

The Enfolding Object of Conservation: Artwork Identity, Authenticity, and Documentation



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Abstract Conservation approaches for contemporary artworks have increasingly turned to a work’s identity as the object of conservation and perpetuation. Within the “performance paradigm” of conservation (van de Vall, *Revista de História Da Arte* 4, 7–17, 2015a) authenticity is often predicated on a manifestation’s compliance with an artist’s explicit directives. In practice, this paradigm is challenged by works of art that unfold in protracted states of creation and accrue new modes of presentation. This chapter reads notions of artwork identity, authenticity, and documentation for conservation purposes through poststructuralist, feminist, queer, and agential realist discourses. It troubles the assumption that conservators have access to a “view from above” (Haraway, *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 575–599, 1988) and that the boundaries or properties of an entity are determinate prior to and separate from our observation and description. Within Karen Barad’s agential realist framework, the documentation of artwork identity is reframed as a perspectival and partial representation of significances, which are made determinate through—and therefore entangled with—the specifics of our measurement or observation. This chapter shows how, through both our investigations and the documentation we create and leave behind, conservators and conservation researchers are enfolded with the entities we seek to know and care for, and how their boundaries and properties are continually enacted and reconfigured through these material-discursive practices. The objective referent of conservation documentation is therefore refocused as and around the *phenomena* produced through conservation research and practice.

Keywords Significant properties · Identity · Authenticity · Documentation · Time-based media · Agential realism

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1 Introduction

Becoming is not an unfolding in time but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering.—Karen Barad (2007, p. 180)

In classical theories of conservation that emerged in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both the physical integrity and authenticity of works of art were thought to rely on the endurance of a particular physical object and its various aesthetic potentials. Within this paradigm, conservation activities were centred largely around mitigating changes perceived as loss to a physical object through minimal and ideally reversible material interventions. With many works of art produced today and in recent decades, the perpetuation of an artwork's presence is not contingent solely on the physical persistence of a discrete, spatiotemporal artefact nor is a work's authenticity guaranteed only by maintaining the continuity of original material fabric. Many artworks that incorporate ephemeral or consumable materials, audio-visual technologies, liveness, and other conceptual practices that challenge traditional, Western paradigms of art making do not persist as experienced entities by simply maintaining a finite and unchanging material assemblage. In many cases, these works recur in multiple "equally genuine instances" (Goodman 1968, p. 113) as physical objects, events, and experiences made present in time and space through the episodic recombination of replenished or new materials and media, equipment, and/or human interactions.

Against the backdrop of the wider "communicative turn" of the 1990s wherein heritage frameworks and conservation theories in the Global North began to recognise the cultural contingency and mutability of perceptions of authenticity (Villers 2004; Muñoz Viñas 2005; van Saaze 2013, p. 75), frameworks for fine art conservation began to be reconceived to accommodate the particularities of modern and contemporary artworks. As with many non-Western objects of cultural heritage and new, born-digital archival objects and records, the classical conservation frameworks—with their prioritisation of material fixity—were also no longer sufficient for the diversity of modern and contemporary artworks in and entering museum collections around the world. Entrenched understandings of authenticity—predicated on the continuity of historic material substance—necessitated a reformulation.

New theoretical frameworks and practical approaches have emerged in the last two decades wherein the focus of conservation has expanded away from material fixity towards a fixity of artwork identity, essence, or experience. At the heart of these frameworks is a recognition of the artwork as an abstract entity, manifested or instantiated in time and space by one or more concrete objects or events (Castriota 2021a; Irvin 2013). In time-based media conservation in particular, authenticity is often framed as a quality that can be guaranteed by ensuring a work's various manifestations remain compliant with the artist's explicit directives or the properties singled out as constitutive of the artwork's identity. In this "performance paradigm" of conservation—as Renée van de Vall (2015a) has termed it—this is typically

achieved by discerning an artwork's "score."¹ Recognising the inevitable absence of the artist and the insufficiency of a paper certificate alone to confer authenticity on an instantiation, these efforts are motivated by the belief that fidelity to some definitive set of material or relational conditions or parameters defined by or in consultation with the artist will allow the work to recur with authenticity and mitigate perceived losses to its integrity. This has led to a pervasive supposition that conservators or other collection care staff may reveal and protect an artwork's identity or essence by extracting the rules for its display or activation through artist questionnaires, interviews, and other empirical methods. Within the performance paradigm of conservation, *score compliance* has emerged as one of the implicit, post-material metrics for gauging authenticity in the conservation of time-based media, installation, and performance artworks.²

Although some works may appear to be more amenable to what Hanna Hölling characterises as "textual stabilisation" (2016, p. 18), both score reduction and the enforcement of score compliance can be difficult or infeasible for some works. Material and contextual circumstances are liable to change and, as a result, an artist may make certain declarations about how a work should be enacted or manifested that contradict previous declarations or sanctions.³ The fact that many contemporary artworks are editioned—existing in multiple collections with the artist often retaining an AP or "artist's proof"—leaves open the opportunity for artists to continue editing, revising, and updating their works. Directives may therefore become thinned or multiplied over time as new versions, edits, and presentation modes arise. There may also not always be clear or unanimous agreement between an artist, their representatives, collection caretakers, and audiences about what constitutes a work's significant properties; different perspectives on a work's significant properties may arise, and these may be at odds with those of an artist or a caretaker at one point in time. Whether a manifestation is score-compliant may, in these cases, become a matter of perspective.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the prevailing conservation discourse around artwork identity and authenticity for time-based media, installation, and performance artworks. I outline the primary shortcomings of approaches wherein authenticity is seen to be derived through score-compliant enactment and identity is framed as the object of fixity. I challenge the premise that an artwork's identity is a latent quality or singular and wholly knowable entity that may serve as the object of conservation, and I argue that it instead be recognised as a continuously (re)produced

¹Notable discussions include Viola (1999), van Wegen (1999), Rinehart (2004), Laurenson (2004, 2006), MacDonald (2009), Noël de Tilly (2011), Caianiello (2013), van de Vall (2015b), and Phillips (2015).

²The notion of "score compliance" with respect to the authenticity of contemporary artworks is discussed explicitly by van de Vall (2015b), although the term originates in Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* (1968, p. 117; pp. 186–187) and is not common parlance in conservation literature.

