

Affirming future(s): towards a posthumanist conservation in practice

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INTRODUCTION¹

This chapter discusses the ethics of conservation in the contemporary museum. Drawing on feminist new materialisms, and specifically on the notion of *affirmative ethics*,² we reflect on the affordances of the performative in rethinking the ethical positioning of conservation. In addressing the ways in which conservation participates in the relational becoming of museum objects (in the broad sense of the term), this chapter will interrogate not only the positioning of conservation as a practice in the museum ecosystem, but also how that practice co-constitutes – or, crucially, can counteract – the art historical canon, its inclusions and exclusions.

Art conservation is a practice that cares for cultural manifestations – both tangible and intangible – with the goal of transmitting them to future generations. The encounter between conservators and artworks is often characterised by moments of intimacy – a connection that is formed in knowing the physicality of an artwork like few people do, that of recognising the gesture of the artist in a brushstroke or a set of instructions, or even that of being pushed back in time, when instrumental techniques allow us to unveil something about an artwork for the very first time. And yet, most of conservation's day-to-day actions – at least those of conservators working in museums – do not consist of those moments. Instead, a considerable amount of time is spent producing documentation; describing, categorising, and defining aspects of artworks and other cultural manifestations; negotiating parameters for the conservation of these objects; procuring materials and equipment; monitoring environmental conditions and establishing strategies to prevent damage (also called preventive conservation); evaluating the condition of artworks; assessing their material history (or how they became what they are interpreted to be at that given moment);³ in some cases working on installation design and registration; establishing partnerships with communities outside of the museum; and collaborating with other members of staff and, in the case of contemporary art, and where possible, with artists. The scalpel and cotton swab moment (or what we can call the “direct intervention” in an artwork) is also one of conservation's activities, but, as we can see from this list, it is far from being the only or most central one. As we argue in this chapter, all of these activities – from the most glamorous to

¹ The authors have contributed equally for this paper and should both be considered as first authors.

² Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

³ For more on material histories see Hélia Marçal, ‘Documentation Tool: Material History,’ in **Documentation and Conservation of Performance (March 2016 – March 2021)**, a Time-based Media Conservation project at Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance/material-history> (accessed 10 August 2021).

the most mundane – participate in the becoming of artworks and, crucially, to the praxis of conservation itself.

With the acknowledgment of the impact of conservation actions on the becoming of artworks (and vice-versa) comes the *response-ability* to recognise not only the ways in which conservation tailors the futures of artworks,⁴ but also for whom conservation is creating those futures. Statements of regulatory agencies such as ICON (Institute of Conservation, in the UK) or AIC (American Institute of Conservation, in the United States), as well as ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation), set the aims of conservation as the transmission of cultural manifestations for access by present and future generations. In selecting certain futures instead of others, conservators are including certain narratives at the risk of excluding others. To facilitate access beyond the present moment, inevitable and exclusionary decisions tend to be made: preferencing one physical manifestation of an artwork over another; privileging one aesthetic scheme above multiple possibilities; questioning how to represent the artwork in documentation that will accompany and potentially steer the work's ongoing material and conceptual trajectory. Which futures tend to be selected and which are we more prone to exclude or resist bringing into being? An awareness of conservation's *response-abilities* both to the artwork and to its future audiences is yet to be explored fully and is vital to the ethical continuation of the practice. To do this, we propose a posthumanist framework by which to rethink and enact conservation praxis that moves beyond the essentialist practices to which conservators tend to default, namely to measure, score, and contain. In this chapter, we argue that a posthuman conservation practice amplifies the possible futures of works, rendering those objects and their histories more diverse, inclusive, and, necessarily, relational.

