Studies in Conservation

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ysic20

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To cite this article: Hélia Marçal (2021): Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between, Studies in Conservation, DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2021.1947074

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2021.1947074

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Published online: 12 Jul 2021.

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STUDIES IN CONSERVATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2021.1947074

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between

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ABSTRACT

Notions of authenticity underpinning conservation practice have been challenged by artistic and museum practices that contest the mere possibility of singular material existence of objects. These practices work within the liminal, in-between, space some objects currently occupy. But how can conservation conciliate the preservation of an object's material manifestation, with the ethical need to recognise its other material possibilities? The ethical implications of conserving objects whose existence is contested are discussed. Drawing on feminist theory, it is argued that the path towards a fairer, inclusive, and sustainable conservation practice is dependent on the recognition of difference. The ethical ramifications that emerge from practices of conservation that reflect on performative in-betweenness, here called liminality, are explored. By demonstrating that the act of observation is always contingent, the ways we understand and conserve objects materially change them. How those changes can exclude their material possibilities and their *becomings*, are discussed. A possible ethical approach to conservation is proposed, that goes beyond modernist views of the object being conserved, recognising the exclusions inherent to any process of conservation, celebrating the diversity of material existences of objects we ought to protect.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received January 2021
Accepted June 2021

KEYWORDS
Ethics; liminal; difference; becoming; modernity; contemporary art

Introduction

Conservation practice has always been challenged by cultural objects that *work* within the liminal – the interstitial space between what the object material is, what has been, and what it can become. That is the case for contemporary polyurethane sculptures. The polymer's rapid degradation leads to their early disfigurement, prompting their re-fabrication to recover their material form. Performance art is another example of an artistic practice that defies binary characterisations, with works existing in a state of material dormancy up until the moment of their activation through processes of so-called *re-enactment* (Lawson, Finbow, and Marçal 2019). This status of in-betweenness can also be that of objects which were extensively restored and have been recognised as something other – the famous cleaning controversy (Mahon 1962) is an extensively documented example of the hard-to-get balance between recognising the artwork as the artwork and dissociating the artwork from the material object in hand. Another important example, which has emerged in conservation debates (or debates on conservation) relates to issues of provenance and restitution of looted art and objects (Welsh 1992; O'Keefe 1995)).[1] But how is the authenticity of these objects, or their status of objecthood, defined by the practices that led them to be conserved? And how much of their conservation is linked to their capacity to act within the communities that have produced them? Focusing specifically on the conservation of contemporary art objects that operate within the liminal, this paper discusses the challenges liminality poses to understanding conservation ethics.

Liminality is a term developed in the context of anthropology debates that refers to a state of ambiguity in the transition between two phases (van Gennep 1909/1960; Turner 1974), also called 'limbo', or an act of transitioning, a form of becoming. In the study of art practices, the term has been used to reflect a status of being unfinished or fragmented, the embodiment of multiple identities, or the merging of distinct forms of knowledge and practice, having been extensively used in the analysis of theatre and performance practices (Schechner 2006). In performance studies, liminality has become a way to understand performativity (Butler 1990; Barad 2003) or *becoming* (Barad 2007; after Deleuze and Guattari 1987), as a change in status that influences the material possibilities of reality.

While the liminal existence of some objects is inherent to their fabrication, liminality can be extended to states of indeterminacy, of transition, being in-between conceptual and physical spaces. In a similar manner, while the liminality of some cultural manifestations can easily

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be observed – such as in performance art – other forms of liminality are situated in specific contexts and are dependent on certain ways of seeing. A funerary urn, for example, can be seen as a stable manifestation of a given cultural practice in a Western museum context, and be considered unstable, decontextualised, or in transformation by other people in both Western and non-Western contexts. And finally, while some forms of liminality – again, such as some forms of performance art – are welcomed by the museum, others – along with the diversity of voices that permeate their porous existence – are not recognised (Dominguez Rubio 2014).