³Here I adopt Sherri Irvin's (2005) phraseology around implicit and explicit sanctions. See also Wharton (2015).

representation of significances made determinate through and as part of our practices. Although the distinction is frequently collapsed, I show how artwork identity is fundamentally distinct from the verbal or textualized directives solicited from or created in collaboration with artists to guide decision-making around a work's materialisation(s); whilst these may serve as a quasi-score and may inform perspectives on a work's identity, they are not one in the same. I also reframe the oft-invoked concept of authenticity as the degree to which an encountered object, event, or experience is regarded by an individual as an instance of the artwork it is purported to be, a judgement that is modulated by both empirical evidence, context, as well as the evaluator's experiences, memories, and values.⁴

This chapter builds upon Pip Laurenson's (2016) discussion of contemporary artworks as "epistemic objects" which are open, incomplete, and whose significances continually emerge through their indefinite "unfolding." I also extend Hélia Marçal's body of scholarship applying Donna Haraway's (1988) writing around "situated knowledges" and Karen Barad's (2007) agential realist framework to conservation theory and practice.⁵ By thinking notions of artwork identity and its documentation with Barad's theory of agential realism—developed out of their work as a theoretical particle physicist—I propose that our textual documentation of artworks-as-conservation-objects be understood not as scores to aid in the enforcement of score compliance, but as representations of Baradian *phenomena*, where phenomena are defined as the specific *intra-actions* between objects and *agencies of observation* (which, in this context, include conservation researchers), both of which "emerge from, rather than precede" the *intra-actions* that produce them (2007, p. 128). In this text I adopt Barad's term *intra-action*, which recognises the "ontological inseparability" and mutual, co-constitutive entanglement between measuring agencies and objects (i.e., knower and known), in contrast to *interaction*, which relies on the assumed "prior existence of separately determinate entities" (ibid.).⁶ Within this agential realist framework I argue that the objective referent of conservation documentation is not an artwork or object of conservation separate and apart from our observation or measurement, but rather the phenomena that are constituted by our *intra-actions* with and around the works we are investigating and seeking to secure a futurity for.

Using a case study of a radio-transmitted sound installation by artist Susan Philipsz (b. 1965, Glasgow, Scotland), I show how one artwork's perceived identity is (re)configured through specific material-discursive *intra-actions*, rather than something pre-existent that is revealed and exposed through empirical inquiry. Conservation practices for contemporary art are imagined within a "processual paradigm" (van de Vall 2015a) not as a rote process of score reduction and policing of score

⁴I derive this definition of authenticity from the Consultative Committee for Space Data Systems' *Reference Model for Open Archival Information Systems* where authenticity is defined as: "The degree to which a person (or a system) regards an object as what it is purported to be. Authenticity is judged on the basis of evidence" (CCSDS 2012, p. 9).

⁵See in particular Marçal (2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022) and Castriota and Marçal (2021).

⁶See also Marçal (2021b, p. 2).

compliance, but instead as part of a continuous enfolding and (re)configuring of intra-acting agencies, which include both the objects of conservation practices and those observing, representing, and providing care, and through which such distinctions and boundaries are enacted and made determinate. In this way I argue contemporary artworks—like all parts of the world—are not simply becoming in their unfolding but through their *enfolding*.

2 Beyond Score Compliance Authenticity

In much of the discourse around modern and contemporary art conservation from the late 1990s an artwork's authenticity is framed as a singular quality that can be guaranteed by soliciting the artist's approval (Beerkens 1999, p. 71), or through the conservator's careful excavation of a work's "essence" (Guldmond 1999, pp. 79–81).⁷ Since the turn of the millennium, the objective of conservation has moved away from achieving material stability towards the identification and perpetuation of properties deemed constitutive of the work's "identity" or "essence," which may or may not include original materials.⁸ This thinking was propelled by the writing of Pip Laurenson (2004, 2006), who extended to time-based media artworks several philosophical concepts from Nelson Goodman (1968) and Stephen Davies (2001), recognising the many parallels between time-based media installations and musical works. This included the notion of a "two-stage" model of a work's creation, where the properties identified as essential or "work-defining" may serve as a kind of score that may be used to guide decision-making around a work's manifestations.⁹ Rebecca Gordon proceeded along similar lines as Laurenson with her notion of an

⁷In her discussion of authenticity around the re-fabrication of neon tubes used in a work by Mario Merz, Lydia Beerkens—noting an uneasiness with employing replacement tubes—ultimately concludes that "authenticity may be guaranteed by requesting the artist's approval" (1999, p. 71). Jaap Guldmond suggests that an artwork's "essence" is not just established by the artist's voice, but also by the curator and conservator's "careful analyses of the visual aspects and the content of the work" (1999, p. 81).

⁸Artwork "identity" as the object of conservation is a common feature of the literature, popularised in part through the *Inside Installations* project (2004–2007). Notable discussions include van Wegen (1999), Laurenson (2004, 2006), Jones and Muller (2008), Fiske (2009), van Saaze (2009, 2013), Brokerhof et al. (2011), van de Vall et al. (2011), Jądzińska (2011, 2012); Phillips (2012, 2015), Ensom (2019). References to an artwork's "essence" are also common; see Guldmond (1999, p. 81), Stringari (1999), Mancusi-Ungaro (1999, p. 392), Coddington (1999, p. 24), Bek (2011, p. 207), Rinehart and Ippolito (2014, p. 178).

⁹Goodman refers to a work's "constitutive properties" (1968, p. 116) whilst Davies (2001) uses the terms "work-defining properties" (p. 27), "work-defining features" (p. 166), "work-defining directives" (p. 153), and "work-determinative instructions," (p. 112) which inspired Laurenson's writing. This concept of constitutive, significant, and essential properties and "faithful instances" (Laurenson 2004, p. 49) is inherited from a wider discourse in aesthetics where artworks are conceptualised as abstract objects, or *types*, manifested in one or more token instances; for an overview of this discourse see Castriota (2021a). For discussions of "significant properties" in the

artwork's "critical mass" (2011, 2014), defined as "the optimum choice and grouping of factors or attributes that demonstrate the core identity of the work of art" (2014, p. 97).

The framework put forward by Laurensen has since become foundational to practical models and approaches employed in time-based media art conservation. At the heart of Joanna Phillips' (2015) Documentation Model for Time Based-Media Art is a Goodmanian ontology that distinguishes between a work's score and its manifestations, produced in two distinct stages. In this model, the work's significant or essential properties are synthesised by conservators from the artist's explicit directives as well as the implicit sanctioning of properties or formal features in a work's previous manifestations. These processes of what Tina Fiske has termed "tethering" (2009) are aimed at achieving some degree of durability for artworks that do not persist through a fixed material substance. Through this kind of essentialisation or score reduction it is thought that such works may be made into discrete, coherent, "durable and repeatable" (Laurensen and van Saaze 2014, p. 34) museum objects that can be enacted and manifested in perpetuity, thereby securing their presence. Implicit here is a belief that the conservator can minimise the "erosion of identity between instances of the work" (Fiske 2009, p. 234) and prevent any unauthorised deviation that might be viewed as losses to its integrity. This is seen to be achieved by soliciting and collecting verbal instructions and directives from artists at the point of acquisition, and ensuring—through conservation oversight—that manifestations thereafter remain compliant by embodying the properties, attributes, behaviours, and relations identified as significant, essential, or work-defining. In the application of these frameworks and models there is often a presumption that compliance translates into a guarantee of authenticity and that what constitutes an artwork's essence is both knowable and consensual.