Though posthumanism is a framework that can take on various routes, as one can see throughout the various chapters of this book, the term suggests a revisiting of the status, positioning, ontology, and relationality of human beings, not only rejecting anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, but also rethinking normative understandings of humanness and the human as category.⁵ A posthumanist approach allows us to interrogate the exclusivity of humans as knowledge creators, prompting questions around the agency of the nonhuman (from nature, to objects, infrastructures, or technology) and human fallibility, ethics, and vulnerability. Posthumanism, moreover, challenges traditional categories and hierarchies such as culture/nature, mind/body, or human/nonhuman, which we believe are vital to the ethical progression of conservation practice. The approaches to posthumanism we are using here are mostly connected to the writings of Braidotti and Barad, and broadly in what has been understood as feminist posthumanism, which offers a particular lens into the limits of current conceptions of humanness in processes, structures, and infrastructures. In this chapter, we will specifically address the ways in which conservation as a practice participates in the making of artworks in the contemporary museum, arguing for a posthumanist approach that promotes diversity in the material futures of museum objects and their uses. In proposing a relational ontology of what the world is and how it is

⁴ According to Karen Barad, *response-ability* is one's ability to respond to the Other in their own situatedness in time and space. See Karen Barad, ***Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*** (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵ See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, ***The Posthuman*** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

understood, these feminisms are inherently intersectional.⁶ Similarly, in relating the way things *are* to the ways that they are *known*, feminist posthumanisms add an ethical layer to every act of being and knowing, what Barad calls ‘ethico-onto-epistemo-logy’.⁷

This chapter is structured in three sections. In the first section, we discuss the pitfalls of a humanistic conservation practice, focusing specifically on how it impacts the conservator’s positioning in the museum. Taking on the example of collecting and conserving contemporary art, the second section will explore the ways in which the modernist conception of museum processes impacts the collecting of cultural manifestations that are expressed through forms of becoming. In the third and last section, we position the debate in relation to ideas of returning, undoing, or unlearning in the museum, arguing for a posthumanist turn in conservation practice. The chapter ends with a call for an active engagement with practices of affirmative ethics and *diffraction* in the museum,⁸ concluding with a proposal for an ethical reorientation of collecting and conservation practices using collections as a prismatic lens from the museum to the World. A relational ontology of conservation is discussed alongside the ethical *response-ability* of museum workers towards fairer practices of inclusion and becoming posthuman.

PART 1. Challenging a humanistic museum

Although the practice of care and maintenance goes back to time immemorial, when humans first began making cultural artefacts, the professionalisation of conservation-restoration in the global north is a relatively modern construct. Hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, the development of new technologies such as radiography (established as an autonomous medical department in Glasgow Royal Infirmary in January 1896) alongside a growing interest in the detection of forgeries in private and public collections in post-WWII Europe, scientific methodologies became synonymous with conservation as a ‘revealer of truth.’ Its recognition as a professional field was cemented in the 1950s with the establishment of the extant International Institution for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) in London, which formulated its own code of ethics, initiated training and international conferences, and established international peer-reviewed publications. The entwined roots of conservation, technological innovation, and Enlightenment values is what continues to anchor conservation and collections care today. Accordingly, the figure of the conservator became that of a lab-coat-clad scientist who was more comfortable with chemistry than aesthetic subjectivity, worked at a museum, and mostly on paintings. That straw figure – naturally a white male (although curiously this

⁶ Kimberle Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,’ *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no.8 (1989): 139-167.

⁷ By ‘ethico-onto-epistemo-logy’, Barad means that the being and becoming of human and nonhumans is intrinsically related to the ways of knowing them, and that, as all knowledge-making processes are situated, such onto-epistemology has always an ethical dimension. Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,’ *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801-31. doi:10.1086/345321 and Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁸ For more on affirmative ethics see Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, and for diffraction see, for example, Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

maintenance labour is predominantly recognised as ‘women’s work’⁹ – has been raised as a totem, a dispassionate resource of invisible labour. Conservator Miriam Clavir notes that conservation’s emphasis continues to remain on ‘rigorous, logical, and systematic methods of observation, experimentation, validation, and prediction.’¹⁰ In recent years, conservation literature has drawn attention to the problems raised by this humanist approach,¹¹ particularly with contemporary artworks that challenge traditional modes of creation through material variability, physical transience, or in-built obsolescence. Even those frameworks that have been praised for providing some practical solutions to such variable artworks, such as ‘scoring’ time-based media artworks¹² or mapping an artwork’s ‘work-defining properties,’¹³ follow the default desire to contain, maintain, and codify. Are there other paths to be forged that better serve the care of these artworks and the individuals and communities enmeshed in their production and becoming?