In this paper, I will draw on feminist new materialisms to explore the notion of liminality and reflect on the possibilities it opens up for rethinking conservation's ethical positioning. The affordances of feminism as theory have been discussed with detail by intersectional feminists such as Ahmed (1998), who argues that this framework is able to discuss epistemic constructions in the ways they are situated within the political. Indeed, they highlight not only *who speaks*, but also 'whose speech gets heard and authorised as 'theory"' (Ahmed 1998, 18), or, in other words, which knowledge and knowledge-making practices are sustained, and which are excluded. Feminist theory works as a conceptual tool to move beyond dominant epistemologies. In demanding a conscious effort to recognise the geopolitical positions of knowledge, this framework intersects directly with ethics as a subject matter and scholarly and personal commitment.[2]

Firstly, I shall interrogate the place these objects currently occupy in conservation discourse by reviewing some disciplinary perspectives on ethics and changeability. I will demonstrate that, while the discourse in conservation theory recognises the limitations of the sphere of operation of the principles that underpin our ethical considerations and decision-making processes, most discussions still reiterate an epistemic framework that deems conservation objects as autonomous entities and conservation as an object-oriented practice. Secondly, I shall explore some of the ways these discourses can help us reflect on the epistemic relationship between conservation and modernity. This relationship, I argue, is inherent in the practice of conservation and directly influences the ways conservation operates and is operated by the liminal. I shall further explore how the modernist conception of museum processes impacts the conservation of cultural manifestations expressed through forms of liminality. Thirdly, I shall position the debate in relation to ideas of conservation as a political activity that influences the ways in which conservation objects are materialised and performed historically. In this sense, I will argue for an ethical re-orientation of the conservation discipline towards the recognition of difference in processes of becoming.

From changeability to ethics: perspectives from the field

The discussion on the changing and indeterminate status and identities – or, in other words, the liminality – of objects being conserved is not new. Debates on this topic have been raised in the conservation of objects created by Indigenous and World Cultures.[3] The role of ritual in both the production and conservation of these objects has been extensively discussed by conservators and other practitioners studying and working on these objects since the 1980s (Peters 2020). In the 1990s, we see discussions about the transient nature of objects being propelled further in the field of conservation, with questions around the changeability, tangibility, materiality, and identity of objects being expanded to the realm of the fine arts, and that of contemporary art (Marçal 2019a).

Although theories of conservation of contemporary art have certainly been influenced by the theoretical work of conservators in so-called 'traditional' contexts – such as paintings, graphic documents, sculpture, preventive conservation, the conservation of objects from Indigenous and World Cultures, among others – the lineage of conservation theory demonstrates that the development of theoretical thinking in conservation has also emerged across (and at the intersections between) a variety of specialisms and knowledge cultures, including philosophy (Marçal 2019a). Although reflections developed from these efforts vary in nature and scope, some common themes emerge across the different positionalities of the authors and their subject matter. These are, for example, the expansion of critical discourses around thresholds of change, the rise in the awareness of conservation as a social-material process made of interactions between people, objects, technology, nature and knowledge infrastructures, the recognition of the agency of the conservator, and conservation as a process of making, and the understanding that current ethical frameworks, guidelines, and approaches – while an intrinsic (if not the prevalent) aspect of care practices – are sometimes insufficient to respond to the specificities of contemporary art. All these themes share issues having to do with ontologies of objects being conserved and conservation itself, as well as epistemologies and ways of practising conservation. Given that conservation is one activity that changes the materiality of objects as well as the landscape of their potential futures, all these themes are also inherently about ethics.

It is not necessarily true that the ethical frameworks that have guided the practice in the field for long are not suitable for the care of contemporary art due to the exceptional nature of its materiality. Discussions on the struggle of adapting conservation axioms to practice go back more than twenty years, when

practitioners questioned if reversibility even existed (Oddy and Carroll 1999; Schnizel 1999), or argued for a postminimal intervention (Villers 2004). The recognition of the lack of applicability of these operative concepts, however, and with few exceptions,[4] failed to be translated into current codes of ethics and definitions, while also being too general to account for differences in cultures of conservation – e.g. of the *why* and the *how* a given cultural heritage item is preserved (Ashley-Smith 2017).

