



ART OBJECTS AS DOCUMENTS AND THE DISTRIBUTED IDENTITY OF CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the distinct function performed by objects in contemporary artworks, and draws attention to various non-object-based means by which artworks can be revealed to viewers. The discussion takes as its starting point the idea of contemporary art as a new paradigm of artistic practice, along with the concept of the art project, and the notion of the document as proposed by French documentalist Susanne Briet. These ideas will be examined through a piece by Danh Vo, which, despite unfolding around three physical artefacts, only becomes legible in light of stories the artist has communicated through means such as interviews and catalogues. As the identity of a contemporary artwork is distributed across the various objects, processes, concepts and contexts that shape it throughout its career, and because of its potential media-variability, I argue that the information conveyed through other channels of communication might be equally important for the integrity of artworks as the art objects proper. Accordingly, this paper suggests that in contemporary art, the art objects themselves can be seen as documents on equal footing with other artwork-related documentation, and in consequence proposes to shift the significance, value, and therefore status of artwork-related documentation within the artwork understood as a collectible.

Introduction

In today's artistic production, few things are as controversial and ambiguous as objects. Indeed, when thinking of what artists 'make', most people are likely to think first of objects and images. However, in addition to 'making', contemporary artists do a great deal of researching, selecting, showing, and crafting stories and experiences often anchored in, but not reducible to, their made (or ready-made) objects. Although by the early 1970s, Lucy Lippard had already influentially diagnosed a dematerialisation of the art object, within the field of visual art, objects are continuously produced, circulated, appreciated and valued.¹ However, with the expansion of art practices far beyond the confines of the traditional use of art objects as equivalent to artworks, the role of these objects in relation to artworks has changed significantly.²

Starting from the dissimilar categories of artwork and art object, this paper discerns the distinct functions that

objects can perform within a contemporary artwork and draws attention to the means that place objects within the artwork's narrative, making them a part of the artwork. Building on the current discourses in art theory, the concept of contemporary art as a new paradigm of artistic practice, along with the notion of the art project, I argue that contemporary artworks are inherently variable in terms of media. Likewise, the identity of a contemporary artwork is distributed between its objects and the processes, concepts and contexts that shape the work, both during the process of its creation and throughout its entire career.³ Following this line of thinking, I propose that the physical components of artworks can be seen as documents of artistic practice. Therefore, in order to appreciate, collect and preserve a contemporary artwork, it should be considered within the entire body of the artwork's documentation. This standpoint shifts the importance of such documentation, and points in the direction of a reconceptualisation of the artwork as an archive, as proposed by

conservation theoretician Hanna Hölling.⁴ As the practical implications of this paradigm shift are vast, I hope to see how her ideas dialogue with present-day discourses in art theory. While she has focused a great deal on media art, it is worth exploring how these ideas can prove just as relevant for an art project that is directly anchored in objects. This paper examines this viewpoint with the work by Vietnamese-Danish artist Danh Vo, in which the categories of artwork, art object, art project and document intermingle, thereby challenging traditional art categories.

Due to the prevalence of contemporary art as a paradigm for art making in current artistic practice, I propose that the keepers of today's art would benefit from revising traditional object-centred preservation approaches, and expanding their idea of the collectible to encompass all documents that evidence an artwork's existence and functioning.

Danh Vo's chandeliers: between objects and stories

Danh Vo, despite his profoundly object-based practice, is frequently categorised in the literature as a 'performance art inspired conceptual artist'. His objects, although indisputably unique and 'auratic' like traditional art pieces, are not in themselves artworks. Curator Katrine Brinson has even referred to them as 'storytellers',⁵ since they act as expressive means that transmit the artist's narratives and the documents of his artistic project.

