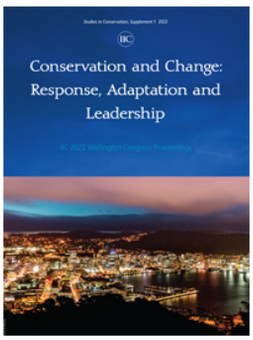

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Conservation in the Performative Turn

Joel Taylor [1] and Hélia Marçal [2,3]

[1]Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU), Oslo, Norway; [2]Department of History of Art, University College London, London, UK; [3]Institute of Contemporary History, NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Over the last century, conservation practice and discourse have undergone several turns. One of the most recent – the cultural turn – prompted discussions on the importance of values-led approaches, highlighting the inherently social nature of conservation. In this paper, we argue that conservation is now at the edge of a performative turn, emerging (also) from the field of critical heritage studies, which questions not only the uses (and users) of the past but also the ways in which cultural heritage is ultimately made through the actions of many agents. The performative turn in conservation comes with a set of reworked questions – not only about the aims and process of conservation itself, but also about ideas of what heritage is, for whom it is conserved, and practices of participation. This paper will focus specifically on how this performative turn revises current assumptions in practice, focusing on conservation risk assessments and how they are applied to contemporary art. We use contemporary art as the lens for this discussion, not as an exception but as the vantage point from which broader issues in conservation are more visible.

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Performative; risk assessment; values; contemporary art; ethics

Introduction

Conservation is currently at the edge of a shift in practice and theory that questions not only the uses (and users) of the past but also the ways in which cultural heritage is ultimately made through the actions of many agents. This paper will discuss approaches to risk assessment in light of the performative turn.

The conservation field has witnessed a number of 'turns', from the scientific turn that led to the advent of scientific conservation and a growing reliance on quantitative data in conservation practice (Muñoz-Viñas 2005), to the cultural turn, which developed values-led conservation approaches (Clavir 1994; Avrami 2009), or the communicative turn, which championed a shift from objects to people-oriented conservation (Muñoz-Viñas 2005). The understanding of these theoretical perspectives as turns, however, does not come without contingencies. This paper views those twists and turns in conservation discourse as part of an ecology of practice that is characterised by differentiation, or as a bespoke (Ashley-Smith 2017) way of doing conservation.

Two key concepts underpin the ideas explored in this paper: critical heritage studies and its performative turn. Critical heritage studies understand heritage as a social, cultural, and political construction. Specifically relevant for the field of conservation, critical heritage studies address certain assumptions, not least the notion that heritage is always a social good or that the preservation of its material is necessarily a benefit. Critical heritage studies move beyond management to recognise heritage as a political and cultural phenomenon as well as a social one by questioning the role of conservation in society. The performative turn in critical heritage studies pays attention to the continuous development of cultural practices through multiple interactions with several makers of heritage, which can encompass a diverse group of human and nonhuman actors (such as objects, technology, nature, among others), past, present, and future. 'In the words of Smith (2006, 2), '… heritage is a multilayered performance – be this a performance of visiting, managing, interpretation of conservation – that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present'. The performative turn also makes evident that heritage is rooted in values and rituals that are inherently intangible. Consequently, the materiality of the object itself, through changes in context and materials, is a time-based process, and conservation discourse and practice participate in the making of heritage and its own performances.

The performative turn in conservation comes with a set of reworked questions – not only about the aims and process of conservation itself, but also about ideas of what heritage is, sustainability and climate impact, social justice, and practices of participation.

CONTACT Joel Taylor joeltayloronline@gmail.com, joel.taylor@niku.no Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU), Storgata 2, 0155 Oslo, Norway; Hélia Marçal h.marcal@ucl.ac.uk Department of History of Art, University College London, London, UNITED KINGDOM

In this sense, we can also question our operative frameworks and how we come to understand them in the light of reframing cultural heritage as processes. If heritage is inherently processual, how do we understand notions such as unwanted change, condition, minimum intervention, or, ultimately, risk?