The focus on manual expertise has come to distinguish the role of the conservator from that of the curator who, in recent decades, has become known as something of a ‘tastemaker’ and ‘interpreter’.¹⁴ The backstory of the unfolding role of the curator – from carer of the museum collection (coming from the Latin word *curare*) to its hermeneutic keeper – is certainly not linear or straightforward. Yet these pithy observations of the designation of various labours within the museum are not insignificant to the positionality of the practice of conservation and the role of the conservator within the institution. Museal structures tend to mirror this bifurcation. Conservation studios and offices are often separated from the main thoroughfare; conservators often are not consulted before the acquisition of new works to a collection is initiated; there are still salary discrepancies between conservators (and overall collection care professions), and those of curators, even when the same level of education is required;¹⁵ conservators and other collection care professionals are still not part of research projects on the care, conservation, and decolonisation of museum structures, and, when they are, very rarely do they lead the project or one of the work packages or associated research streams. There are of course exceptions, such as MoMA in New York, where

⁹ See for example: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Ithaka S+R. (2019). **Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018**, Report. https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/e5/a3/e5a373f3-697e-41e3-8f17-051587468755/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf (accessed 22 April 2021).

¹⁰ Miriam Clavir, **Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations** (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2002), 10.

¹¹ See, for example, Hélia Marçal, ‘Becoming Difference: On the Ethics of Conserving the In-Between,’ **Studies in Conservation** (2021). DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2021.1947074

¹² Joanna Phillips, ‘Reporting Iterations: A Documentation Model for Time-based Media Art,’ **Revista de História Da Arte** (2015): 168–179. <http://revistaharte.fcsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAW4.pdf>

¹³ Pip Laurenson, ‘Authenticity, change and loss in the conservation of time-based media installations,’ in J. Schachter & S. Brockmann (eds.), **(Im)permanence: Cultures In/Out of Time** (Center for the Arts in Society, 2008): 150-164.

¹⁴ Henri Neuendorf, ‘Art Demystified: What Do Curators Actually Do?,’ **Artnet**, November 10 (2016). <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-demystified-curators-741806> (accessed 10 August 2021).

¹⁵ The May 2011 statistics of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, in the US) place the conservators’ average income at \$42,450 per year, while curator’s average income in the same report reaches \$53,540. Do note that BLS pairs conservators with museum technicians, which might impact the statistics. The same salary discrepancy, however, can be seen between archivists and curators. For more on this see Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, **The Economics Daily**, Occupational Employment and Wages (May 2011), https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120329.htm (accessed 10 August 2021).

conservators and curators sometimes share the same spaces,¹⁶ or the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum* at Tate, which was led by the conservator Pip Laurenson and had a pluridisciplinary team researching the structures of the museum.¹⁷ In being positioned in what has been called ‘the backstage’ of the museum,¹⁸ conservators are refused access to the place from which one speaks and is heard. It is also a position from which it is difficult to hear. The ones who own the social capital to speak and be heard are also the ones whose speech is ‘authorised as “theory”’,¹⁹ and, fundamentally, the ones who hold the power to define how other knowledges are valued.²⁰ The separation of departments within the museum, perceived hierarchies of knowledge and quasi-Cartesian epistemic separations, the necessary yielding of authority and (with few exceptions) the absence of conservation from the public eye,²¹ is symptomatic of the essentialism that characterises institutions of the West and of the humanist ontologies that underpin the making of artworks and their narratives in the museum.

