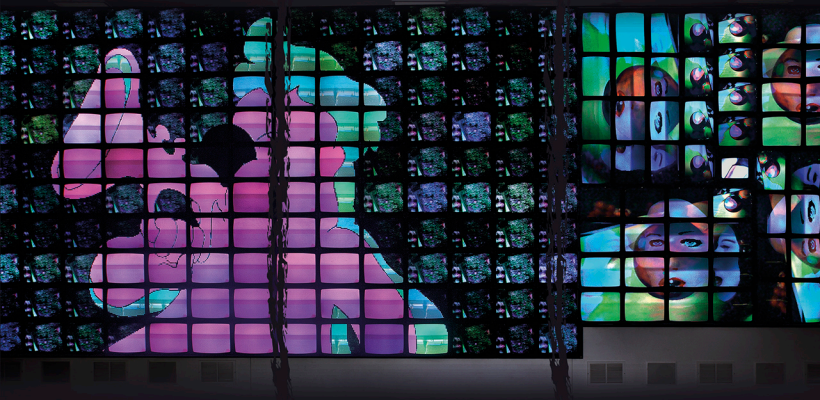


# AUTHENTICITY IN TRANSITION

CHANGING PRACTICES IN ART MAKING AND CONSERVATION



Edited by Erma Hermens and Frances Robertson



**Figure 1** William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012 (installation view). Jointly owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (purchase, by exchange, through an anonymous gift and the K. Hart Smith Trust). (Photo: Henrik Stromberg, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.)

For a work of art, being in the wings is to be nearby, not on stage at the moment but likely to be once again. William Kentridge's *The Refusal of Time*, 2012, draws from a century of influences to contemplate the personal, political, geographic and scientific nature of time and offers a poetic manifestation of flux or the perpetual condition of in between (Fig. 1). The five-screen video installation (with a mechanical breathing machine) takes its cues from 19th-century investigations into relativity, industrial workplace productivity and the establishment of global time zones. The multisensory collage references science, industry, art, music and literature, and starts with the steady beat of a metronome that dissolves over the course of the 30-minute composition.

Among the artist's references is *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad's 1907 novel recalling an 1894 terrorist attempt on the Greenwich Observatory, the master timepiece itself. *The Secret Agent* had one context when it was published in the early 20th century and it resonates

altogether differently in the 21st, having been shaped and reshaped by ensuing events in world history. In the wings, there are players – artists and art, people and objects – all of which are destined for a next turn.

If animating art is one goal of the museum, a simultaneous objective is to be the place where visitors are animated in the presence of art. How will museums tune and retune their practices? Refresh their normative approaches? Reposition for this creative potential? Intentionally short-circuiting a few museum traditions is one way to explore these questions. Playing with them helps to shake loose old habits and try on new possibilities. This exercise is stimulated by the work of two art historians, Jennifer L. Roberts of Harvard University and Caroline A. Jones of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both reflect critically on their respective modes of art historical practice as they mine productive alternatives. One concentrates on underreported locales in objects' histories and the other on the habits of mind behind creative activity.



**Figure 2** Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953. Collection SFMOMA, purchase through a gift of Phyllis C. Wattis. Displayed on the floor of the Mock-up Gallery at SFMOMA for a museum study session.

### Towards refreshed practice: on locales

In *Transporting Visions*, Jennifer Roberts re-evaluates art's material thingness, arguing for the reintroduction of moments in an artwork's life that are all too often left out of the codes of visual communication. Her book is a material history of visual communication in 18th- and 19th-century America in which she links the transmission of art and ideas between England and America to the actual physical realities of its movement. She calls it a highwayman's art history, 'one that intercepts pictures on the road, on the sea, on the move' as an approach that values the less art-historically propitious events, such as crating and transit, and puts them on par with the more well-considered sites of production and reception (Roberts 2014: 2). She treats an artwork's heft and the arduous conditions of global transit in an 18th-century world as a part of its configuration. Rather than rendering these conditions invisible, she makes them productive (Roberts 2014: 9).

Her research raises questions on what constitutes an art-historically relevant event. Consider the full array of actions that comprise the story of a contemporary work of art including all of the more and less art-historically propitious events. What happens to a work when it is removed from public visibility – that is, when it is not on public view? It is studied, packed, unpacked, reframed, photographed, talked about, published, examined, conserved, sometimes reconfigured and studied again. It might even be bought, sold, borrowed or relocated. The 'multisensory intimacies of art that artists, art handlers and conservators experience amount to something more than mysterious, task-driven activities shielded from the public' (Roberts 2014: 9). Bringing these secrets to light in purposeful spaces situated, both physically and intellectually, between curated galleries and dark storage creates a new commons for the meeting of art's material, visual and other sensory, qualities.

Before revealing these intimacies, it is first necessary to believe in the value they bring to the





**Figure 5** The object after conservation: general views. (Photos: C. Delgado Martín.)



**Figure 6** The object after conservation: details. (Photos: C. Delgado Martín.)

of sculpting. Both of us, with Paweł, we wanted to pay tribute to the Professor by the use of clay. People associate our activities usually with our education within the Grzegorz Kowalski studio. But actually our first professor at the Academy of Fine Arts was Gustaw Zemła.<sup>3</sup>

Before the sculpture entered the conservation studio it was fumigated but the entire clay surface remained covered by mycelium, which had a strong influence on the visual reception of the object. In the photograph of the object provided by the gallery (Fig. 1), which was taken before it joined the museum's collection, it can be seen that the mould can be perceived as an artistic effect.