This is the case of one particular project that consisted of the loan, purchase and display of three chandeliers from the ballroom of the early 20th-century Parisian Hôtel Majestic. The ballroom later became a site for treaty negotiations in many international conflicts, including the 1973 Paris Peace Accords meant to put an end to the Vietnam War, an event that had a great impact on the fate of the artist and his family. The chandeliers as 'silent witnesses' to historical events that shaped the artist's biography is one of the readings of the chandeliers' story featured in the literature.⁶ Nevertheless, there are other crucial stories that shape the pieces' possible readings, such as one recounted by Vo during various interviews and public talks:

My dad visited me in France. I took a cab with my dad to the hotel before they took down the chandeliers. Of course, he was cursing and swearing during the cab ride – and talking about going to the room of death.⁷

When he entered the room, and that for me was really what formulated the project, he could only say: oh my God, Danh I think that the Queen of Denmark must have one of these in her home. And I thought that was what the project was about, that this object is about: when you enter the room, you leave all your sorrows behind. That is what it was created for.⁸

Thus, besides acting as 'silent witnesses' to or evidence of historical events, there is another, seemingly opposing



Figure 1 Danh Vo, *08:03:51, 28.05.2009* (2009). Installation view, National Gallery of Denmark. Photo © SMK Photo/Jakob Skou-Hansen.

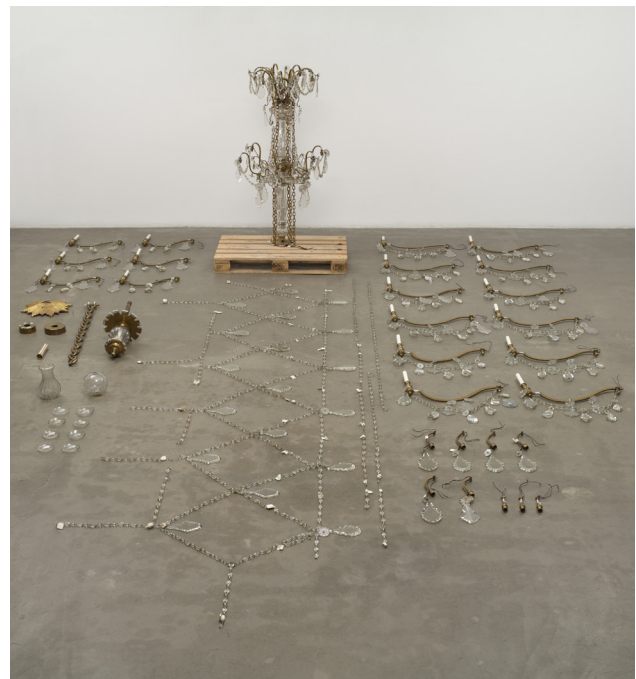


Figure 2 Danh Vo, *08:43, 26.05.2009* (2009). Installation view. Photographer: Thomas Griesel (copyright MOMA NY). IN2152.5 © 2019. Digital image, MoMA NY/Scala, Florence.

reading of the chandeliers, namely as artefacts designed for enjoyment: objects that 'make you forget things' even if these 'things' are formative for one's biography.

Another conceptual dimension of the 'Chandeliers Project' is related to the circumstances in which the undertaking unfolded, a story that positions the artwork within discourses on the value of heritage in the global economy. The former Hôtel Majestic, a historic building with a rich and complicated past, was sold by the French government to an overseas real-estate investor seeking to convert it into a luxury hotel. It was precisely this transitional condition of the building that allowed Vo to collect the chandeliers and preserve their value as evidence of past events. In an



Figure 3 Danh Vo, *16:32-26.05.2009* (2009). Installation view. Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Georges Meguerditchian.

interview conducted by Clare Molloy, Vo explained that the process of purchasing the chandeliers and all the actors involved in it are significant for the reading of the piece:

they [the chandeliers] have of course like a historical element that attracted me, but I think if that was only the thing, then I don't think it would be such an interesting artwork. I think also it had the story of ... the sale of it, the finances around this circumstances.⁹