Casuistry was proposed as an ethical approach to the care of contemporary art to circumvent the application of general principles in conservation decision-making. First advocated by van de Vall (1999), and then adopted by many practitioners (it was, for example, adopted in the context of the project *Inside Installations* which ran 2004–2007), casuistry acknowledged the necessity to accommodate the variable nature of contemporary artworks and their changing and sometimes conflicting values, and to assess those values when considering treatment, with the help of precedents set by past case studies. Research projects emerged to form frameworks that could serve as a basis for casuistic analysis (as in practical ethics) and to apply reflexivity to conservation (van Saaze 2013; Stigter 2016). The notions of casuistry and reflexive practice – as well as their applicability – are, however, often lost either by the lack of strategies that guide its implementation in institutions, or by the insufficient resourcing that provides conservators with time to think, reflect, and develop their own practical ethics.

Despite the evident efforts to recontextualise the ways in which we practice conservation, ethical dilemmas still trigger discussions in the field. Much of the literature recognises that ethical challenges tend to be related to the destabilisation of the boundaries of what was understood as the object being conserved, for example see Laurenson (2006). In other words, discussions arise when conservation objects do not operate within the epistemic boundaries of the conservation field, or, as the sociologist Fernando Dominguez Rubio calls them, when objects are 'unruly' (Dominguez Rubio 2014). However, from the discussion above, we see that the focus on the challenges brought by these objects reiterates an epistemic framework that deems conservation to be an object-oriented practice, and objects being conserved as autonomous entities. In the next section, I will discuss how these two considerations are at the core of the knowledge systems that underpin conservation as a practice and a discipline, which are rooted in modernist thinking.

Conservation and modernity

It is impossible to dissociate conservation from the idea of 'modernity', and this association has severe implications in the ways in which conservation is theorised and practised. Modernity has been associated with the political and intellectual perspectives that intersect with the Enlightenment, as forms of knowledge-making that led to the development of scientific knowledge and the growth of the political and public sphere under the ideal of progress – see, for example, Foucault (1977) and Latour (1991/1993). Postcolonial and feminist theorists also associate modernism with imperialism, bringing to the fore how the project of modernity is also that of coloniality – of bodies, land, language, knowledge.[5] Modernist conceptions of the world are prevalent in institutions and modes of operation across all spheres of society. Although they impact notions of time (see Barad 2007), power, or modes of interaction in the public sphere, the conceptions particularly important for this paper are those impacting the university or the museum. This section will reflect on how the entanglement of modernist knowledge structures and the museum influences conservation practice.[6]

The epistemic cultures that we currently see expressed in museum cultures and processes are deeply influenced by the contexts of collecting that led to their creation – see, for example, Bennett et al. (2017). The scholar Ariella Aisha Azoulay's phenomenal discussion of the ethics of collecting, historicising, and archiving in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* provides a thorough examination of this process. Regarding collecting practices, this author argues that they are

> not separate from other foundational practices, procedures, institutions, concepts, and categories operative in the field of art shaped through Imperialism. Writing specialized histories of collecting or of art, even with critical tools, one continues to be bounded by the phenomenal field created by imperial destruction, cultural appropriation, and the imposition of a new regime of modern art, which centers on seemingly neutral activities such as collecting, preserving, interpreting, and displaying objects, which reaffirm the transcendental condition of art. (Azoulay 2019, 80–81)

This definition proposed by Azoulay resonates with the definition in 2002 of the universal (or encyclopaedic) museum which, in its epistemic framework, defines universal knowledge as that produced by Western-centric institutions. For more on this, see Castriota and Marçal (2021). The idea of the universalism of scientific and cultural knowledge was critically addressed by Mignolo (2004/2011), who identifies two types of ideas around museums originating since the Renaissance (and particularly in the sixteen century): the art museum, which was a way of collecting and displaying European history and identity, and the ethnographic or natural history museum, which was created to display objects embedded with the history and identity of *others*. While the former held

objects that were later characterised as part of the *fine arts*, the latter typically comprised an assemblage of cultural manifestations brought to the imperial metropolis and adjusted to epistemic frames or modes of thinking already in place (Azoulay 2019). The categorisation and removal of objects from the places they originally inhabited and the communities that gave them meaning, and their later translocation to museums and translation into museum language – created and fostered by the same practices that led to the removal of these objects – has impacted the ways they are seen, studied, and cared for. In other words, the epistemic framing of these objects through the project of modernity is one that we are, in many ways, still promoting today. And conservation, like many other museum practices, is part of the making of those epistemic cultures.