This paper will address the performative turn and how it impacts the ways in which we conceive risk frameworks, such as conservation risk assessment. Even risk assessment, which has been deeply important in the development of conservation and has broken ground, holds assumptions about materiality and the role of the conservator. These are embedded in the foundations of risk assessment that are so integral as to be barely visible. Throughout this paper, we will demonstrate that addressing some of these assumptions through the performative turn allows us to examine how roles of conservators and collections are established and become part of practice and discourse. To examine this further, it is worth considering the foundation of risk assessment approaches in general, not just for conservation. This relates directly to risk assessment, but also more broadly to risk-based concepts used in conservation.

The first section of this paper explores the theoretical and philosophical lineages of risk assessment and how it is and has been applied to conservation. The second section will focus on dependency models, and the ways in which they recognise how risk processes are relational and interdependent. The third and final section applies such models to contemporary art. The case studies we will analyse in this paper pertain to contemporary art. Contemporary culture provides excellent case studies for exploring conservation practice that necessarily disrupts commonly accepted axioms (van Saaze 2013), working here not as a disruptive, paradigmatic field of human creation, but as a vantage point from which the gaps in conservation practice can become more visible. The ways in which contemporary art can challenge conservation axioms help us rethink theory and practice in the conservation of all kinds of objects and collections.

Going beyond numbers

The numerical approaches that risk assessments employ are grounded in utilitarianism (Michalski 2008), a highly influential form of moral philosophy developed by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. Utilitarianism enables one to mathematically compare different decisions by determining their overall costs and benefits. The assertion that all people are equal allows one to quantify different outcomes, indicating which has the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The process outlines a rational framework beyond the emotional context, since short-term losses or costs can be seen in a wider perspective.

Despite the fairness of treating everyone as equal, this basic notion of utility has undergone criticism (Rawls 1999). Following utilitarianism implies that if the continuous, unbearable suffering of 100 people was necessary for the rest of the world to lead happier lives, the greater good for eight billion people would outweigh that suffering – a proposition few would accept (Lovett 2011). Although preposterous, what the example illustrates is that there is more to the choices we make than the numbers. Decisions that appear irrational in utilitarian approaches can sometimes simply be expressions of preference, not 'irrationality'. Although utilitarianism has been applied to many decision-making fields, it should be remembered that the notion of equally, intrinsically valuable human lives does not necessarily equate to extrinsically valued objects. 'Heritage' is not the object. Objects, collections and sites are preserved when humans regard them as valuable. The reasons why humans find them valuable can, and will, vary, as values are inherently context-specific and can conflict if individuals, groups or communities value things for different reasons. In terms of preservation, extrinsic values do not necessarily rely on material embodiment. Although preserving values is the aim, assessing loss from a hazard is designed to foreground reduction of change in the material. Sometimes this comes at the cost of the values – those qualities that make it important and/or desirable. In other words, material does not necessarily need to 'survive' as humans do.

Risk assessment – indeed preventive conservation – has largely focused on the preservation of material as the carrier of values. When dealing with contemporary art (and some objects from Indigenous and world cultures), the material may be ephemeral, and preservation of artistic intent may require replacement of elements (Falcão 2010). The video art of Nam June Paik, such as the works *Megatron/Matrix* 1995 (Figure 1), demands a set of 215 CRT monitors (Finn 2021). Not only are these monitors obsolete, making them incredibly hard to source, but the skills and the replacement parts needed to repair them are also becoming increasingly scarce. Collections that include holdings that need to be installed with this piece of equipment tend to respond to the risks of losing the work forever as a displayable object by stockpiling equipment, and proceed with the necessary substitutions and replacement of parts, trying to find ways of repairing existing equipment, or else develop strategies that can prolong the lives of these artworks beyond these natural lifespans. There are also occasions where certain artworks require equipment that is used solely for their display (called dedicated equipment), which impacts the joint equipment pool from which other artworks can source their specific substitutions.