Although often overlooked, Laurensen importantly cautioned against drawing direct analogies between musical works and time-based media artworks,¹⁰ and noted that that an artwork's identity may be difficult to pin down: "Making decisions about what is important to preserve means deciding what is essential in identifying a particular installation as a faithful instance of that work. However, what is important to the identity of these works is often uncertain" (Laurensen 2004, p. 49). She also added that a work's identity may be labile even after entering a museum collection.¹¹ More recently, Laurensen (2016) has drawn upon the writing of sociologist Karen

context of digital objects and records see Holdsworth and Sergeant (2000), Hedstrom and Lee (2002), Yeo (2010), and Ensom (2019). See also the discussion of "character-defining features" of built heritage and historic landscapes by Jester and Park (1993), Birnbaum (1994), and Birnbaum and Capella Peters (1996).

¹⁰Laurensen (2004, p. 49) comments, "...it is not possible to draw a direct analogy to musical works—time-based media installations are not specified by a score, and media elements are decoded without the interpretative role of a performer."

¹¹"Early in the relationship with a new work, the museum often accommodates the exploration and development of the identity of the work, only later acting more conservatively to contain the work in its established form" (Laurensen 2004, p. 51).

Knorr Cetina (2001) to consider how contemporary artworks may be understood as indefinitely “unfolding” epistemic objects, that is, as abstract objects of knowledge whose significances may accrue and vary over time.¹²

Several other influential texts on the conservation of contemporary art have also highlighted how the differences introduced in the course of a work’s iteration may alter the work’s perceived identity, fracturing the perception of a singular, immutable essence. Van de Vall et al. (2011, p. 3) comment that a “work does not necessarily stop changing when it enters a museum collection” and add to this observation that not every artwork exists as “an organic or functional whole possessing a singular identity.” Phillips (2012, p. 140) writes that a work’s identity is not always fully formed close to the work’s initial manifestation; she cautions conservators against prematurely determining a “young” artwork’s work-defining properties as it may enter a collection while in a “state of ‘infancy’” and in the process of “forming its identity.” In the documentation model she developed, Phillips (2015, p. 175) also notes how each manifestation of a work “may inform” its identity or score. In her writing on the multiple nature of Nam June Paik’s video installation *One Candle*, Vivian van Saaze similarly observes that “what was considered to be the core of the work varied from one person to the next” (2013, p. 77), leading her to conclude that this work is “more than one, less than many” (2009, pp. 196–197). More recently, Caitlin Spangler-Bickell (2021) has noted how many contemporary artworks exist in a state of multiplicity with a “dividual” and “partible” objecthood, in a challenge to theoretical frameworks and essentialising approaches to artwork documentation predicated on the assumption that every artwork retains a singular, monolithic identity or essence. Accordingly, we might ask: Is it part of the caretaker’s remit to police score compliance and protect an artwork’s identity from erosion or deviation? Is the authenticity of a work predicated purely on score-compliant display or enactment? And if a work’s identity or essence is something plural or in flux, what exactly is the role of conservation?

3 The “View from Nowhere”: Essentialism, Centring, and Representation

Although there is a growing acceptance of this processual understanding of artwork identity and a recognition that it may evolve through time, both conservation theory and practice continue to fall back on the essentialist assumption that an artwork retains a singular identity or a “true nature” (Muñoz Viñas 2005, p. 92) at any given

¹²Knorr Cetina (2001, p. 181) explains, “Objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely. They are more like open drawers filled with folders extending indefinitely into the depth of a dark closet. Since epistemic objects are always in the process of being materially defined, they continually acquire new properties and change the ones they have. But this also means that objects of knowledge can never be fully attained, that they are, if you wish, never quite themselves.”

moment that can be totally known through empirical methods or simply by asking the artist. The role of the conservator is still often framed as the excavator and protector of an original, or, at the very least, *singular* identity or essence. Such thinking can be traced to post-Enlightenment, materialist theories of authenticity—with an “emphasis on entities and their origins and essences” (Jones 2010, p. 181)—where the conservator is compelled by an ethical directive to uncover, recover, and protect.

The notion that things are defined or determined by an abstract and eternal essence has been a recurring subject of Western philosophy. Feminist theorist Diana Fuss characterises essentialism as “a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (1989, p. xi). Following deconstructionist philosophical discourse in the late 1960s and 1970s, many social constructionist frameworks in cultural studies began to challenge the idea that national, racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identities are identified “on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences” (ibid.).

According to essentialist and structuralist conceptualisations of identity, the manifestations of every entity are determined and constrained by a static and immutable essence, that is, bounded by a seemingly stable ground or centre that limits deviation and permutation. In his 1966 lecture ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ Jacques Derrida put forward a critique of what he called “centred structure.” He argued that classical thought presumed every structure was ruled or governed by a *centre*, which above all served to “limit what we might call the *play* of structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (2001, p. 352). In the classical model, the centre constituted the structure’s core but was importantly seen as free from what Derrida called the “play of difference” or the substitution of meanings that might occur within the structure. He explained,

The concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. (ibid.)

This notion of play is what allows for variation or permutation, but only up to a certain point: in the structuralist linguistic model, the centre establishes a tolerance for deviation by effectively marking off a boundary, beyond which “the substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible” (ibid.).

This model remains at the heart of the way we tend to think about an artwork and its identity. Essentialising approaches employed in contemporary art conservation that trace boundaries around an artwork’s essential properties might be characterised in Derridean terms as processes of *centring*. As a work of art is transfigured into an object of cultural heritage or *musealium* within the museum (Stránský 1985), an institutional centre is often constructed through the musealisation process. A centre is effectively traced by delineating the rules and parameters about how a work may be activated, exhibited, and interacted with, or the physical matter or features that must endure for the work to be perceived as “whole.” Properties endowed with a greater significance—lying closer to or within this centre—are those that might be

considered essential, work-defining, or constitutive of its critical mass. If these properties are not maintained or embodied in a work's future manifestations, it is thought that concerns around authenticity may arise. However, as we will see, the essentiality of some properties and the insignificant or incidental nature of others are not binary or eternal statuses, nor can they always be determined conclusively.

Judith Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that what we take to be an "internal essence" is in fact "manufactured through a sustained set of acts" (1990, p. xv) and that "identity is 'performatively' constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (1990, p. 34). The concrete objects and/or events presented as instances of a particular work—understood as an abstract object or entity—may be thought of along similar lines as J. L. Austin's performative utterances or *performatives*, which Butler extends to non-verbal bodily acts around gender expression. These formal manifestations—that is, particular physical objects or episodes of enactment/installation—are typically conceived of as the products of a score-based enactment or materialisation, like cakes made by following a recipe. However, identity is not the same thing as a recipe or score. Although certain directives communicated by an artist may be used to guide how a work is manifested or enacted, it is an artist's directives and a work's manifestations (experienced by audiences) that *performatively* affirm an individual's sense of the work's identity through repetition, or rupture that sense of continuity or self-sameness through difference or deviation.¹³ This is to say that a work's manifestations are not the *results* of its identity so much as they help constitute our sense of what that identity might be, alongside the various other ways works of art or heritage objects may be actualised in time and space.¹⁴ This may, nevertheless, lead to the creation of representations in the form of conservation reports that can also have a causal effect on how a work or entity is materialised, resulting in a kind of "iterative intra-activity" (Barad 2007, p. 208) between these various performatives.