Dominguez Rubio develops this theme in relation to the ways artworks are made in the modern art museum in *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination* (2020). This author discusses how the contemporary museum is structured around systems that were brought to the fore during the sixteenth century and became crystalised in the eighteenth century. These systems are characterised by dualistic concepts of reality (such as subject/object or past/present) and categories, which, in the context of the museum, Dominguez Rubio identifies as 'artworks, artists, authorship, intentions, chronologies, and authenticity' (2020, 45). In this sense, in associating authenticity to inherent qualities of objects and artworks, conservation discourse, with few exceptions (e.g. van Saaze 2013) is negating the ways in which authenticity is frequently constructed in practice by the museum or the institution.

These categories of practice do support the care of some objects, which Dominguez Rubio calls *docile objects*, or objects that already obey the categories of thought one can see in the museum. To this author, *docile objects* – such an oil painting, to give the example explored by Dominguez Rubio, or, in my own interpretation, the objects the museum space was built for – make '… particularly elusive objects of study. Their stability, classifiability, knowability, and portability mean that they often go unnoticed, embedded in the quotidian activities and structures that define the common run of things … ' (Dominguez Rubio 2014, 624). The easiness that comes with the docile nature of this works within the museum, he adds, reproduces and confirms existing structures and how they are applied (Dominguez Rubio 2014). The museum itself works hard to maintain artworks within the boundaries established in moments of acquisition. Moreover, much of the conservation work demands the maintenance of those artworks through what this author calls 'mimeographic labor,' therefore resisting processes of difference. And, although 'not all forms of creating the same are the same' (Dominguez Rubio 2020, 81), the conservation profession how it is currently defined and constructed – and within the categories that it builds through such practice – is undoubtedly reiterating paradigms associated with the modernist construct of art and the museum. Notably, he mentions the conservator's invisibility (2020), the demand for stasis in the artworks' lives (instead of recognising they are always in the process of becoming), and the immeasurable resources needed to keep those objects the same. In the next sub-section, I will discuss some of the ways in which the categorisations that we engage with in understanding our practice are further crystallised by assumptions around the focus on materials as the sole indexes of artistic authorship, intention and the autonomy of the conservation object.

Focusing on objects

From the targeted review of perspectives on changeability and ethics mentioned above, we can see that conservation's focus on objects has been revisited since the 1980s. Muñoz Viñas stated in *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* that the field has seen a 'communicative turn' (2005), characterised by a turn to subjects, instead of objects. This turn evidently opposes that of scientific conservation, which in the 1970s and 1980s prompted a purely technical approach to the care of objects. If we are to analyse the ways in which this turn is seen in practice, however, it is clear that most cultures of conservation still echo the structures of Western conceptions of modernity, dissociating object and people, and defining the practice of conservation as that which cares for the material of objects instead of their integral materiality.

A focus on objects being conserved as objects undoubtedly supports the care of cultural manifestations which easily fit the structures and processes of the museum – so-called *docile objects*. Understanding these objects – that often fall within the realm of the fine arts – through their materials might, in many cases, fulfil the conservation needs of the object in the context where it exists. The same, however, is not the case for objects that are dislocated from their contexts of creation, or objects that were created with the purpose of actively participating in the social lives of the communities for which they hold a special significance – those could be objects from Indigenous and World Cultures, religious heritage, decorative objects, socially-engaged art, public art, to name a few. These manifestations rely on specific forms of interaction to exist and such interactions are not sustained by focusing on the materials alone.