Taking into account the unstable micro-climate condition in the exhibition space, there was a major risk that high humidity could cause recurrence of the mould that could also spread to other works in the show. The metal parts of the sculpture, especially the wires that joined the wooden crosses and the structure of the core, were coated with corrosion products. The sculpture's surface was covered by a different type of accretions: splashes of plaster, paint stains and dirt.

Finally, with the help of the curator, we decided to proceed with the conservation process<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 4). As we had no information on the original appearance of the work, the only choice was to treat the sculpture according to



**Figure 7** The object on display. (Photos: B. Stawiarski (left) and K. Kaczorowski (right), reproduced with the permission of the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw.)

the author's statement – as a document-artefact rather than a work of art – and to limit the treatment to basic conservation. Procedures used in the conservation of ethnographical objects or archaeological materials seemed to be the most appropriate. As the cracks in the clay were stable, it was agreed that they should be preserved in their actual shape. After a long debate, we decided to remove the mycelium together with the dirt from the clay's surface. The wires were cleaned of corrosion products and protected. Most of the separate clay fragments were stuck back onto the sculpture. The wooden base was cleaned of the non-compacted dirt and protected with oil (Figs 5 and 6).

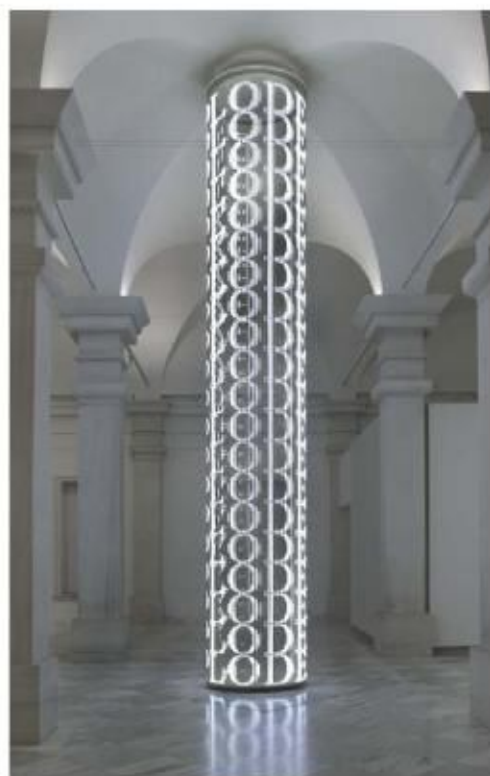
The curator decided to display the sculpture on the wooden rotating sculpture stand similar to that used in the process of creation, and the sculpture was exhibited together with the documentary film (Fig. 7).

### A problem of authority

In the case of *The Visit of Professor Zemła* two important problems have to be faced, both related to the authorship issue. The first concerns the incorporation of participatory art in public collections. One of the key aspects of many participatory art projects is the elimination of the artist as an authority figure. Kelly (2011) defines this phenomenon:

Participatory arts refer to a range of arts practice ... where emphasis is placed on the role of the viewer or spectator in the physical or conceptual realisation and reception of the artwork. The central component of Participatory Arts is the active participation of the viewer or spectator. Many forms of Participatory Arts practice foreground the role of collaboration in the realisation of an artwork, deemphasizing the role of the professional artist as





**Figure 1** Jenny Holzer, *For SAAM*, 2007, electronic LED array with white diodes, 336 × 48 in. (853.4 × 121.9 cm). A catalogue image of Jenny Holzer's *For SAAM* after it was first installed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. (Photo © Jenny Holzer/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.)



**Figure 2** Robert Watts, David Behrman and Bob Diamond, *Cloud Music*, 1974–1979, hybrid sound/video installation with custom electronics, dimensions variable, during its inaugural exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. (Photo © 1979, Robert Watts Estate, David Behrman, Bob Diamond.)

reinvented by contemporary media aesthetics, starting from immanent analysis but articulating it with aesthetic and art tradition (Marchiori 2013: 94–5).

While technology is central to the concepts and transmittal of data behind the artworks discussed in this paper, the quality of perceived colour, illuminance and sound directly influences the viewer's aesthetic experience. These properties are the criteria for judgement in determining when artworks must be conserved and restored. Artworks discussed in this paper include the media of television and lights that convey images and text of conceptual significance. When presented in their best functioning condition, the visual impact of these artworks overcomes materiality. This paper presents the results of empirical observation and research carried out in the practice of museum conservation.

### The Nam June Paik Archive

Nam June Paik is well represented in SAAM's collection. Works including *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* (Fig. 3), *Megatron/Matrix* (Fig. 4), and *Technology*, were acquired in the 1990s. In 2009 the Nam June Paik Archive was received as a gift from the Paik Estate. At the time of his death in 2006, Paik had a few studios in New York as well as storage sites. The Paik Estate consolidated materials from the various locations into three sites which included the Green Street studio in SoHo, a warehouse in Brooklyn and a storage site in San Francisco. The studio contents represented a vast assortment of diverse objects the artist collected throughout his lifetime. There are many toys in the archive, many of which have themes related to televisions, robots and transportation. There are also a number of bird cages that Paik identified with his friend John Cage. Other materials include radios, tape players, record players and television sets (Fig. 5). While the majority of artworks by Paik on display in museums or discussed in literature