Here, with posthumanism in mind, we instead recognise that knowledge is relational, networked, and embodied; that labour can be simultaneously intellectual and physical (and many things in between and beyond); and that these intersections are vital for a more effective and affirming future of the museum, the objects in its care, and the people who care about and for those objects. This perspective necessarily impacts the understanding of conservation as a practice sustained and confined to the museum. A relational approach to the care of artworks and practices is one that recognises all involved as having a particular, and yet not individualised, lived experience that impacts what we make of cultural manifestations. In the field of conservation, the recognition of these dynamics has been leading to the development of collaborations with communities outside of the museum ecosystem, with varying degrees of success.²² The *response-ability* of conservators to the other social aspects of the practice – particularly the ones that demand an inward reflection on the power structures in the museum – is less evident. Conservators (and other collection care professions) are still not part of debates that respond to the museum as a relational,

¹⁶ Pip Laurenson, ‘Emerging institutional models and notions of expertise for the conservation of time-based media works of art,’ *Techne* 37 (2013).

¹⁷ See Tate, ‘Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum’, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible> (accessed 10 August 2021).

¹⁸ For an analysis on the pitfalls of this view of conservation as being the in backstage, or ‘behind-the-scenes,’ see Rebecca Fifield ‘No More “Behind the Scenes”: How Word Choice Matters in Presenting Collection Stewardship,’ **Conservation: Reactive and Proactive, AIC 48th Annual Meeting** (2020).

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Differences that Matter. Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 18.

²⁰ The expression ‘knowledges’ derives from Donna Haraway’s ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,’ *Feminist Studies* 14, no.3 (1988): 575-99. doi:10.2307/3178066.

²¹ An exception, for example, would be the Dallas Museum of Art where the Paintings Conservation Studio is located within the gallery and has a retractable windowed wall so that visitors can interact with conservators if there is a project underway of particular interest. Of particular note is the restoration and documentation project *Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering the Ghent Altarpiece*, a highly collaborative initiative supported by The Getty Foundation, whereby the technical analysis, high resolution documentation, and project reports are openly accessible on the project website: <http://legacy.closertovaneyck.be/#home/sub=teaser> (accessed 10 August 2021).

²² See, for example, Hélia Marçal and Farideh Fekrsanati, ‘Affirming change in participatory practice of cultural conservation,’ *Participatory Practices in Art and Cultural Heritage: Learning Through and from Collaboration*, ed. E. Sitzia, R. Benschop, V. van Saaze, and C. Rausch (Amsterdam: Springer, forthcoming).

entangled, epistemic site, with human and nonhuman agents operating together. More often than not, conservation is seen as the care for objects and not as an activity that can cause harm to others. Is conservation ethical if the resources to make it happen come from patrons that harm human and nonhuman others? Can conservation's ethical ambitions ignore its (unwilling) participation in economies of exploitation?

PART 2. Challenging a humanist conservation practice

The structure of the museum - that was created for the acquisition and care of self-contained objects of the fine arts -²³ fails to properly cater to the expanded ontology of the contemporary artwork. Much has been written about the contingent object of contemporary art and the complexities of its preservation,²⁴ and there are numerous conservation research projects and networks that are seeking to answer contemporary art's call for more diverse modes of continuation.²⁵ Yet conservation remains rooted to the bedrock of six principles: durability, authenticity, original condition, original intent, reversibility, and minimal intervention. Some of these are written into the various codes of ethics, while others are 'fundamental assumptions,' i.e. those principles that are taken for granted and that 'form a chain of reasoning'.²⁶ That reasoning orientates towards fixity and prolonging the unchanging physical presence of the object. Contemporary art has challenged such assumptions, often inciting mutation and reimagination, opening the door for lateral thinking about the practice and processes of conservation and collections care. Therefore, it is in relation to contemporary art that conservation's positivistic essentialism has first been challenged. Yet we argue that a rethinking of conservation as a posthumanist practice extends beyond the contemporary to the museum object-at-large. It acknowledges that every object/artwork in a museum is part of a *meshwork* of values, practices, cultures, human and non-human, that cannot be reduced to material and aesthetic concerns alone.²⁷ To do so is to perpetuate the violence of lacunae initiated by collecting practices over centuries. A posthumanist conservation practice seeks to advocate for those voices (human

²³ See, for example, Dominguez Rubio, *Still Life*.

