

Artist Interviews as Tools for Diligent Conservation Practice

ABSTRACT

The governing respect for an art object and its unique character, to a great degree, is typified and qualified by its author. However, a work of art is fully realized when encountered and interpreted by a viewer. When the interpreter of an artwork is a conservator, false impressions can lead to misguided practice. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that a conservation professional exhaust every avenue to find the most reliable details before making treatment decisions. Whenever possible, the author of a damaged work should guide a conservator toward a treatment consistent with the author's desired aesthetic.

An artist interview conducted for the benefit of conservators should lead the artist toward answers that will inform conservators of the artist's attitude toward intervention when faced with treatments. Video and/or audio recordings would provide future conservators and scholars with a context that might otherwise have been lost in mere transcription. Through documented interviews, artists can define their materials, processes, and concepts for conservation and scholarly review. Most importantly, the overall attitude of the artist with regard to the artwork is crucial and can serve to inform conservation practice, even when certain technical details may have been forgotten.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Code of Ethics* provided by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works states: "All actions of the conservation professional must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it" (AIC 1994). Though simply stated, such considerations are difficult to define, let alone practice. In the case of contemporary works of art, the governing respect

for an art object and its unique character, to a great degree, is characterized and qualified by its author. A work of art is fully realized and completed when encountered by and interpreted by a viewer. However, this interpretation is compounded by biases of the viewer (Dykstra 1996). When the interpreter of an artwork is a conservator, false impressions can lead to misguided practice. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that a conservation professional exhausts every avenue to find the most reliable details before making treatment decisions.

1.1 Diligent Conservation Practice

The AIC *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* have set ethical precedents for conservation practice. These guidelines describe and promote diligent practice as a defense against accusations of gross negligence, which can be extraordinarily detrimental to the merit of a work of art. Gross negligence is defined as "a conscious, voluntary act of omission in reckless disregard of a legal duty and of the consequences to another party, who may typically recover exemplary damages" (Garner 2001). "Due diligence" is defined as "the diligence reasonably expected from, and ordinarily exercised by, a person who seeks to satisfy a legal requirement or to discharge an obligation" (Garner 2001).

1.2 Visual Artists Rights Act

The AIC Code of Ethics also stresses the magnitude associated with familiarity of laws and regulations surrounding the rights of artists. The Visual Artists Rights Act is a federal law adopted in 1990 that protects the moral rights of artists (Broderson 1991). Moral rights include the right to attribution and the right to integrity. These rights legally guarantee an artist's association with a work he or she has created, and protects that work from modification which could tarnish the artist's reputation (Broderson 1991).

If a work of art is damaged, altered, or neglected in such a way that the artist's intent is obscured, the caretaker can be held legally responsible. Conservators whose interven-

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tions alter a work can be held liable for damages if an artist feels that his or her concept has been lost during a conservation treatment. As mentioned, it is the right of the artist to sue to remove his or her name from a work of art. Since the value of a work of art is its association with the artist, the piece loses its market value once its ties to that artist are severed. If the loss in value can be attributed to a conservation treatment, the conservator can be held responsible for restitution to the owner.

2. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY ART

Artists who base their material selections on certain mechanical and aesthetic qualities may have little knowledge of the materials' nature or stability. Many contemporary artists experiment with a variety of materials, many of which were not manufactured for art's sake. Many pieces composed of found objects include industrial and consumer products manufactured to fail and decompose. In certain instances, ephemeral materials help to illustrate the artist's concept. A good conservator will find a way to treat a damaged object without falsifying, imitating, or competing with the hand of the artist. If the author of a damaged artwork is available for consultation, the law and good sense suggests that the artist should guide a conservator towards a treatment consistent with the author's desired aesthetic. A discussion should be had about the use of materials analogous to the damaged object, since using them for repairs and retouching could be nearly imperceptible.

Throughout the course of a treatment, a conservator dealing with contemporary works of art must exert every effort to protect the moral rights of artists. Clarification of abstract information would diminish the potential for misinterpretation, which could otherwise lead to misguided treatment decisions (Coddington 1998). In many instances involving contemporary art, the artist can be consulted during the course of examination and treatment of a work of art. Conversations between the artist and the conservator will ensure that the artist's intent is maintained. Through documented artist interviews artists would be able to define their materials, processes, and concepts for conservation and scholarly review. The documentation of such conversations can help to better inform future conservators of the artist's attitude toward the work and its preservation (Coddington 1998).