The story of the sale of the Hôtel Majestic as significant for the reading of the artwork was evoked in an unorthodox way in the catalogue of the exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel. One page of the book is composed of fragments of an article from the *New York Times* describing the massive sell-off of historic properties by the French government.¹⁰

The chandeliers purchased from the new owner of the historic building were each assigned a title that represents the exact time and date of their removal from the original location, and eventually entered the collections of three museums: Centre Pompidou, Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, and MoMA, New York.¹¹ Both before and after their musealisation, the chandeliers were displayed on numerous occasions in different venues, and in many

ways – disassembled and arranged on the floor in pieces, in a transport crate, suspended on scaffolding, hanging from the ceiling, lit and unlit – each instance articulating a different narrative (Figures 1–3).¹²

Beyond art objects: contemporary art as a new paradigm in artistic practice

The first, most intuitive and self-evident definition of the term 'contemporary art' is linked to the relationship between the date of an artwork's creation and an audience's position in time, which would mean 'current', contemporary to 'us'. However, in recent art-theoretical discussions,¹³ 'contemporary art' is often presented not as a temporal marker, but rather as a separate phenomenon or distinctive condition within the historical tradition of artistic movements. Among other attributes, this 'new condition of art' can be characterised as addressing the dichotomy of artworks' concept and objecthood, where the former prevails over the latter.

For philosopher Peter Osborne, contemporary art is 'postconceptual', i.e. it is a historical-ontological condition that builds upon the complex experience and critical

legacy of conceptual art, where concepts involved in the work of art take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns.¹⁴ He argues that a postconceptual artwork can no longer be regarded as a closed, autonomous or self-sufficient entity conceived outside of the framework of social dependencies, and which remains identical to itself everywhere and at all times.¹⁵ Rather, a postconceptual artwork can take on different shapes depending on context.¹⁶ It is instead 'a radically distributive ... unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time'.¹⁷ In line with the writings of art historian Rosalind Krauss,¹⁸ Osborne opposes the modernist concept of medium-specificity to the idea of the 'contemporary' as a 'transmedia' or 'post-medium' condition.

Art historian David Joselit argues that despite the changes to the development of artistic practices introduced in the 20th century, most 'art historical interpretation continues to depart from the presumption that objects are its fundamental units of analysis'.¹⁹ In opposition to such reasoning, Joselit does away with the concept of medium, aiming to expand the definition of art by embracing 'heterogeneous configurations of relationships and links'.²⁰ By doing so, he introduces the notion of 'format', namely a constellation of links or connections between people, objects, spaces, events, and so on. 'Media' in his theory are subsets of 'formats', as he sees differences as residing primarily in the scale and flexibility of the latter. Still, in his view, the 'medium' is an obsolete notion characterised as 'analogue in a digital world'.²¹

Both Osborne and Joselit consider contemporary art as a relational phenomenon detached from the unique, fixed physical medium. A similar approach expressed outside of the fields of art history, art theory and art criticism is that of sociologist Nathalie Heinich, who proposes that contemporary art should be considered as a new paradigm of artistic practice, an aesthetic category within the arts. Within this framework, she offers the contention that 'the artwork is no longer exclusively the actual object proposed by the artist, but rather the whole set of operations, actions, interpretations, etc., brought about by this proposition'.²² The last voice in this discussion is that of art theorist Boris Groys, who builds his argument on the dichotomy of 'modern' and 'contemporary art', pointing out that while the former was oriented towards an individual form, the latter works 'on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation'.²³ For Groys, contemporary art is less related to the production of individual objects, and is instead a 'manifestation of an individual decision to include or to exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world – to give them a new context or to deny it to them: a private selection that is at the same time publicly accessible and thereby made manifest, present, explicit'.²⁴ Besides framing the notion of contemporary art, in his seminal essay 'Topology of contemporary art', Groys points out the distinct role of objects within this framework, by arguing that the primary form of contemporary art is the installation. However, for Groys an installation can consist

of individual paintings, since in contemporary art 'the crucial aspect of the painting as an artwork is not the fact that it was produced by an artist but that it was selected by an artist and presented as something selected'.²⁵

