contemporariness, or membership within the contemporary, derives from the particular. It is the inverse operation to *the idea* of contemporary art preceding—and often obfuscating—these very details.

### **Change of scenery: convalescing at CCL**

The opportunity to be with art outside the usual context of the gallery or museum allows a different quality of contact. While these art objects may strike one as being “out of time” in the sense described above, the time spent

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?,” 40.



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and work done at the conservation studio cannot be understood as a gap in their lives but rather as a stage or period that contributes to their meaning. It was a curious moment of understanding that they have a life outside the public eye, as when it dawns on you at a certain age that your teacher doesn't live at school and has her own family.

On one visit, we stopped to look at a sculpture of a sink by Robert Gober, marooned on the worktable like a small ceramic boat that ran aground. Its backside, which is normally fastened to the wall, was here exposed, showing its structural makeup of plywood and various kinds of plaster. The fact that the sink is not ceramic at all, but made of much more fragile materials, was part of the reason for its need of treatment: a little boy had taken it to be a sink like he would find at home or at school, and had hung from the edge of it until it fell off the gallery wall. Works often come for restoration when their ontological truth is misread, as here, or is disputed and vandalized (as was, famously, the case with Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* [1996], for example).<sup>9</sup> Moments such as these, and the consequent damage sustained, occasion not only the recognition of their fragility but a consideration of their very status as art. Moreover, the cracks and fissures are literal ruptures in their seeming perpetual newness as contemporary art, opening them up to new ways of looking and understanding.

<sup>9</sup> Ofili's painting became a lightning rod of the controversy over the Brooklyn Museum's Sensation show in 1999, when it was condemned as sacrilegious and obscene by New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and defaced with white paint by a fundamentalist Catholic.

### **An examined life**

As is evident by now, the common tendency towards anthropomorphism when describing works of art is even more pronounced in the conservation studio context. The notion of the subjectivity, even agency, of artworks is gaining currency as a critical tool, as evidenced by W.J.T. Mitchell's proposals in his 2005 book, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. By committing to this idea, Mitchell works to show that the animism, idolatry and iconoclasm of images by their human interlocutors in the pre-modern past in fact persist in the modern present as well, yet under different guises. The taxonomy of pictures he develops enables us to reconsider our imbrication with images by unsettling the (false) stability between subject and object, Self and Other. By raising the question of an object's or image's animation or vitality, and questioning how we define life at all, the boundaries between the metaphor of life and life itself become increasingly unstable and start to blur. Of particular interest is the "growth and development" part of the biological description he uses and its ostensible relation to a work of art. Mitchell asserts that "'Growth and development' might characterize the process by which an image is realized in a concrete picture or work of art, but once completed, the work is normally homeostatic (unless we think its aging and reception history constitutes a kind of 'development' like that of a life-form)."<sup>10</sup> I argue that, drawing from the perspective that contemporary conservation affords, a work of art is not homeostatic and undergoes growth and development even after its original production, and to its ageing and reception history we must add the stage of restoration and conservation as well. My intention is not to prove that art is more alive than Mitchell thinks it is; this would miss the point even

<sup>10</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Images," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52.

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he is trying to make. Moreover, Mitchell is not solely referring to contemporary art, nor are his efforts at this point centred on the paradox of the contemporary, or even historicity in general. I want to modify and expand this definition in order to draw attention to the change that an art object, a *contemporary* art object, undergoes in its lifetime so that it is not understood as occupying dead or empty time, an assumption that would invite the backslide into the ahistorical ether of “the contemporary” as mental shorthand.

To refer to the lifetime of a contemporary artwork is to infer—quite naturally!—that it can also die. Using Hegel’s dialectical reasoning as a guide, Mitchell suggests that “a living thing is a straightforward dialectical statement: a living thing is something that can die.”<sup>11</sup> Thus we may draw a stronger connection with other works of art that can die, even figuratively: those who came before the contemporary, who belong to a period that could be put to rest as part of the historical past, and observed in the distance. In fact, this action could be an appropriate response to Mitchell’s call for a “paleontology of the present.”<sup>12</sup> Briefly reiterating the critical consensus that the “present is, in a very real sense, even more remote from our understanding,” he posits that we need a “rethinking of our condition in the perspective of deep time.”<sup>13</sup> This line of reasoning also corresponds to what the *Seachange* editors initially suggested as the potential facility of thinking about age, as “an active act of judgment that parses past, present and future.”<sup>14</sup>

Scheidemann’s own professional experience already suggests this linkage, as he began his career by studying medieval art, moving eventually to the conservation of 19<sup>th</sup> century German paintings, and later to the present focus

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Bem and Rafico Ruiz, “Age,” Call for Papers, *Seachange*, 2013.

on contemporary art. The materials and artistic motivations may differ, but the objective of conservation work is the same. It is “not to restore an artwork to its original state but to accompany it through its period of existence”<sup>15</sup>—in other words, to provide care that enables it to function in the present. In another way, to return to Agamben, we are able to think of works of art across time as being contemporaries of each other, connected by their singular, out-of-joint relationship to their respective presents.

It is with these experiences and observations that the contemporary (to paraphrase Robert Morris’ famous dictum on the Modernist art object)<sup>16</sup> has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory Williams, “Conserving Latex and Liverwurst: An Interview with Christian Scheidemann,” in *Cabinet: A Quarterly of Art and Culture. Issue 2: Mapping Conversations* (Spring 2001). [www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/latexandliverwurst.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/latexandliverwurst.php).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Morris quoted in Beatrice von Bismarck, “Proposals for the Visible,” in Klaus Gallwitz, ed., *Dan Flavin: Installations of Fluorescent Light, 1989-1993* (Stuttgart: Editions Cantz, 1993), 14.

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preoccupations include defending the prerogative of the apolitical in contemporary abstract painting, struggling with the viability of performance art and using polemical arguments to incite a more vital discourse within art criticism.

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