²⁴ See for example: Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003); Pip Laurenson, 'Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,' *Tate Papers* 6 (2006), <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7401>; Tatja Scholte and Glenn Wharton, *Inside Installations: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Vivian Van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013); Hanna Hölling, 'Transitional media: Duration, recursion, and the paradigm of conservation,' *Studies in Conservation* 61 (2016): 79–83.

²⁵ See for example the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) <https://www.incca.org/>; The Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (Dutch abbreviation: SBMK); The Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research (NeCCAR), a three-year international research network (2012-2014) funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) which sought to develop joint research projects and a training curriculum on the theory, methodology, and ethics of the conservation of contemporary art. The latter led to the research and training programme New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA), a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network, with fifteen funded doctoral research projects: <http://nacca.eu/about/> (accessed 10 August 2021).

²⁶ Dinah Eastop, 'The Cultural Dynamics of Conservation Principles in Reported Practice,' in *Conservation Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, ed. A. Richmond and A. Bracker (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2009): 150-162, 151.

²⁷ Ingold uses *meshwork* as a metaphor to describe the entanglements of individuals and knowledges that are created through encounters with others. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Routledge: New York, 2011).

and nonhuman) that do not have space to be aired in the current structures of the modernist museum.

Epistemic cultures in museums, as networks of being and becoming in permanent *intra-action*,²⁸ impact not only how conservators operate in these structures, but also how artworks can exist and continue to become. The understanding that knowing is ultimately performative leads to an ongoing construction of what we are able to know. This necessarily 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; ways of knowing are then acts of excluding possibilities, and 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, can be considered an ethical stance. Moreover, if we consider the process of conservation as *making-with* or *worlding-with* others, as proposed above, the realm of material possibilities for objects also determines that of the possibilities for all human and nonhuman agents connected with it. The sympoiesis of these systems makes them inevitably inseparable.²⁹ 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 *response-ability*. Considering accountability as something that brings us together reframes it to refer to our responsibility to another, whether people, artworks, spaces, technology or nature. In what follows, we ask what *response-ability* the conservator has to collaborate with other voices in the decision-making around an artwork's becoming? In what ways can the conservator work towards a more ethical and relational decision-making practice that informs the care of the human and nonhuman agents involved in the making of art?

Here we turn to Karla Black's *Contact Isn't Lost* (2008) to unpack these questions. Acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland in 2009, it instantly raised questions of the Galleries' cataloguing systems and conservation decision making. A significant proportion of its material presence is a carpet of white plaster powder filling the gallery space, leaving the viewer only a narrow walkway around its perimeter, deliberately opening itself up to the vulnerabilities of a viewer's ill-fated step. This spatial precariousness and its expansive positioning might lead one to ask whether this work should be catalogued as an 'installation'; which it was until Black contacted the gallery to have its 'object type' changed to 'sculpture'.³⁰ The taxonomy of the modernist museum remains, in most cases, to follow classification by material type, again a hangover from Enlightenment collecting practices, which is problematic for artworks that defy neat categorisation. Conservators' job descriptions follow suit, with roles predominantly advertised as 'paper conservator,' 'sculpture conservator,' 'time-based media conservator' etc. In practice, this means a 'sculpture' conservator could be working simultaneously on a plaster cast of a Greek figurative sculpture, a large outdoor Louise Bourgeois *Spider*, and a complex multi-room

²⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

²⁹ Sympoiesis is a term coined by Haraway, which pertains to the complexity of processes of making-with within systems of being and knowing. In Haraway's words, '[n]othing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing ... Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.' See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58. DOI: doi:10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q.

³⁰ See correspondence in *Contact Isn't Lost* accession file between Karla Black and Shona Cameron, National Galleries' Online Curator.

Mike Nelson installation like *Coral Reef* (2000). Difficulties arise with the latter, being created from a multitude of different materials and objects, as the various elements may need to be stored in different conditions and locations. Such expansive and materially complex works may require input from outside experts and a whole network of supply and facilitation to present the work again. As with Black's work – although hers operates according to relatively traditional taxonomies and materials in comparison (plaster power, chalk, pigment) – contemporary artworks prompt questions of museal and conservation praxis.