As we can see identity is not only processual but also perspectival and representational, which is to say that representations of an entity cannot be detached from the individuals doing the representation. Prevailing conservation theories and documentation practices remain built upon a scientific view that our "observations reveal pre-existing properties of an observation-independent reality" and which "take observation to be the benign facilitator of discovery, a transparent and undistorting lens passively gazing at the world" as Barad (2007, p. 195) puts it. Building on the ideas of physicist and philosopher of science Niels Bohr, as well as Haraway's (1988) feminist critique of classical notions of scientific objectivity, Barad explains how this view of the world is based in Newtonian physics and a "Cartesian presupposition that there is an inherent boundary between observer and observed, between knower and known" (2007, p. 154). According to metaphysical individualism, the world is made up of separate entities with "individually determinate

¹³For a lengthier discussion of Butler's notion of performativity in relationship to the construction of artwork identity, see Castriota (2021c).

¹⁴For a discussion of the various ways works of art are actualised beyond formal gallery manifestations, see Castriota (2021b).

boundaries and properties whose well-defined values can be represented by abstract universal concepts that have determinate meanings independent of the specifics of the experimental practice” (p. 195).¹⁵ By contrast, Barad explains that Bohr’s indeterminacy principle—understood as “a quantitative statement of complementarity” (p. 302) evidenced by wave-particle duality and the double-slit experiment—highlights the “ontological inseparability or entanglement of objects and agencies of observation” (p. 309), that is, how the “determinateness of the properties and boundaries of the ‘object’” depends on the “specific nature of the experimental arrangement” (p. 302) or measuring apparatus.¹⁶ In Barad’s posthumanist elaboration—which also draws upon experiments in quantum physics that have further corroborated Bohr’s interpretations—measurements do not reveal the properties of independently existing objects. Rather, measurements are “the intra-active marking of one part of a phenomenon by another” (p. 338), where the boundaries and properties of its entangled, component parts “become determinate only in the enactment of an agential cut delineating the ‘measured object’ from the ‘measuring agent’” (p. 337).¹⁷ It is therefore *phenomena* that are the “objective referent of measured properties” (p. 309).

Nevertheless, a Newtonian-Cartesian view of the world continues to underpin prevailing conservation theories and practices. This is characterised by an “epistemological assumption that experiments reveal the pre-existing determinate nature of the entity being measured” (p. 106), and—as Haraway (1988) puts it—the idea that we occupy a “view from above, from nowhere” (p. 589), impartially “representing while escaping representation” (p. 581). We see this reflected in the assumption of inherent divisions or cuts separating the conservator or conservation researcher (the observer/knower) from the object of conservation (the observed/known). We may connect it with the prevalent self-image of the conservator or conservation researcher as an impartial observer gazing from above, discerning the “properties of observation-independent objects” (Barad 2007, p. 114), which are assumed to be determinate prior to and separate from their inquiry. It is also forms the basis of documentation

¹⁵Barad (2007, p. 106) writes, “Objects are assumed to possess individually deterministic attributes, and it is the job of the scientist to cleverly discern these inherent characteristics by obtaining the values of the corresponding observation-independent variables through some benignly invasive measurement procedure.”

¹⁶For Barad, apparatuses—such as an experimental set-up—are material-discursive practices that enact boundaries and “produce differences that matter” (2007, p. 106). In so doing, they are also phenomena (“constituted and dynamically reconstituted as part of the ongoing intra-activity of the world”) that are “formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part, of, the phenomena they produce” (ibid.). For an explanation of the double-slit experiment and its onto-epistemological implications, see Barad (2007, pp. 97–106; 247–352).

¹⁷Barad derives their notion of *agential cuts* from Bohr, who challenged the assumed inherent separation between the measuring apparatus (which includes the observer) and what is measured or observed. Cuts, according to Barad, are “agentially enacted not by wilful individuals but by the larger material arrangement of which ‘we’ are a ‘part’...‘they’ and ‘we’ are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts ‘we’ help enact.” (p. 178).



Fig. 1 Susan Philipsz, *You Are Not Alone*, 2009. Installed at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford in 2009 (Photo: Andy Keate, © Susan Philipsz)

practices focused around establishing boundaries and marking off—in no uncertain terms—the properties deemed inherently constitutive of the object of conservation.

An ongoing challenge to frameworks for authenticity rooted in the performance paradigm of conservation are those works whose boundaries appear to “shift from within” (Haraway 1988, p. 595), that is, when empirical inquiry around a work’s significant properties fails to reveal a singular, consensual centre, or a “true” essence or core of the work’s identity. In what follows I present a case study of such a work that troubles the supposition that an artwork or heritage object has “determinate properties that are independent of our experimental investigations of them” (Barad 2007, p. 106). I will show how the assessed significances of particular artwork properties are inseparable from the conditions of our observation, and I will consider how conservation documentation at the level of identity is therefore less an objective representation of the entity being studied or conserved so much as it is a perspectival and partial representation of the phenomena produced by our measurement and of which we are an entangled part.

4 Case Study: Susan Philipsz’s *You Are Not Alone*

Susan Philipsz’s radio-transmitted sound installation *You Are Not Alone* is a work that has developed into a multiplicity of variants or versions since it was first realised in 2009. The work was initially conceived as a commission for Modern Art Oxford in 2009, installed in the nearby, late eighteenth-century Radcliffe Observatory



Fig. 2 Transmission equipment installed in the upstairs offices of Modern Art Oxford (Photo: Andy Keate, © Susan Philipsz)

(Fig. 1). Inspired by Guglielmo Marconi's radio telegraphy experiments at the turn of the twentieth century, Philipsz took the commission as an opportunity to thematise distance and connection through the history of the astronomical observatory and the poetics of how sound waves and other signals persist in their infinite reverberations.

For the commission, Philipsz began collecting recordings of radio interval signals from radio stations around the globe, some still operational and some defunct. Developed in the 1920s and 30s, these brief musical sequences functioned as sonic fingerprints for listeners to identify a particular station between broadcasts. Like a nineteenth-century naturalist, Philipsz collected sixty-seven of these endangered or extinct radio interval signals and worked with musician Julius Heise to re-record them on a vibraphone. Two stereo tracks (four channels) containing the vibraphone renditions were created, with each musical sequence played three times in a row. In accordance with telecommunication regulations in the United Kingdom, a Programme Making and Special Events Licence was obtained from Ofcom authorising the use of two UHF bandwidths for the duration of the work's installation in Oxford. The two half-hour audio tracks, played on loop, were broadcast at 856.8 and 860.6 MHz by two SBS TX400 transmitters and aerials located in the upstairs offices of Modern Art Oxford (Fig. 2) to aerials (Fig. 3), two RX400 receivers (Fig. 4), amplifiers, and four speakers installed at the Radcliffe Observatory over a mile away for the duration of the work's exhibition.