2.1 Artist Interviews

An artist interview conducted for the benefit of conservators should engage the artist in his or her artwork. The line of questions should help to lead the artist towards answers that will inform conservators of the artist's attitude towards conservation when faced with treatments.

Video and/or audio records would provide future conservators and scholars with a context otherwise lost in mere transcription. Importantly, the overall attitude of the artist with regards to the artwork is crucial and can serve to inform conservation practice, even when certain technical details may have been forgotten.

2.2 Tips for Conducting Interviews with Artists

Research artist before contacting him/her

- Look at previous interviews
- Read articles
- Read artist's statement
- View artist's work in person

Develop a relationship before the visit

- Identify common goal: preservation of physical object along with artist's intent
- Art object is meant to be the beneficiary of collaboration
- Correspond through email (paper trail can be helpful)
- Speak over the phone

Supply the artist with a list of topics of interest to conservation before visit

- Allows artist to give thoughtful responses to questions
- Focus on materials, processes, and tools
- Find out if the artist uses any sort of cataloging system
- Does the artist document his/her work with photography?
- Inquire about artist's intent and aesthetics
- Allow artist to consider his/her choice of materials
- Ask if visible change is acceptable? To what degree?

Schedule a couple of visits to the artist's studio

- Develop a relationship with artist (cultivate trust)
- Observe artist and studio
- Take notes and photographs
- Watch artist interact with his/her work
- Observe development of work in progress
- Whenever possible, collect and catalog material samples from artist
- Take time to digest information and form new educated questions before interview

Documented interview

- Conduct in studio (or comfortable place for artist)
- Include artwork, tools, and materials (props to illustrate points)
- Go over list of topics of interest before interview
- Place camera at a comfortable distance
- Some artists may be camera shy
- Camera assistant is helpful
- Tripod will provide steady images
- Do not shoot towards light (prevent silhouetting)
- Make sure voices are adequately amplified
- State your name, the artist's name, and date in beginning of recording
- Be sure to focus discussions on topics relevant to conservation

- Artists enjoy sharing anecdotal stories
- Explain levels of loss compensation
- Ask to what extent they would like losses compensated
- If they have a damaged piece, discuss their ideal/target goal for treatment
- Explain what is possible
- Ask how he/she makes material selections
- Ask if he/she has taken recommendations from anyone: other artists, conservators, technical advisors from manufacturers?
- Is he/she open to recommendations for the future?
- Ask if he/she has ever had to restore one of their own works of art
- Ask if he/she has had previous experiences with a conservator

3. INTERVIEW WITH SIRI BERG

In order to better illustrate the merit of artist interviews within the field of conservation, an interview was conducted with an artist named Siri Berg.

Siri Berg was born in Stockholm, Sweden. At the age of nineteen she moved to New York City. Although she has been a resident artist of New York City for years, she maintains a very close relationship with her homeland by continuing to exhibit her work in numerous Swedish galleries and museums. Berg is internationally acclaimed, having also shown her work in Germany, Spain, Israel, Australia, China, and various galleries and museums throughout the United States. Berg divides her time between working in her studio and teaching young artists and designers at the Parsons School of Design.

Siri Berg describes herself as a “paper carpenter.” In her prepared artist statement, she explains how she uses color, texture, design, and movement to express feelings and moods. Berg’s work is divided into three distinct categories: oil paintings on canvas, paper collages, and found-object assemblages.

Her individual panels are usually hung in organized grids: for example, sixteen objects hung on a wall in a four-by-four pattern. Berg induces uniformity among the pieces she groups by mounting the objects to stretchers of a consistent size and depth. She may also color the stretchers or frames to further the coherence of a group. She is particularly attentive to the subtle texture of her surfaces (the way a material holds paint or ink, and how it interacts with the material and media next to it). Each piece articulates Berg’s vision in a different way and each benefits from proximity to its neighbors.

This “paper carpenter” is indeed an impeccable craftsman. Her paper collages are created from printed paper pieces that are neatly cut to fit perfectly and lock in place with another. Berg uses papers from around the world carefully selected for their texture and surface quality. Her

primary suppliers for paper are New York Central Art Supply, Pearl Paint, and Kate’s Paperie in New York City. Some papers are used as they are found while others are further decorated prior to their incorporation in a collage. For example, Berg uses woodblock printing to color and impart designs to some sheets.