To summarise, the way the term 'contemporary art' is used here is less related to a particular moment in time or an art-historical period, but rather to art which may comply with certain features that can be defined in terms of four framing aspects: conceptuality (in terms of the balance between concepts and their product), contextuality (in terms of social/historical/cultural dependencies), media-variability (as opposed to media-specificity) and processuality (a rise in the importance of processes over results, as well as durability in time). It does not mean that these aspects are equally significant in all contemporary artworks, but that all contemporary artworks might encompass each of these aspects to a certain degree and, while being investigated as collectibles, they should be examined against all of them.²⁶ This bundle of traits shares a common denominator in the artwork's potentiality for change.

Despite being at the centre of the artwork, without the contextual and complementary information, the three chandeliers from the Hôtel Majestic, however impressive, are nothing more than common decorative elements that belong to the realm of the history of interior design. What makes them an artwork is the artist's gesture of selecting them and embedding them in stories through which he communicates his interests and concerns. These stories, revealed to the public by diverse means, such as interviews, talks or catalogues, determine the artwork's identity and illuminate the objects that represent it. These stories, of which I have mentioned only a few, are told and shaped by multiple actors – the artist, curators, the institutions that acquired them, as well the public – in an ongoing process. The collection of stories expands each time the artwork is accessed – displayed, analysed or discussed.

The document as the result of art and the project as an art form

Among the myriad of tendencies and phenomena subsumed under the label 'contemporary art', two are especially important for understanding the manifold functions that objects might carry out in relation to artworks. The first one is the omnipresence and key role of documents – a legacy from earlier experimental art forms. Already with the emergence of happenings, actions and events in the 1950s, especially as regards radical artistic movements such as Fluxus, the distinction between artwork and documentation began to blur, and artists exploited this ambiguity of categories in their own practice in numerous ways. The increase in the importance of documentation was also fostered by the rise of conceptual practices, which in the absence of art objects resulted in the production of evidence: from drawings representing an idea to imagery depicting processes and their outcomes. Within the category of documents produced as a result of art, special attention should be given to

the documentation of performance art pieces, whose continued existence, due to their very nature, fully relies on documentation. In the past, live performances were considered uncollectable because of their intangible nature. Museums collected instead objects related to a performance, such as the material remains or the documentation of the event, but not the performance itself as a live event.²⁷

The second is the notion of the 'art project', understood as one of the key contemporary strategies in art making. Although, as Claire Bishop has remarked, the term 'project' was already in use among conceptual artists by the late 1960s, back then it was largely understood in a similar way as in architecture – as a proposal for an artwork.²⁸ However, since the 1990s the art project has slowly developed into an art form in its own right, displacing the work of art as a finite object with an 'open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form'.²⁹ As scholars Johnnie Gratton and Mark Sheringham have observed,³⁰ in many projects the process is related to a strong investigative impulse reflecting concerns of a sociological or anthropological nature. Such projects, in line with the notion of the 'ethnographic turn' as coined by Hal Foster,³¹ consist of site-specific (or site-sensitive) cultural research projects that 'shift our attention from art to life, from the aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic, and from the personal to the collective'.³² Its end (or side) product is not dependent on the success of the project; it can represent its failure or unpredicted development. Furthermore, the final outcome may be less important than the process itself, as the project is 'a device designed not to achieve a particular end, but to allow something unforeseen to happen'.³³ Although by nature the term 'project' is linked to the present and oriented towards the future, here it may be used to describe a completed undertaking. However, to apply this term retrospectively it is necessary to recognise within its outcome the trace of a now-past present and now-past future. It is also important to acknowledge that many final products are not actually final, but 'works in progress', as the result is, above all, 'the project'.³⁴ The result made available to the viewer is often an account, record or documentation of the course of the project: a material confirmation or representation of the project as a process. Moreover, a single project can enjoy various manifestations, and only by gathering the variety of its outcomes into an archive can a project be represented as a work of art in its entirety.