When analysing the risks of loss of value of a collection – in this case, of video art – conservators must weigh those strategies and opportunities against external factors that include supply chain analysis of objects and equipment for whose production the museum cannot and will not be responsible. Indeed, this is a long-noted paradigmatic case in conservation and risk assessment, that not all material change constitutes damage and not all damage consists of material change (Ashley-Smith 1999; Waller 2003). Currently, only the term 'dissociation', the general concept introduced by Waller (1994), addresses the many ways in which value can be lost that do not involve material change, such as misplacement, missing information, technological obsolescence or unresolved ownership issues. It carries a great deal of weight in terms of representing risks, and often includes management and budgetary issues which affect all kinds of changes.

Another aspect of the focus on risk assessment is the implicit notion that a museum collection consists of material declining from a fixed starting point in value. The way that collections are understood and used is dynamic. Risk-based concepts like damage functions (Strlič et al. 2013), social discounting (Michalski 2008), quality-adjusted life years (QALYs, a term used in the healthcare sector when cost–benefit analysis is undertaken) (Keene 1996; Bülow and Brokerhof 2011), and lifetime predictions (Sebera 1994; Michalski 2002) also assume the projection of a rate of change on a defined material which is a rate of decline. This may be the case for material, but not necessarily for values. However value is described, such approaches ultimately anchor conservation in the mode of keeping material for as long as possible rather than promoting value (even though risk assessment helped shift conservation from the perspective of avoiding change at all costs). Once the risk has been mitigated, the rate of change can be reduced.

Figure 1. Partial view of Nam June Paik, *Megatron/Matrix* 1995, on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. *Megatron*: 340 × 686 × 61 cm. *Matrix*: 325 × 325 × 61 cm. Image: TimothyJ. creative commons licence CC-BY 2.0, https://www.flickr.com/photos/tjc/327769044

For some works, their preservation of their so-called 'original material' can be exactly what leads to the loss of value. That is the case for complex digital objects, such as software- and net-based artworks.

The Taiwanese American artist Shu Lea Cheang's web-hosted artwork *Brandon* 1998–1999, commissioned and acquired by the Guggenheim Museum in New York, USA, is one of those works. As with other web-based artworks, *Brandon* is dependent on the web ecosystem within which it was created. Technological change has led to many web frameworks becoming obsolete. Changes to the artwork's environment, or what can be called 'external forces,' led to the obsolescence of *Brandon*, and specifically, to the loss of some of its features, including loss of access to specific pages and data, the malfunctioning of text and image animations, and the inevitable broken links to many internal and external pages (Philips et al. 2017). The restoration of *Brandon* was undertaken by the conservation team at the Guggenheim with the collaboration of computer scientists from New York University, after the latter were able to analyse and document the source code and understand the behaviours each page was supposed to exhibit. The restoration included rewriting some parts of the source code, to enable those behaviours to be restored (Philips et al. 2017). The degradation and the consequent restoration of *Brandon*, are, therefore, examples of how the risk of value loss sometimes cannot be mitigated by slowing material change. With net art collections and time-based media works in general, we are not only speaking about technological obsolescence, but also the obsolescence of the practice of navigating websites under certain socio-material conditions. The artwork is dependent not only on the equipment and software but also on our own memories of engagement with web environments.

Moreover, the maintenance of some of the features a net art collection needs to thrive inevitably goes beyond the structure of the museum, and, therefore, adds a layer of uncertainty that becomes more and more important as the technology moves closer to the end of its lifecycle. Web-based artworks and collections demonstrate how change is sometimes what sustains conservation care efforts, and illustrate how the inherent performativity of artworks disrupts the independence of museum collections. Although this does not mean that the preservation of web-based art collections is incompatible with numerical risk assessment models, it demonstrates that risk assessment must necessarily encompass the external dependencies of these environments.