For its reinstallation at Haus des Rundfunks in Berlin in 2012 (Fig. 5), Philipsz reconfigured the four-channel work into a two-channel, stereo format as a response

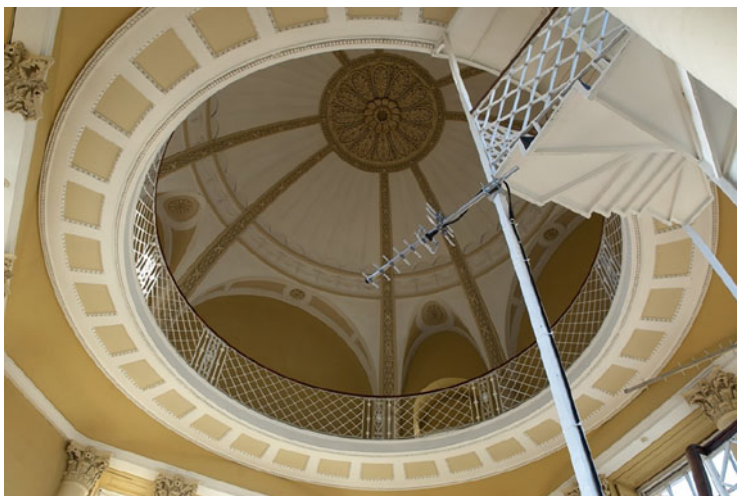


Fig. 3 Detail of the aerials installed at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford in 2009 (Photo: Eoghan McTigue, © Susan Philipsz)

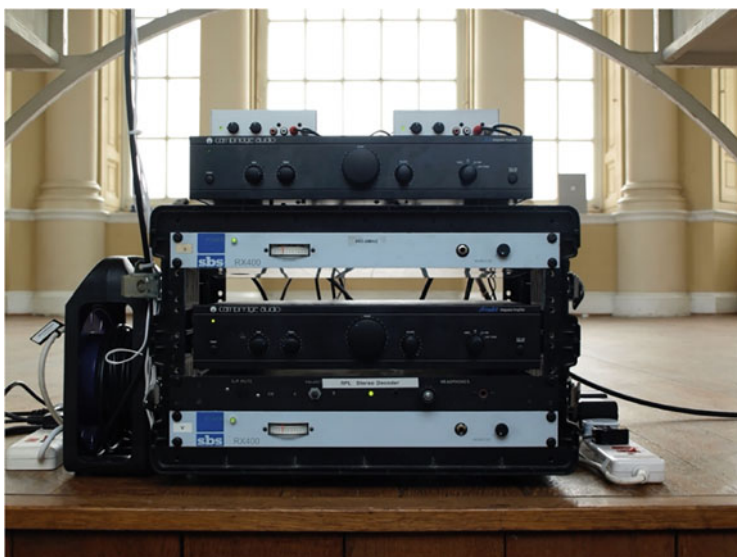


Fig. 4 Detail of receivers and amplifiers installed at the Radcliffe Observatory, Oxford in 2009 (Photo: Eoghan McTigue, © Susan Philipsz)

to the building's historical connection with the development of stereophonic sound and broadcast technology. There, the audio component was transmitted on UHF radio frequencies across the central hall of the building. It was also re-edited in response to the work's context; several radio interval signals were added, with the

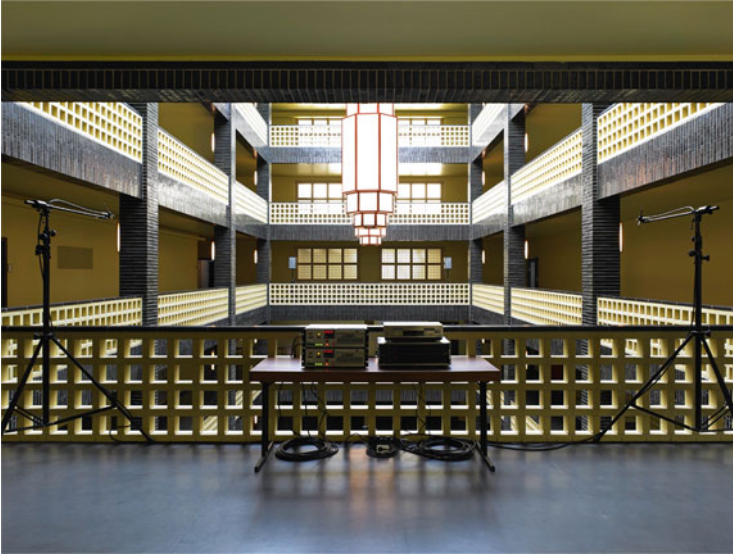


Fig. 5 Susan Philipsz, *You Are Not Alone*, 2009. Stereo version installed at Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin, 2012 (Photo: Nick Ash, © Susan Philipsz)

sequence beginning with Radio Berlin International and ending with Sender Freies Berlin (Connolly 2014).

During the course of my doctoral research secondment with the National Galleries Scotland in 2017—as part of the *NACCA* project—a number of recent works by Philipsz were featured in their *NOW* exhibition series, including *You Are Not Alone*. Although not a collection work, I was immediately drawn to this installation as a possible test case to consider how a work’s significant properties are established and maintained despite material and contextual variation. On the occasion of its re-installation in Edinburgh, Philipsz decided to create a regionally specific version of the work by adding several newly recorded interval signals from stations around the North Atlantic in order to draw a connection with the installation’s geographic context. As a loan from the artist—effectively a display of the artist’s AP or “artist’s proof”—the logistics and equipment sourcing for the work’s re-installation were organised by Senior Curator Julie-Ann Delaney who communicated closely with the Philipsz studio in the run up to the opening. There were no written display specifications supplied by the studio; Philipsz and her studio assistant and partner Eoghan McTigue instead pointed Delaney to images and published accounts of the Oxford and Berlin manifestations as a reference, and Delaney worked with a local AV company to procure UHF transceivers and the necessary radio broadcast licence from Ofcom. However, due to the short lead-in time and other logistical challenges, an alternate AV company and relay system using digital, encrypted 5 GHz wireless transmitters and receivers had to be used.



Fig. 6 Playback equipment for *You Are Not Alone*, installed in Gallery 10 of Modern One in 2017 (Photo: Brian Castriota)

With Delaney liaising between the Philipsz studio and the AV company Zisys Events, the final installation consisted of an equipment rack containing a channel mixer, a compressor and gate unit, an LED level visualiser, and a media player, displayed on a pedestal in the middle of Gallery 10 in Modern One (Fig. 6). An XLR cable ran out the back of this unit to the wall, up the side of Modern One to a Xirium Pro transmitter (Fig. 7) mounted on the roof. From there, the signal was broadcast wirelessly across Belford Road to the Xirium Pro receiver mounted on the weathervane on the roof of Modern Two (Fig. 8). The audio was relayed through an XLR cable to an amplifier and speaker perched on the windowsill at the top of the east stairwell (Fig. 9).