Following this line of thinking, I propose to regard the role of the three chandeliers (art objects) within the artwork as documentary – a record of the artistic project, a representation of Vo's artistic practice, and evidence of the multifarious narratives that form the artwork's identity. The concept of the project therefore not only enables us to examine the notion of contemporary art from a new perspective, but also to emphasise the distinct role of objects in contemporary art, and to support the assumption that art objects themselves might be considered documents. As Boris Groys observed,³⁵ the art project's goals are usually established in such a way that they cannot be evaluated as

having been reached or not; in other words, one can never say whether the project has achieved what it was supposed to achieve.³⁶ In consequence, the project as a formula shifts the attention away from the result and toward the process, and this can affect the way art is defined.³⁷ Based on this stance, contemporary art might be understood not as the 'result-oriented' production of works of art, but rather as documentation of projects. In consequence, in exhibition spaces the audience may encounter not only artworks in the traditional sense of the word, but also documents, which can often take the same forms and be exhibited in similar media as those commonly employed for traditional art objects. The application of this theoretical approach to Vo's 'Chandeliers Project' allows the status of the artefacts collected to be shifted, so as to place them on an equal footing with other documents produced throughout the course of the project.

From objects to documents: artworks as archives

In the mid-20th century, the work of European information science pioneers such as Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet expanded the notion of document to include physical forms of 'information'. Otlet is known for his observation that documents could be three-dimensional, and could therefore encompass sculpture.³⁸ His understanding of the document extended to objects originally not intended for communication, for instance traces of human activity such as archaeological finds. Briet in her seminal book *What is Documentation?* developed even further the idea of the possible forms a document could take, stating that 'the forms that the documentary work assumes are as numerous as the needs from which they are born'.³⁹

Briet's theoretical approach deserves a closer look, since besides allowing objects to be included in the definition of a document, it also provides a vision of documentation as a dynamic network of interrelations and a crucial aspect of knowledge production. Briet challenges the traditional, positivist vision of the document 'as a proof [évidence] in support of a fact' and expands it to 'any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [*indice*], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon'.⁴⁰ According to Briet, a star is not a document, but a photograph of a star is; a stone on the ground is not a document, but a stone in a mineralogical collection is; an animal in the wild is not a document, but an animal in a zoo is.⁴¹ The implication of this categorisation is that documentation should not be viewed as related to a textual record, but understood within a broader notion of access to evidence and context.

Is an art object produced in relation to a contemporary artwork also a document? Following Briet's definition, it might be seen as such. If so, an art object would be evidence of the artistic practice of a certain artist, a document of certain tendencies in visual arts of the time, of the institutional collection policy, curatorial choices, and finally

the artwork as such. Furthermore, Briet classifies documents as primary, secondary and auxiliary, categories which should not be regarded as hierarchical in terms of value, as they merely illustrate ways in which a document can be produced. The assumption that an art object is a primary document and a constructed phenomenon, situated within or including networks of secondary and auxiliary documents, may allow for a new understanding of the nature of contemporary artworks, which also comprise documents/signs that represent the artwork or some aspect of it. This would allow for the inclusion of an art object as a document whose importance is comparable to that of the other elements comprising the artwork in a dynamic system of interrelated documents.