Risk assessments, of course, have regularly considered value either as a comparative valuation (Michalski and Pedersoli 2016) or as a normalised

indicator of the relationship between material loss and value (Waller 2003), which has been a deeply important development for conservation. Minimising the loss of value, or loss of utility, is a key issue. In the processes used in conservation, however, value is still a component in such an equation. Values become depicted on a scale, rather than as fluid or potentially conflicting. As outlined in discussions above, the connection to preventing material change is implicit in different aspects of the process. The equation is set up by selecting the agent and determining its potential for loss. The scope of the equation is based around the agent of loss or deterioration, in other words the hazard endangering the collection. The explicit use of value is to determine the extent of the impact of material change or loss, or the relative importance of a sub-group using a value pie chart (Michalski and Pedersoli 2016). When considering loss of value due to material change, the processes are clear and logical. When considering how to sustain values, however, rather than minimising their loss, the emphasis must move beyond positioning value into an equation and embraces the dynamic and complex nature of values. From a performative perspective, then, value should define the scope of the assessment rather than serve as a qualifying factor to gauge the potential impact of a hazard. The reasons any objects exist in a museum are because of the values deemed relevant.

Risk frameworks contributing to positive futures

By considering risk assessment through the lens of performativity, the emphasis is changed – a kind of inversion. Instead of value, or loss of value, being a variable in an equation to calculate the magnitude of risk from a hazard, values become the point from which factors that affect the values of a collection are engaged – whether or not their effect on values is positive or negative.

Inverting the process, and considering the ways in which values can be decoupled from the equation and characterised as the focal point does not necessarily require radical shifts, but instead reinterpretations and interrogations of the ways in which processes are framed and carried out. The field of risk management has various techniques that are focused on sustaining something desirable, which might change or evolve as part of its nature or its role. In the case of time-based media artworks, and, arguably, all forms of cultural heritage, change is often exactly what we need to be prepared to sustain, and many times within contexts of uncertainty.

An example of a risk-based approach that focuses on sustaining a function or mission is dependency modelling, in which an outcome is identified (e.g. a broadcasting service delivering its content to a defined population) and the things upon which that function depends are identified (for example a stage, performers, cameras, see Figure 2). Dependency modelling is one way in which performativity might be embraced within a risk framework, but the notion of sustaining something over time is evident in other methods. Since dependency affects the performance of a system, this serves as a means of understanding the consequences involved in operating and maintaining a system (Ansell and Walls 1990). It is expressed as a network, since the things upon which one part of the network depends are dependent on other things (a stage requires a building, a television camera requires a power source) leading to the 'top' event. The strength of a relationship, i.e. the extent to which the function depends on a particular element and whether that element is substitutable, is logged, and the risk modified to reflect that. It focuses on the network of relationships rather than numbers, and on what is required to make something happen or continue to happen, rather than what might affect it. Taylor, Blades, and Cassar (2006) introduced this model to conservation (Figure 3), and described the method, but as a means of defining and preventing undesired outcomes. In terms of performativity, such a model demonstrates that preservation can depend on creating, producing and organising, as much as on preventing loss or change. The dependencies do not stop with conservation nor with agents of deterioration, and are focused on sustaining the performance or collection rather than minimising change or optimising a pay-off. This approach, therefore, suggests an inversion of the paradigm typically used to perform risk assessments in conservation. This inversion of the process, by foregrounding value, allows for activities and management both to enhance and to reduce values.