For artworks, such as *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), initiated by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, the schism between artistic and museum practices is augmented. A multi-authored work with 13 further artists and collaborating partnerships, and with multiple iterations, Parreno and Huyghe purchased the cartoon character AnnLee from a Japanese manga company, which then became the basis of a succession of works by the collaborators including a number of films, a poster, and a neon portrait. A riff on the title from the Japanese cyberpunk animation *Ghost in the Shell* (1989), in which a female cyborg questions her existence as part-human part-programme, *No Ghost Just a Shell* references AnnLee's cybernetic form that is waiting to be imbued with the ghost of consciousness. Unlike traditional art production where 'the idea is legitimated by the definition of a form, then protected by a system of copyright', as curator Hans Ulrich Obrist explains, in *No Ghost Just a Shell* the idea is unfolding through its polymorphic becoming, then the copyright is returned to the sign itself.³¹ In tracing the process of making and becoming of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, Vivian van Saaze explored its many instances, appearances, and disappearances.³² Contrary to what usually happens when artworks are acquired, with *No Ghost Just a Shell*, museums and other collecting institutions participated in some of the ways in which the artwork disappeared. While Museum Collection Management Systems (CMSs) might struggle to catalogue the complexity of a multimodal installation, for *No Ghost Just a Shell* the CMS was unable to identify its various instances as part of the same artwork, providing them instead with separate inventory numbers (a problem that was later resolved). The museum similarly struggled to define the boundaries of an object that was ever expanding and the process of becoming of which was visible across all areas of intervention, including conservation. When facing non-conforming forms of artistic practice, museums typically end up adjusting the material conditions of the work itself instead of revising their own.

With *Contact Isn't Lost* – Black's first work to be acquired by a national collection – the process of acquisition itself contributed to the material becoming of the work. At the far end of the paster powder carpet is a swathe of polythene sheeting, crumpled in a form like a model mountain range of translucent blue and pink peaks and valleys. With the knowledge that this work would enter a public collection, Black took it upon herself to try to 'fix' the work; to resist future reinterpretations and define the continuation of the work in a particular material configuration. The fine balance between material fragility and stasis is a constant theme throughout Black's work: it needs to look like it could be blown away, trampled over (which sometimes it is!), while asserting a strong will to prevail. It was in this spirit that Black

³¹ Artspace Editors, 'Hans Ulrich Obrist on the Historic Import of AnnLee, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's Self-Aware Manga Creation,' *Artspace* (27 August 2015). https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/no-ghost-just-a-shell-phaidon-53070 (accessed 10 August 2021)

³² Vivian van Saaze, 'Doing Artworks. An Ethnographic Account of the Acquisition and Conservation of *No Ghost Just a Shell*,' *Krisis* 1 (2009): 20-32.

decided to cast some plastic bottles in plaster as anchor points for the polythene sheet. According to this logic, the plaster powder could be swept up for disposal and the sculptural form of the polythene and plaster-cast bottles would remain a constant in the work. While the intention to acclimatise the work to the structures and expectations of a national collection was understandable, it has prompted further questions and conservation issues around the becoming of this work in practice. The desire to provide something tangible to be stored in perpetuity has in fact caused more problems than it has solved. The lifespan of the polythene sheet was given as five-to-ten years in the initial conservation documentation.³³ The artist's directive to preserve this element of the work means that to replace it, even in consultation with the artist's estate, is problematic. In trying to operate according to museal conventions of authenticity, as well as an understandable desire to remain connected to the materiality of the work, Black may have inadvertently sentenced *Contact Isn't Lost* to its own partial demise.