While discourses on the importance of the intangible features of objects has become common practice in conservation literature, more often than not, those

discussions are restricted to specific spheres of practice, and tend to lack the transversality one would need to explore intangibility as being at the centre of conservations activities. One example can be found in *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* by Muñoz Viñas, which argues for a new theoretical (and ethical) perspective of conservation, where, a few pages before describing the turn to subjects (2005, 121), the author argues that the conservation of the intangible, whilst important, falls outside of the conservation remit (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 41).

I would argue against this stance. Indeed, in line with the explorations developed in the field of critical heritage studies (Smith 2006), I could argue here that all heritage is inherently intangible; in this sense, neglecting to preserve the material conditions to promote the construction and transformation of the meanings of objects within the social would be undeniably unethical. One of the examples we can discuss in this context has to do with loan agreements, which, up until recently, have been contingent on the borrowing institution's capacity to comply with set of stringent environmental conditions. As mentioned by Dominguez Rubio (2020), the resources needed to maintain those conditions are enormous, which make some museums in non-Western geographies unable to participate in the circulation of objects and artworks. In framing these regulations as essential for the conservation of these cultural manifestations, these agreements limited the possibility for dislocated (and, in many ways, disembodied) objects to be placed within their contexts of creation. Within the framework of care, of promoting 'best practice,' the potential for transforming and reviving the practices that create meaning are excluded.

In summary, the focus on objects serves well the objects for which those processes were created, but can be harmful for those that are outside the modernist knowledge systems of the museum and conservation. Moreover, the narrowing of the ways in which we understand objects can also impact our recognition of liminality in objects that, indeed, fit within the processes of the museum. In this sense, while this is more prevalent when caring for objects and practices that challenge the existing epistemic structures, it demands a consideration of whether it is possible to rethink conservation and the apparent social autonomy of the object.

On the autonomy of the object bring preserved

There is a sense that an object can be somewhat autonomous. Conservators have varying attitudes towards the care they can provide – all depends on the type of object, available resources, institutional frameworks, cultures of conservation. And yet, there is the idea that objects can live as they are, and where they are, as long as the preservation needs of their materials are fulfilled. Or, as stated by Azoulay:

> To achieve a cohesive Western history that defined art as a succession of collectible and displayable objects, various gaps had to be bridged (…) the new museum procedures had to suit the white cube, while applying to all art objects regardless of the environment from which the objects originated (…). Being object-centered, these procedures, external to the life of the object, confirmed through their application that a given object was an art object and thus were pivotal in defining what an art object is. The standardization of such procedures, which renders them applicable to any art object, contributes to the ontological status of the art object as separate, independent, and primary to the neutral procedures of handling them. (Azoulay 2019, 96)

The autonomy of the object is, however, contested when we consider that such definition, or identity, demands two agents – an object worth conserving, and the person who performs the conservation intervention. The conservator examines and studies the object and then, even if deciding to do nothing, intervenes directly in its materiality and how such materiality will be historically performed. In this sense, the conservator, alongside other human and non-human agents, is directly implicated in the development of the artwork, rendering the knowledge produced by such interaction performative, and the structure of the engagement inherently relational (Marçal 2021). The performative act of knowing the object being conserved – whether by observing, studying, or intervening on it, or even considering an intervention – and the relational existence of both the object and the conservator, denies the possibility of any sort of autonomous existence for every agent involved.

The understanding that knowing is ultimately performative leads to an on-going construction of what we are able to know (Haraway 1988; Barad 2007). If what we observe, such as an artwork, or even conservation practice itself, changes with our observation, there is an immense field of material possibilities that is afforded by these phenomena. This implies that neither artworks nor conservation practices have a fixed or true 'nature', but are constantly constructed in every act of observation, in every practice of knowing (Marçal 2021). Ways of knowing are then acts of excluding possibilities. A reading of this situation against feminist epistemologies (Haraway 1988; Butler 1990; Barad 2007), could suggest that exclusions of, in this case, states of liminality or alternative forms of living with cultural manifestations that resist modernist conceptualisations, do not represent the totality of neither the cultural practice nor the stories that co-constitute its manifestation. These exclusions are a product of ways of seeing that are performed and re-performed, becoming ever so present as they are enacted through sameness.