How things might work for contemporary art

A performative approach goes beyond positioning value in an equation to embracing the fluid, dynamic and complex nature of objects and their care, by focusing on the reason that objects are in a museum. Inverting the perspective of risk – considering the values that should be sustained first, then determining what is required to sustain them – defines collection futures by considering factors upon which they depend (see an example for an analogue video art collection in Figure 4). Through this framework, we are able to identify areas of vulnerability in relation to a value or a set of values, promoting discussions about institutional responsibility towards external communities of practice (such as people and companies that know how to repair CRT monitors, or institutions that are

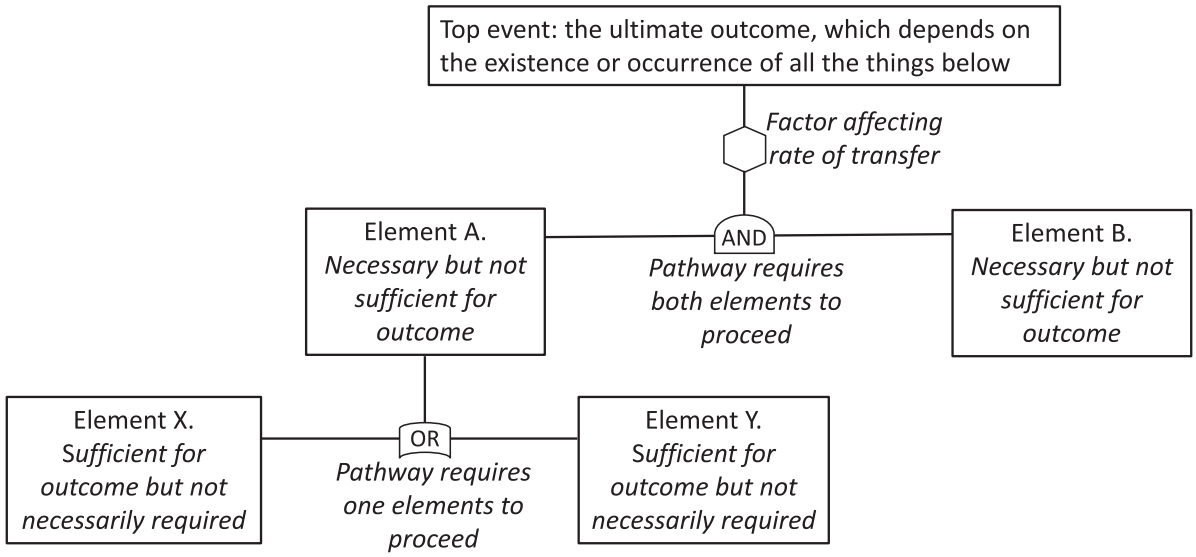

Figure 2. A simplified key for reading a dependency model.

dedicated to transmitting those skills to present and future generations).

This framework further responds to the performative turn by moving from questioning 'for whom?', to asking 'for whom, with whom, and who are the decision-makers?', while adopting a view that looks into the infrastructure that underpins risk. In this sense, inverting risk assessment operations lends decision-making the potential of becoming more people-based. This could include identifying potential heritage values associated with each stakeholder or stakeholder group as a starting point for defining and assessing risk, making the process more transparent and accountable. Techniques such as *Significance 2.0* (Russell and Winkworth 2009) can be very helpful in developing this. In exploring the ways in which values can impact the ways we understand the internal and external dependencies of artworks, it is, therefore, possible to have a deeper understanding of what we are excluding with each perspective.

Performative approaches help rethink the very role of conservation. Although differences may seem subtle