Delaney gave the installation a double date of 2009/2017 on the wall label to reflect the changes both to the re-edited audio component and transmission technology (Delaney 2017), although the medium line asserted the work was a “radio-transmitted sound installation.” During and following the work’s display in 2017 I returned—or *re-turned*¹⁸—again and again to the question of whether this manifestation was a fully “authentic” instance of *You Are Not Alone* without a true, analogue RF transmission of the audio component. Was this property a “core” part of its identity, and had its identity been “eroded” as a consequence of this deviation? Had the lack of a conservator’s active involvement or intervention failed the work in

¹⁸For Barad (2014) *re-turning* is not a return to a point of origin or departure but a diffractive methodological turning over and over (like soil) to iteratively and intra-actively produce new insights and diffraction patterns.



Fig. 7 Euan Kerr from Zisys Events holding the Xirium Pro transmitter prior to installation on the roof of Modern One (Photo: Brian Castriota)



Fig. 8 Xirium Pro receiver installed on the roof of Modern Two (Photo: Brian Castriota)

some way? What, ultimately, is the significance of the wireless, audio relay technology employed in the work? Where might we mark the boundary between the work's essential and incidental properties? These were some of the questions that

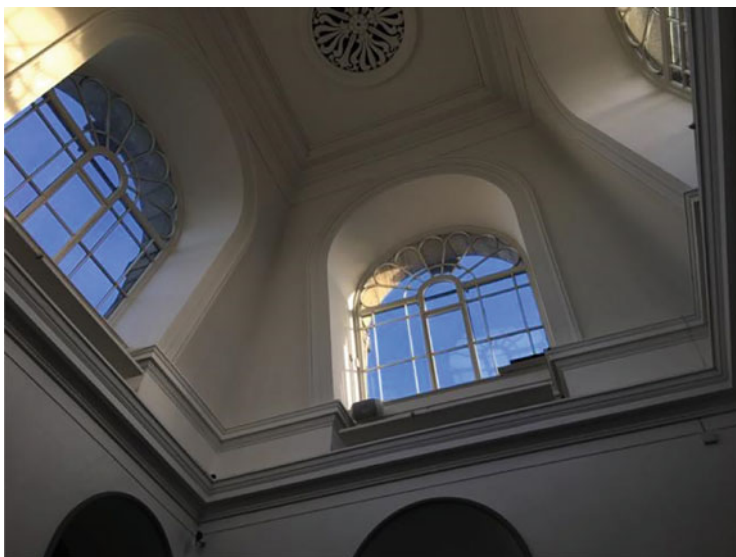


Fig. 9 *You Are Not Alone* installed in the East Stairwell of Modern Two (Photo: Brian Castriota)

guided my subsequent inquiry and are the kinds of questions conservators of contemporary artworks often ask both of themselves and artists.

Delaney worked in tandem with Philipsz and McTigue for the months leading up to the opening, and the final product of that collaboration—including the equipment employed and audio relay system—was signed off by Philipsz, who was present for final audio adjustments in the days before the exhibition opened and pleased with the outcome. The 2017 installation of *You Are Not Alone* at the National Galleries Scotland was therefore in all practical terms authorised. Were we to predicate the installation's authenticity not only on the basis of it being authorised by the artist, but also in terms of its "precision of resemblance" to the work's initial instantiations (see Innocenti 2013, pp. 225–226), many arguably essential aspects that featured in Oxford and Berlin were retained: pre-recorded vibraphone renditions of radio interval signals were wirelessly transmitted from one location to another and made audible to visitors in the galleries.

However, several features were present that were notable differences compared with the Oxford and Berlin manifestations, most notably the fact that the work was transmitted not using modulated analogue radio frequencies in the UHF range (300 MHz–3 GHz), but rather, by using an encrypted, 5 GHz digital audio transmission system. It could be argued that the Xirium Pro transmission is a "radio transmission" insofar as it is carried on electromagnetic waves with frequencies within the SHF (Super High Frequency) band of the electromagnetic spectrum; the SHF band is technically considered the upper end of radio frequencies, although SHF and EHF (Extra High Frequency) bands are often classed as microwave. This detail—which I discussed with Delaney at the time—was a factor in her decision to

describe the work as a “radio-transmitted sound installation” on the wall label’s medium line and in publicity materials, even if the medium line conjured other analogue associations.

Even if we can make the case that the installation in Edinburgh retained the significant, *conceptual* property of wireless transmission using radio frequencies, an important *aesthetic* feature of the work was arguably missing. With the 5 GHz digital transmitter and receiver the audio fidelity was greatly improved, allowing for studio-quality audio to be transmitted. The work no longer retained the static and crackle of the analogue radio transmissions perceptible in Oxford and Berlin, a feature that has been commented on positively by both Philipsz and reviewers. In his essay “Lullabies for Strangers”—published by Modern Art Oxford to accompany the 2009 commission—Joerg Heiser (2010, p. 25) wrote:

But just as a lullaby can become unsettling, the vibraphone sounds—especially as they are emitted here with the soft crackling of radio—make you think of a total stranger trying to communicate with you as if you were his closest friend; or of a message from a once close friend reaching you out of the blue, after you thought they had disappeared forever.

In a public lecture at the National Galleries of Scotland following the opening, Philipsz (2017) remarked:

I find analogue radio fascinating, there’s something quite magical about analogue radio transmission. . . . And it’s really interesting that it’s so variable as well. Whereas now it’s digital radio, everyone uses digital radio, but there’s something—I mean you can really tell that it’s analogue when you first hear it, there’s something in the sound.

That said, when asked directly in an interview I conducted with her and McTigue in 2018 if anything were “lost” by not maintaining the analogue radio transmission in Edinburgh, Philipsz responded:

No, not really, not really. I think if it is being projected over a long distance you get the sense of the distance. When you use an analogue radio, you sort of feel that it emphasises the distance, you know? But when it was going from [Modern] One to [Modern] Two then I think it was okay. Yeah, that was fine. I didn’t think it lost anything.

Philipsz and McTigue (2018) went on to explain to me how *You Are Not Alone* was in fact installed twice in 2014—at Fundació Tàpies in Barcelona and at Bielefeld Contemporary—not with analogue, UHF transmitters but with wireless, digital transmission systems similar to what was used in Edinburgh in 2017. McTigue noted that this “digital version” was also a viable option that made the work easier to install and more reliable. Digital wireless relay of the audio component was therefore implicitly sanctioned by Philipsz back in 2014, explicitly sanctioned in emails and personal communication between Delaney and the studio in 2017 authorising its use, and even more explicitly in the interview I conducted with her and McTigue in 2018. Nevertheless, the history of the work’s display as a UHF transmission, Philipsz’s published description of the work’s medium as “radio transmission” (2014, p. 62, 72), and her fondness for the aesthetic qualities afforded by analogue radio broadcast all lend weight to the view that analogue transmission of the vibraphone melodies *is* significant and not incidental. All may be understood as performatives that reify

certain perspectives on the work's identity, and in this case we can see how multiple centres—that is, representations of significance—may be traced when these performatives are contradictory.