Her knowledge of this process came through study with Kathy Caraccio, an American who learned woodblock printing in Kyoto, Japan. Traditionally, Japanese woodblock artists specialize in one of three areas: design, cutting, or printing. Berg, however, executes every stage of the process herself, feeling intimately connected to each of her prints as she has worked through each phase of its creation.

Many of her prints receive numerous layers of ink from different blocks. Once the prints are made, she spends a great deal of time sizing, cutting, and composing the pieces. Berg’s adhesive preference is UHU glue sticks which are marketed as “archival” and are relatively neat, clean, and quick to use. She is pleased with the glue sticks’ workable quality, allowing her to reposition collage elements as necessary. The paper collage elements are adhered to a paper mount with glue stick, which is in turn adhered to a rigid support. The board is then attached to wood stretchers that are painted for presentation.

To organize her thoughts and work, Siri Berg has developed and maintained two cataloging systems. The first keeps detailed records including: a thumbnail sketch of each piece, along with its catalog number, the size or the dimension of every piece, the medium, the colors, the year, the pattern, a photograph, problems, the collector, and miscellaneous notes. The second system is a detailed registry of materials, including: color swatches, samples, sketches, thoughts, and images of each piece. Together these catalogs provide important information about the provenance, processes, and aesthetics of Berg’s work.

3.1 Preparation for Interview

The documented interview has given Siri Berg an opportunity to record her artistic visions and intentions so that they may be preserved along with her objects and material catalogs. A great deal of time and preparation was invested before the formal interview took place. Siri Berg and I spent several days together in her studio, during which she spoke about her experiences, inspirations, and creations. Much consideration was given to the execution of the interview. I thought it would be beneficial to prepare Siri Berg by submitting a list of questions and considerations in advance. This list also helped me to focus on issues of importance to the conservation field.

The interview was conducted in Siri Berg’s studio, located in her Soho apartment. I selected the camera’s position based upon Berg’s comfort. To sooth her nerves I found it helpful to place the camera at a slight distance.

Distance from our table also allowed the camera to capture some of Berg's hanging collages in the picture. Each object referenced and illustrated a different point through process. To prepare, we outlined a few topics of interest and gathered some materials and tools to serve as props. Our preparation for the recorded interview ensured a comfortable situation and allowed us to focus on our conversation.

3.2 Results of Interview

Siri Berg grew to understand that as the gaps between artist and conservator were bridged, the artwork became the beneficiary. As a result, her interest in the project heightened, and the breadth of her answers grew. Through the course of this project, Siri Berg learned more about conservators' capabilities, and how she and her legacy can benefit from conservators' skills and resources. I learned how she employs process and combines elements to materialize her visions. The documentation of our conversations and interactions with her artwork will continue to inform others similarly.

3.3 Collaborative Treatment of Berg's Collage

While visiting her studio, I looked at numerous collages, paintings, and assemblages. One drawing suffered an unfortunate fate when she applied adhesive to it. The drawing was executed on tracing paper, and it expanded considerably as moisture from the water-based glue stick permeated the sheet. Innumerable tight creases and cockles spread across the paper, diminishing the impact of the drawing. Because Berg felt that the moment had passed, she could not recreate the piece. A discussion with Berg concerning the conservation treatment of the collage allowed us to establish a target goal for the treatment.

The piece is a collage composed of a crayon drawing on tracing paper and an oil painting on a canvas swatch. The canvas and tracing paper were mounted overall to a thick, white, waterleaf paper. Both the tracing paper and the canvas are divided into seven bands, aligning with one another so that the bands continued across both supports. One of seven colors was applied to each band: purple, carmine, scarlet, vermilion, orange, yellow, and lemon yellow. The canvas was painted out in solid bands of color, while the tracing paper was colored by a series of long, wavy crayon lines. Although the media differed on each support, the colors applied to the tracing paper matched those on the canvas.

Fortunately, this collage was assigned a number, and its information had been cataloged by Berg. Unable to recall the exact materials from memory, Berg checked her notes and was able to give me specific details about her materials selections. She was also able to supply me with samples for testing purposes. Conversations with Berg and testing with the artist's materials guided me towards a treatment that

maintained the artist's aesthetic while satisfying conservation standards.

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