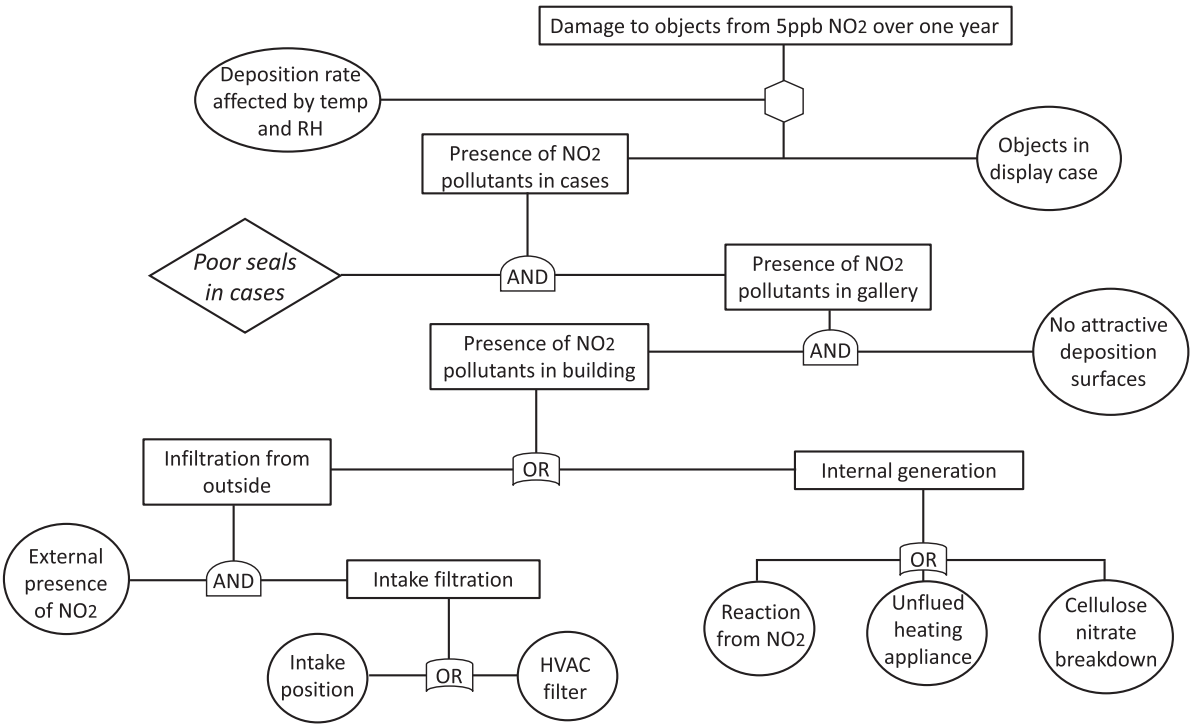

Figure 3. A simplified dependency model (fault tree analysis) to illustrate the basic dependencies that relate a particular kind of damage (Taylor, Blades, and Cassar 2006). Here, emphasis is on stopping an undesirable outcome.