In its various presentation formats, transmission technologies, and re-edits of its audio content, the work *You Are Not Alone* is both singular—with each installation bearing the same title or nominal identity—and multiple—with each being instances of multiple subtypes or versions of the work. We can say that the 2017 manifestation was another instance of the digital version as well as the prime instance of the Scottish version with its re-edited audio. In this way, although we speak about one artwork-as-type, it also exists in a state of multiplicity through each of these subtypes of the artwork *You Are Not Alone* and their token instantiations in time and space.¹⁹ The question of authenticity in this context thus concerns the degree to which the 2017 manifestation should be regarded as an instance of the abstract entity *You Are Not Alone* more generally, rather than an instance of just one or more of these versions or subtypes of the work.

Based on a certain selection of statements and other evidence of past display, one could make the case—or mark the boundary—that analogue RF broadcast of the audio is a highly significant feature of the work that should be maintained in order to achieve a full—or fully authentic—instance or occurrence of the work. Conversely, one could also point to an alternate selection of evidence to argue that it is simply wireless relay of the audio using any technology that is required to manifest a legitimate, authentic instance of the work. Although Philipsz explicitly sanctioned the use of digital wireless relay, it may become a matter of perspective as to whether this was a fully authentic instance of *You Are Not Alone*, contingent on whether we—based on the evidence collected—attribute significance to analogue RF broadcast of the audio component and regard it as a significant or essential property of the overall work. In effect, this property is at once significant and incidental, resolved as only one or the other depending on how we observe or assess it. Prevailing theories and practices of conservation assume an entity's properties or attributes to be something quantifiable and determinate outside of any inquiry on our part. Even if we employ autoethnographic methodologies that recognise how “things are disturbed when we measure them” (Barad 2007, p. 107), they rely on a Newtonian assumption that we can subtract out our disturbances through reflective approaches and thereby come to a more objective account of the object of our investigation.²⁰ Particularly for artworks that accrue multiple versions or subtypes, we can see how their constitutive properties may exhibit a kind of quantum indeterminacy in that they do not have inherently determinate, measurement-independent values separable from the specific conditions of our observation or experimental arrangement.

¹⁹For further discussion of the type-token ontology in the context of contemporary artworks and their multiple version and variants see Castriota (2021a).

²⁰Barad (2007, pp. 108–115), following Bohr, explains that this assumption is untenable given what quantum mechanics tells us about the nature of measurement.

5 The View from Within: Rethinking Documentation Practices

Although there is a growing acceptance of the processual paradigm of conservation, there remains an entrenched presupposition—both in conservation theory and practice—that an artwork might have a single, authoritative constellation of essential or work-defining properties at any given moment. This assumption stands in stark contrast to the practical reality that many artworks retain neither a fixed nor a singular constellation of significant properties, as both judgments of significance and a manifestation’s authenticity are relational, that is, socially and contextually situated and continually (re)configured, including through conservation research.²¹ Haraway (1988, p. 595) comments, “Boundaries of objects of knowledge materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not preexist as such.”

As the example of Philipsz’s *You Are Not Alone* demonstrates, rigorous empirical inquiry at the level of identity does not uncover an artwork’s objective essence so much as it reveals how significances are (re)configured in part through the material-discursive practices of exhibition and conservation research activities. In our investigations “we do not uncover preexisting facts about independently existing things as they exist frozen in time like little statues positioned in the world. Rather, we learn about phenomena—about specific material configurations of the world’s becoming,” as Barad (2007, p. 91) puts it. They explain

The point is not simply to put the observer or knower back *in* the world (as if the world were a container and we needed merely to acknowledge our situatedness in it) but to understand and take account of the fact that we too are part of the world’s differential becoming. (ibid.)

From an agential realist perspective, an artwork’s identity is not something latent awaiting our discovery—it is our perspectival representation of properties that matter, whose significances become determinate through and as part of the measurement apparatus and the cuts we help enact in the process of our investigation. There are no “observation-independent objects” (Barad 2007, p. 198) for us to know that pre-exist or exist separate from our measurement or inquiry. What is generated are phenomena constituted through specific intra-actions, that is, the effects of “boundary drawing practices that make some identities or attributes intelligible (determinate) to the exclusion of others” (p. 208). In this way significant properties are emergent, that is, they are made to matter—in both senses of the word—by the unceasing, reconfiguring intra-actions that come with our being not *in* but *of* the world.

Barad notes how “the objective referent for identities or attributes are the phenomena constituted through the intra-action of multiple apparatuses” (p. 208; see

²¹ See Villers (2004), Muñoz Viñas (2005), Yeo (2010, pp. 97–98), Jones (2010), Jones and Yarrow (2013), van Saaze (2013, p. 75), Marçal (2021b).

also p. 202).²² Conservation research activities—read as Baradian apparatuses—can be understood as open-ended, boundary-drawing, material-discursive practices that “come to matter” (p. 206). They are “productive of (and part of) phenomena” (p. 142) and the “boundaries and properties of ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate” (p. 148) through the agential cuts enacted as part of these practices. The objective referent in our documentation is therefore not the work or its identity as such, but the phenomena created by the intra-actions between the measurement apparatus (which includes us) and the objects of our inquiry, with the understanding that such a distinction is an agential cut, that is, a “cutting together-apart” (Barad 2014) enacted within phenomena where the two are differentiated and entangled. Prevailing documentation methods and formats often perpetuate what Haraway (1988) terms the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (1988, p. 581); the reports or textual documentation produced by conservators characterising an artwork’s identity are often full of authoritative, declarative statements about a work’s essence and ontological perimeters, and clinical passive-voice descriptions that efface the conservator or conservation researcher’s role in processes of knowledge production.²³ But as we can see, there is no pre-existing object to know or represent “outside” of our inquiry—any notion of a determinately bounded or propertied object is a distinction or cutting together-apart we enact *within* and as part of phenomena. Accordingly, our documentation must account for the phenomena produced through and as part of our investigations and which, crucially, include us as intra-acting agencies.