PART 3. Affirming a posthumanist conservation practice

Both the expanded ontologies of contemporary artworks and their positionality in the World requires a radical shift in awareness of disparate contributing factors to an artwork's becoming as well as ethical relationality and duties of care surrounding the *meshwork* in which the artwork exists.³⁴ That is the case, for example, of supply chain in access to art materials. In an interview in 2009, Black pondered her use of chalk from the Early Learning Centre (now no longer trading): 'I suppose if someone was dying from making it... if it was little children with their fingers bleeding in China... Maybe it is, I don't know, I haven't looked into that... That would be quite bad.'³⁵ Do artists, as much as conservators and museum professionals, have responsibility to an *harm avoidance principle*, in which moral agents have a 'moral duty to avoid inflicting serious harm... on another human being or human beings... at least if she can avoid doing so without suffering comparable harm herself'?³⁶

Harm to others, namely nonhuman others, is also seen with issues of disposability, which are yet to be addressed in museums. If *Contact Isn't Lost*'s polythene sheet begins to look less than 'fresh,' how can it be disposed of in an ecologically sensitive manner? Its disposal would imply the need to source replacement polythene sheeting. Will there come a time when this type of non-recyclable material becomes obsolete? Conversely, if its production continues, who and what is negatively impacted by the manufacture of such material? Produced from ethylene, which is obtained mainly from petroleum, this has ethical implications for the environment and human alike: fossil fuel extraction is cited as one of the major causes of climate change and why, in accordance with the Paris Agreement goals, its use is to be ended within a generation.³⁷ Assuming that climate change is also an issue of decision-making,³⁸ and in line with the *harm avoidance principle*, how are conservation

³³ Noted by Senior Conservator Lorraine Maule in the work's condition report when acquired in 2009.

³⁴ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*.

³⁵ Karla Black interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Glasgow, 16 February 2009: 00:56:55.

³⁶ Elizabeth Cripps, *Climate Change and the Moral Agent: Individual Duties in an Interdependent World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 11.

³⁷ Greg Muttitt & Sivan Kartha, 'Equity, climate justice and fossil fuel extraction: principles for a managed phase out', *Climate Policy*, 20:8 (2020): 1024-1042.

³⁸ Brown, K., Adger, W. N., & Cinner, J. E. 'Moving climate change beyond the tragedy of the commons,' *Global Environmental Change: Human and Policy Dimensions*, 54 (2019): 61-63.

practitioners to navigate the culture of single-use materials, replacement, disposal of exhibition copies (in keeping with copyright restrictions), or ethically questionable material sourcing as outlined above? Is the allure of the authentic so powerful that it surpasses warranted concerns about the loan of objects, arguably one of the most polluting museum activities? Is it appropriate for artworks to be preserved and stored for future generations at all costs? While Black cites a recycling ethic behind her work, where everyday detritus such as cardboard and polythene sheets are made precious, the very act of 'making precious' has conversely cemented potentially damaging materials and practices as sacrosanct within the museum. If we were to consider the possibility of radical relationality afforded by posthumanism, the symbiotic relationship between human and nonhuman in the construction of worlds would mean that harming others would inevitably ultimately harm the object itself.

As mentioned in the introduction, conservators are accountable for their exclusions, as they are responsible for understanding how they mis- or under-represent other existences, or how they are harming nonhuman Others, namely through the maintenance of practices that contribute towards our climate catastrophe. Barad's proposal of an 'ethics of entanglement' precisely targets an individual's accountability across space, time, and different ways of seeing and being in the world. She posits that:

an ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future. ... Our debt to those who are already dead and those who are not yet born cannot be disentangled from who we are. What if we were to recognize that differentiating is a material act that is not about radical separation, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments?³⁹

Accepting the ethical responsibility that comes every time we perform exclusions, or misrecognise Others, is, for Barad, essential for creating a just world. In the framework of posthumanist thought, this can be done by recognising and connecting differences, while also approaching our activities as being inherently relational. Barad and other posthumanist scholars (such as Geerts and van der Tuin, or Haraway)⁴⁰ propose processes of highlighting previously excluded possibilities and connecting them to ongoing phenomena as a way of bringing new perspectives to the fore.⁴¹ As they argue, this is a process of *diffraction* by which a single beam of light produces an ever-widening wave that extends beyond that initial point of encounter. In this metaphor for diffractive thinking, the posthumanist conservation prism has the potential for positive impact not only within the confines of conservation practice itself, but beyond its edges towards wider museal values and, potentially, even bending around obstacles such as museum structures. In practice, this could mean, for example, the development of new categories of knowledge for artworks – or even the staying with the troubles of ambiguity and resist categorisation altogether.⁴² This could also mean to resist the allure of fixity and to allow artworks to be manipulated, changed, or, potentially, remade (or destroyed!) by their users – that being so-called 'source communities,' artists, or visitors. This could be refusing to use any conservation materials

³⁹ Karen Barad, 'Nature's Queer Performativity,' *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 121-58, 150. doi:10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, 'Diffraction & reading diffractively,' in *New materialism: How matter comes to matter. Almanac*. <http://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction> (accessed 26 May 2021).