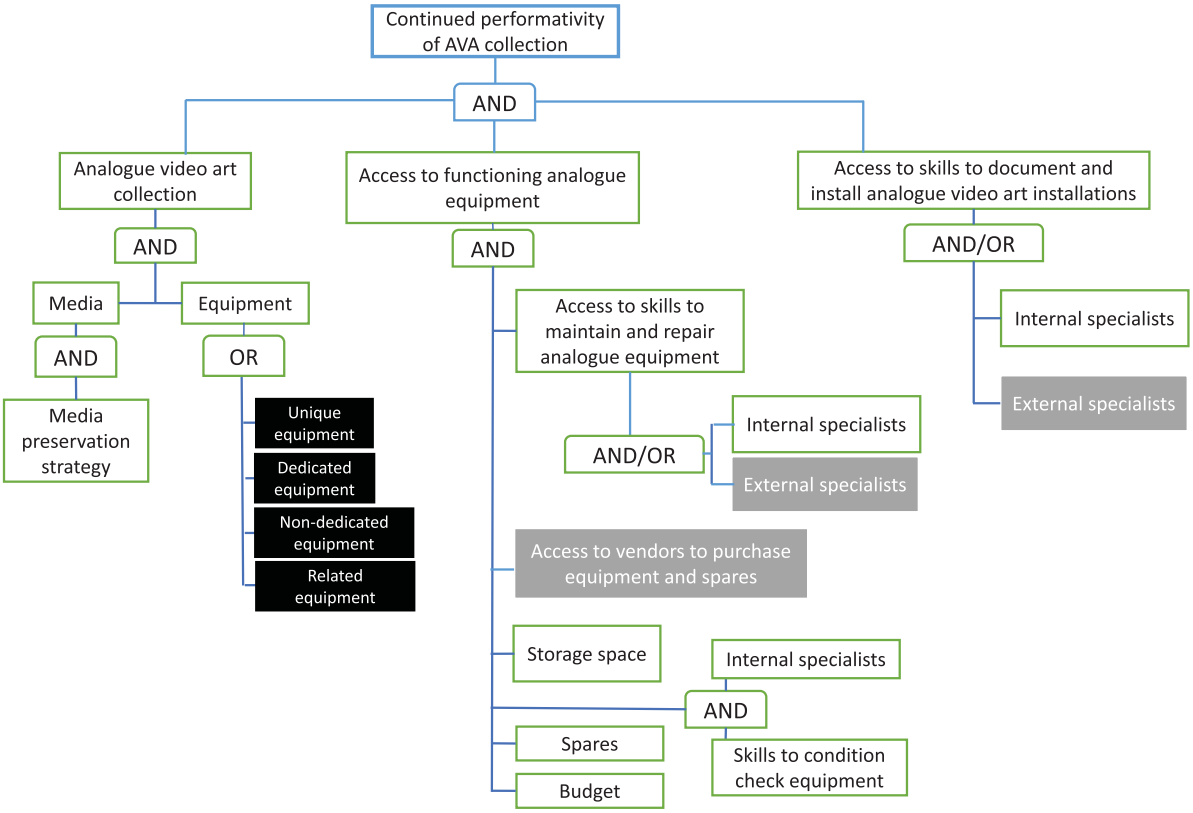

Figure 4. A basic dependency model used to identify the risks for a video art collection. This model is developed around a hypothetical collection of analogue video art. Here, emphasis is on sustaining and increasing the value of a collection. Based on Lawson and Marçal (2021). Instances in which an external dependency is very impactful are shaded in grey. Black shading shows the various types of equipment that add layers of complexity to the model.

in some ways, the fundamental aspect is the positioning of how these familiar issues relate to one another. Inverting the process from calculating risk to determining what is required for heritage to be sustained opens up conservation to different functions and actors that affects objects and collections, including their management. The traditional role of conservation is still evident, but is something that contributes to the wider picture of why that work or collection exists, and what would sustain and grow its value. Technical information gathered for an installation or predicting agents of deterioration can be applied into a framework that is not driven by the kinds of risk (i.e. agent of change), but by the kinds of value.

Conclusion

This reconfiguration connects with questions on the role of conservation expertise, challenging its aims and scope, and positioning it as a necessary-but-not-sufficient process in sustaining heritage. The performative turn recognises the collective and co-constitutive nature of conservation, embracing heritage in its plurality, and challenging long-accepted certainties on what heritage is and how (and for whom) it can be preserved. This reworking effectively expands the scope of conservation, where 'traditional' conservation activities are enmeshed with those that are connected to enhancing value in a way that dissolves dilemmas of preservation versus access or notions of conservation being an end in itself (or problems being the focus).

Different situations and models may be required in different situations, however, and this paper is not presented as an example of method development but as a discussion of how performativity might rework assumptions about conservation methods and practice. Although the examples are individual works, intended to draw concrete examples from contemporary art as a vantage point, the questions can be asked of any object or collection; indeed anything that can be sustained as a collective.

Addressing new questions in conservation involves appraising the methods and concepts from which conservation draws. At a time when the processes of conservation are being called into question, the performative turn must be further explored as a means to reappraise and rethink even the most fundamental frameworks, tools and ideas held in conservation theory and practice.

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ORCID

Joel Taylor http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7864-9414
Hélia Marçal http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0476-5233

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