The creation of a given existence against all others therefore entails a sense of both accountability and responsibility. Choosing one possibility over others, or observing an artwork through a given frame, is an ethical stance. In this sense, as conservators, we are accountable for our observations and the knowledge we produce in our relationality with objects. In this process of knowing, we are then as responsible for highlighting ways of seeing as we are when we mis- or un-represent other possible existences, like the ones that reside within the liminal. This analysis of the process of conserving an object, therefore contests any possibility of objectivity or neutrality. The invisibility of the conservator identified by Dominguez Rubio (2020) and studied extensively by Miller (2021), therefore, on the one hand, becomes a political act reiterated by the museum and related structures to sustain the idea of sameness, and, on the other hand, contributes to the assumption that the field, except for distinct paradigms of practice, shares a set of values, understood by all, and made for all.

Writing conservation documentation and making decisions within the paradigm of 'we,' a world of perceived consensus, canons, and singular understandings of the words and categories that populate the conservation, renders the agency of the conservator invisible, removing the traces of her operation. And yet, the reduction of agency to that of the canon, reduces or completely excludes the space that can be occupied by bodies, objects, and thoughts that do not look or think the same. In other words, it eliminates the possibility of difference. As Azumah Dennis (2018, 194–195) tells us when considering the status of the 'unmarked scholar', if this voice of 'privileged neutrality' 'assumes the entire space of [the] universal human, she is unable to recognise the significance of difference, particularity and specificity'. Yet, to reduce all conservation experiences to those of the universal and the canon, is also to dissolve the possibilities of difference on the works we ought to conserve. Inasmuch as it is a political act to maintain to exclude alternative material narratives from the object's history, it is to stay with the liminal and acknowledge both conservation objects and our sphere of operation with its ambiguity.

Staying with the liminal

Echoing Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), I will argue that the way to amplify diverse voices, perspectives, materialities in the care of cultural manifestations implies embracing the liminal. This does not necessarily mean to learn from conservation's engagement with artworks and objects that operate within the liminal – although, I would argue, that would be as positive as it is for conservators working with liminal manifestations to learn from colleagues that are involved in efforts concerning *docile objects* (Dominguez Rubio 2014). Instead, I argue that recognising the liminality within conservation itself is something that impacts how cultural practices can be manifested now and in the future. It is an orientation that responds to the ethical calling of engaging politically, and in a transparent way, with objects in their multiplicity.

Recognising the liminality of conservation processes calls for a reframing of practitioners' stances on neutrality and objectivity and the focus of its remit and the ways conservation operates in practice. In the same way, accepting the ethical responsibility that comes every time we perform an observation, study an object, or make decisions about its future, is essential for creating a just world. In the framework of feminist epistemologies (Ahmed 1998; Barad 2007) this is done by recognising and connecting differences. For Barad (2007), for example, such recognition could be undertaken in highlighting previously excluded possibilities and connecting them to on-going phenomena. And, while this process is dependent on our ability to respond to the 'other' in our own situatedness, the various approaches emerging from differing situated perspectives both contributes in making visible the relativity of conservation. Arguing for a given materiality – and putting forward a reasoning for including some aspects of the artwork and excluding many others – is a way of expressing a conservator's situated responsibility, or, to use a term coined by Barad, response-ability (2007). Similarly, considering accountability as something that brings us together reframes it to refer to our responsibility to another, whether people, artworks, spaces, technology or nature (Marçal 2021). If conservation ontology is relational and ethical decision-making needs to encompass our relationship with the 'other', how can we bring multiple social others into our decision-making processes?

Conservators can also find ways to re-situate themselves by practising difference. One example would be to engage with re-enactment or re-fabrication processes – and, more so, to yield their authority and let people with different backgrounds participate in these controlled experiments on the ways of making (Marçal 2019b). Re-enactment processes can, therefore, be seen as a form of recovering counter-narratives that exist in a state of potentiality and are yet to be performed, as a set of practices that can enact difference in the conservation process – difference in the ways in which we observe, categorise, and undertake treatment; difference in the ways we document our own positioning, and that of others; difference in the types of knowledges we choose to highlight and those that we exclude.[7] In re-enacting practices and diversifying the involved agents, including, for example, communities and practitioners outside of the conservation and museum sphere, it is further possible not only to

amplify different perspectives on the conservation object, but also to renovate the intangible memories and affects that are essential in effectively preserve cultural manifestations to the future. While opening the field to various forms of participation – and making a conscious ethical commitment to equitable deliberation processes (Fraser 2001) – can further potentiate liminality of conservation, creating more ambiguities and forms of uncertainty, staying with the liminal seems to be the only possibility to create instances of difference in conservation objects and practices.