⁴¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁴² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

that are not part of a circular economy or, otherwise, that do not have clean and fair trade principles. Or this could even mean to accept that the museum is not the place to care for these objects and artworks as holdings, but can be a steward of these artistic manifestations, where the care for the artworks is as distributed as it is their ownership. Rather than shoe-horning the 'polymorphic' *No Ghost Just a Shell* into preconceived boundaries based on out-moded modernist taxonomies, or the use and replacement of ethylene, an awareness and understanding of the *sympoiesis* of this meshwork of making, becoming, and caring is vital. This needs to be reflected in the rewriting of the various codes of ethics for conservation (many of which haven't been updated for decades),⁴³ as well as educating conservators in their *response-abilities* during their training.

This approach to ethical accountability links to a relational approach to conservation. A possible strategy to bring together apparently competing approaches to care can come through an awareness of these exclusions. The *response-ability* of conservators would be realised by considering the multiple possibilities for the artwork and the interactions that make it what it could be.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated how current conservation practice upholds humanistic notions when caring for objects in the contemporary museum. Conservation practices tend to recognise the existence of a singular and exceptional authenticity in artworks, promote traditional categories of knowledge, and, in some cases (like what happened with Black's *Contact Isn't Lost*) change the characteristics of the work for it to better fit the expectations of a museum collection. Some of those practices are developed by museum staff, while others are championed by human and nonhuman others, such as artists, storage systems, communities, collection management apparatus, visitors, the artworks' composite materials. Our contribution has proposed an alternative practice: a posthumanist conservation approach.

A posthumanist conservation approach resists essentialism in favour of facilitating difference and embracing expanded notions of authenticity in the museum. A posthumanist conservation practice fosters collective engagement through collective caring, acknowledging the meshwork of creative practice and its care and seeking expert knowledges from individuals and communities at various turns of the artwork's becoming, from acquisition of source material, communities involved in its ongoing, and its reception. A posthumanist conservation methodology sees the pain of unlearning the structures of the museum as a form of becoming, and affirms difference and distinctiveness. To use Braidotti's words on *affirmative ethics*, a posthumanist, affirmative, relational, subjective, and, ultimately, ethical conservation approach 'consists not in denying negativity, but in reworking it outside the dialectical oppositions; ... it is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather a different way of reworking it ... Ethics is not just the application of moral protocols, norms and values, but rather the force that contributes to conditions of affirmative becoming.'⁴⁴

⁴³ E.g. the most up-to-date version of the American Institute of Conservation (AIC) Code of Ethics was revised in 1994.

⁴⁴ See Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, n.p.n.

In the case of a posthumanist conservation practice, we argue that the first step on this path towards this ideal is to consider conservation from all-to-all. This relational conservation would encompass parity of participation in conservation decision-making, and recognise the shared ownership of cultural heritage. A posthumanist ethics of care is one that cares for objects alongside people, knowledge, and nature. A posthumanist conservation approach is one in which the object works as a prism that diffracts conservation practice as an ethical commitment to the World. Similarly, it is one that recognises the object and all the material assemblages that co-constitute it through its lineage. This implies shifting the focus from harm to objects, to the harm of humans and nonhumans that allowed the object to get to us at that precise moment in time and space. All this while caring for the people who created them, and the workers who produced the materials needed for their creation and ongoing care. A posthumanist conservation practice is caring for the planet that provided the resources for their production and continuous becoming, for all the humans and nonhumans that are connected and entangled with their various ontologies. Caring for all, through conservation.

Biographies

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