Objectivity, within an agential realist framework, is not a matter of detachment or “producing undistorted representations from afar; rather, objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part” (Barad 2007, p. 91). Any representation we might create to mark a work’s anatomy, dependencies, significances, and edges—however rigorously investigated—can only ever be a partial and schematic picture because we are part of the phenomena. But, as Haraway notes, “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1988, p. 583). Being accountable in our documentation practices requires us to resist “unlocatable knowledge claims” (ibid.) by taking account of our partial view from within and—as Hélia Marçal (2017, 2021a) has advocated—explicitly recognising the situatedness of our perspective in our documentation.²⁴ Accountability also requires us to understand

²²For a discussion of the objective referent see Barad (2007, pp. 338–340). For a discussion of measurement and objectivity, see Barad (2007, pp. 342–350).

²³Zoë Miller (2021, p. 202) describes the entrenched “tradition of epistemic invisibility of the conservator” in conservation reports, where passive voice constructions work to “conceal the subjective, discursive role the conservators may play in the shaping of the knowledge and information contained within these documents.”

²⁴In her application of Haraway’s (1988) notion of *account-ability* to conservation practice, Marçal (2021a, p. 60) emphasises the need for conservators to “account for their own actions and identities, and to critically analyse how power dynamics were destabilised and re-framed through practices of relocation.” Marçal (2017, pp. 102–103; 2021a, p. 59) has also recommended including in conservation reports an “Aim of Documentation” and a “Documentation of Absence” field.

how the cuts we help enact in our marking off and *mattering* of significant properties and boundaries—at the exclusion of others—causal structures are generated. The documentation created for conservation purposes is not inert—it carries a causal potential as it is often used to generate display or activation specifications and guide decision-making around the properties of a work that are (re)materialised or perpetuated. In so doing it may further reinforce certain perspectives on what the work is whilst precluding others. Through our documentation, we are propagators of certain perspectives—inevitably privileging some properties over others—and we play an active role not only in identifying which properties matter in our documentation, but also how they come to matter in an artwork or heritage object’s ongoing materialisation(s). In this way, through our documentation, we remain causally entangled with that which we seek to represent. Accountable practice is therefore predicated on our accounting for the phenomena we are co-constituting through both our research and the documentation we create. Accountable practice also entails a reframing of our documentation as perspectival and partial representations of phenomena produced through and as part of our inquiry, of which we are an entangled and agential part, and which can never be known or represented fully.

6 Conclusion

According to agential realism, our marking of the boundaries and significant properties of an object or entity is not an objective accounting of a reality that pre-exists our observation or measurement. Both our investigations and representations contribute to a reconfiguring of a part of the world that makes certain properties momentarily determinate within a particular context, with the understanding that this “indeterminacy is never resolved once and for all” (Barad 2007, p. 179). Because “different agential cuts materialize different phenomena,” we are responsible for how our intra-actions “contribute to the differential mattering of the world” (Barad 2007, p. 178).²⁵ In the context of conservation, this is not only true for more obviously material interventions like cleaning or refabrication, but also preventive conservation methods like documentation, as all our material-discursive practices may contribute to the materialisation—or mattering—of that which is thought to matter whilst excluding and foreclosing other possibilities.²⁶ In this way we are entangled—cut together-apart—with that which we seek to know and care for.

This stands in stark contrast to what we might call Newtonian-Cartesian frameworks for conservation where the evaluator or documentation author is still very

²⁵For a discussion of our ethical responsibility to the cuts we enact in conservation practices, see Marçal (2021b) and Castriota and Marçal (2021).

²⁶“Intra-actions,” Barad (2007, p. 393) explains, “do not simply transmit a vector of influence among separate events. It is through specific intra-actions that a causal structure is enacted. Intra-actions effect what’s real and what’s possible, as some things come to matter and others are excluded, as possibilities are opened up and others are foreclosed.”

often positioned outside and separate from the object of conservation and its representation. If we accept both the processual dimensionality of the entities we seek to care for and the ways in which our practices of custodianship are inevitably entangled and enfolded with them, it becomes untenable that we have access to a view from nowhere, outside and *inherently* separate from the objects of our conservation practices. The agential realist critique of an intrinsic knower-known or subject-object distinction does not imply that there is no distinction or that an objective referent is inaccessible. On the contrary, it implies that that distinction is continually enacted over and over, we are responsible for our parts in these enactments, and that what we come to know is not the “true” work or heritage object and its essential properties but rather phenomena generated through specific agential intra-actions. Within such a framework the objective referents are the phenomena produced by multiple, entangled, intra-actively (re)configuring boundary-drawing practices, which include us as agencies of observation. It is through our measurement that “the boundaries and properties of ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate” and “particular material articulations of the world become meaningful” (Barad 2007, p. 333). This is to say I am not discovering boundaries and properties of an “object” that pre-exist my observation; I am—as part of both my inquiry and representation—marking off components of phenomena and making determinate properties that matter at the exclusion of others. What is made determinate is partially a trace of my selection of research methods, my decisions about who or what to consider as relevant to or part of the object of conservation, my framing of the evidence collected, and the form and format of my representation. These actions and choices are not simply made by a wilful me, but rather are entangled with inherited practices and other political forces that must also be considered and accounted for.

The reports and documentation we create should therefore not be construed as authoritative accounts of observed entities and their constitutive properties separate and apart from our investigations. Our representations are made not from a position of absolute externality, but rather with a view from within. They are diffracted by our partial perspectives, the cuts we help enact both in our research and our representation, and the larger material-discursive practices of which we are a part. We are productive of and part of the phenomena produced through our inquiry, and through our representations—by virtue of their causal potential—we become further enfolded with that which we seek to know and safeguard.²⁷ “Representations,” Barad writes, “are not snapshots or depictions of what awaits us but rather condensations of traces of multiple practices of engagement” (2007, p. 53). Representations have and will continue to have a utility in conservation practices: they allow us to abstract, momentarily make sense of, and communicate knowledge pertaining to a

²⁷In an agential realist framework, intra-actions also reconfigure us: “Our (intra)actions matter—each one reconfigures the world in its becoming—and yet they never leave us; they are sedimented into our becoming, they become us” (Barad 2007, p. 394). Marçal (2021b, p. 4) extends this to conservation practices, commenting that “every intra-action with an artwork changes the conservator.”

particular entity with the view towards securing a futurity for the properties that matter and that may come to matter. But approaches that frame an entity's identity as something pre-existing or separable from those representing it are *misrepresenting* the nature of the phenomena we are part of and co-constituting through our practices. This is not to say that we are seating ourselves at a table to which we were not invited. Rather, we were there all along.

Acknowledgments I wish to extend my gratitude to Susan Philipsz, Eoghan McTigue, and Julie-Ann Delaney for their participation in this research, my thesis supervisors—Dominic Paterson and Erma Hermens—for their support throughout my doctoral studies, as well as the entire *NACCA* network of supervisors and ESRs. I also wish to extend particular thanks to Hélia Marçal and Rebecca Gordon whose thinking, scholarship, and friendship have been instrumental to my own personal becoming, and that of the ideas presented here.

Some of these ideas have taken published form previously (see Castriota 2019, 2021c), however they have since been substantially re-turned in preparing this text and they will undoubtedly continue to be reworked and reconfigured in the future. This research received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 642892.

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