Conclusion: affirming ethics through liminal spaces

This article explored the potential of the liminal for creating a more transparent and fairer approach to the conservation of objects. I have proposed that we need to look at objects in their difference, recognising that we will always only be able to understand them from our situated perspective. The ways in which we understand and conserve objects will materially change them; those changes, in turn, can exclude their material possibilities and their *becomings*. In proposing that we stay within the liminal, I have argued that a fairer, more transparent, and responsible approach to objects in general that are being preserved needs to account for and actively look for instances of difference. Moreover, I have argued that the creation of material possibilities for difference is not only crucial for the care of specific objects, but it is also of paramount importance to the continued definition of conservation as a field that directly intervenes in the fabric that makes, transforms, or destroys cultural memory, identity and the public sphere.

To be an active agent in the promotion of difference, conservators and the conservation field as a whole can make a conscientious commitment to redirecting conservation ethics towards people. This would extend the politics of intervention to effectively challenge the modernist operations within conservation, bringing the recognition of different forms of knowledges to the forefront of conservation ethics. The object being conserved therefore would become the lens through which conservation operates in and with the world, just like a prism that transforms a beam of light into a spectrum of difference, containing as many colours as the human eye can see.

Notes

1. See also recent discussions in ICOM-CC's Working Group on Theory, History, and Ethics of Conservation), whose programme for 2020–2023 is at http://www.icom-cc.org/156/Triennial%20programme/#.YLJvnqhKgvg (Accessed in 25 May 2021).
2. The feminism commitment to positionality is also the reason why I wrote this paper in the first person, to make my position within this topic visible and to allow me to adopt a perspective that is not that of the 'unmarked scholar' (Azumah Dennis 2018), whose intentionally neutral position highlights authorised discourses and lacks the positionality needed to engage critically with subject matter outside the canon.
3. The name of the ICOM-CC Working Group on Objects from Indigenous and World Cultures is the basis of the terminology in this paper.
4. One example is the recently updated *Icon Professional Standards and Ethical Guidance* document (updated in 2020). See http://www.icon.org.uk/resources/standards-and-ethics/icon-professional-standards.html (Accessed in 25 May 2021).
5. Here, the concept of modernity will mostly be based on writings by Karen Barad, Ariella Aisha Azoulay, Fernando Dominguez Rubio, and Walter Mignolo. It is important to mention, however, the work by scholars and practitioners in the museum field, who have been working on highlighting these issues in the last decades, for example, Umolu (2020).
6. Conservation practice is understood here as the process of interaction between people, artworks/objects, and society, that allows said artworks or objects to operate within a given context. This notion is drawn from the text 'What is practice?' by Althusser (1975/2017).
7. The use of the term 'knowledges' derives from Haraway (1988).

Acknowledgements

I started addressing the themes discussed here when I was a Fellow in Contemporary Art Conservation and Research as part of the Andrew W. Mellon-funded Tate project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*. Thank you to Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research, and Louise Lawson, Time-based Media Conservation Manager, for their on-going support and insights during my time at Tate (2018–2020). I would also like to thank my new academic home, the Department of History of Art at the University College London, and the colleagues whose stimulating conversations make me question my thought processes every day – particularly Dr Aparna Kumar, who reviewed an earlier version of this manuscript. I began studying conservation through the lens of feminist new materialisms during my doctoral project (2013–2018). Thank you to my supervisor – Rita Macedo – and all the evaluators and friendly reviewers for important discussions that inevitably tailored my interactions with conservation and the museum. And, finally, I would like to thank the editor and the reviewers of this paper for their important contributions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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