Consequently, I advocate for a shift in how artwork-related documentation is valued within museum practices related to collecting and caring for contemporary art. To this end, I point toward and expand on the notion of the 'artwork-as-an-archive' as introduced by conservation theorist Hanna Hölling.⁴² The 'artwork/archive' is an entity that consists of documents: both physical elements of the artwork and the artwork-related documentation. It is a dynamic, decentralised, non-hierarchical, open-ended set of records, and at the same time a repository of knowledge and memories of those involved in an artwork's creation, care and display. The application of the concept of 'artwork/archive' in museum practice may help to secure the perpetuation of a contemporary artwork in its entirety. It implies reconsidering museum acquisitions as more than just the purchase of art objects, but rather a larger process that encompasses the production and gathering of documentation. From this perspective, accession to the collection would not be considered complete without also collecting the stories that determine the artwork's identity.

Conclusion

Taking as our point of departure the notion of contemporary art as a paradigm shift in artistic practice, this paper emphasises the distinct function objects can perform within contemporary artworks. It proposes that the identity of an artwork is no longer defined solely by an art object, but instead distributed between physical objects and stories that contextualise and articulate them. Although within the field of visual art the public still tends to approach artworks through their physical manifestation, this is only one of the multiple ways today's artists convey their work to the public. As the example of Danh Vo's 'Chandeliers Project' has shown, an artwork's conceptuality, processuality and contextuality may unfold through other, less tangible means, such as oral narratives or in alternative spaces such as catalogues. Because of the potential media-variability of contemporary art, the information conveyed through other channels of communication might be equally important for the integrity of artworks as art objects.

To explain the equivalent importance of objects and documents in shaping an artwork's identity, this paper has adopted the notion of document proposed by Susanne Briet. Following her perspective and taking into account intrinsic tendencies of contemporary art such as documents resulting from the art project as an art form, I suggest that in contemporary art, the art objects themselves can be seen as documents on equal footing with other artwork-related documentation. Accordingly, this paper proposes that shifting the significance, value, and therefore status of artwork-related documentation within the museum structure is key for institutions to sustainably and respectfully collect and care for contemporary artworks. It also suggests that this can be put into practice by including the artwork's documentation together with the art object in the museum collection.

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Notes

1. Lippard 1973.
2. This paper distinguishes between 'artworks' and 'art objects'. Both terms commonly circulate in the fields to which this study relates – art history and conservation – and are often used interchangeably (for conservation see, for example, Appelbaum 2007). Nevertheless, as this study argues, in the case of contemporary art, the substance and identity of the artwork understood as a work of art often lies beyond its physical embodiment, which I refer to in this paper as an 'art object'.
3. The notions 'artwork's identity' and 'artwork's career' are used here in line with definitions presented in Giebelier et al. 2019.
4. Hölling 2013, 2015, 2018.
5. Brinson 2018: 34.
6. Fassi 2010: 154; Hergott 2014: 6.
7. Statens Museum for Kunst, 2012, *Danh Vo - Chandelier - 08:03:51, 28.05.2009*. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDf6M5aCNyE&t=91s> (accessed 21 May 2021).
8. Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Artist's Choice 1: Danh Vo and Julie Ault. See: <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/248/2219> (accessed 21 May 2021).
9. Danh Vo tells 'Les fleurs d'intérieur'. See: <https://vimeo.com/238774045> (accessed 21 May 2021).
10. Vo and Ault 2009: 11.

11. Each of the three chandeliers was given a distinct title: 16:32:15–26.05.2009 (currently in the collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris), 08:03:51, 28.05.2009 (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen) and 26.05.2009, 8:43 (MoMA, New York).
12. A detailed description of all the iterations of the 'Chandeliers Project', along with research into the circumstances that shaped them can be found in Wielocha 2020.
13. Groys 2007; Heinich 2014; Joselit 2012; Meyer 2013; Osborne 2013, 2018; Smith 2009.
14. Osborne 2010, 2018.
15. Osborne 2013.
16. Prinz 2017: 55.
17. Osborne 2010: 11.
18. Krauss 1999.
19. Joselit 2012: 43.
20. Joselit 2012: 2.
21. Joselit 2012: 52.
22. Heinich 2014: 35.
23. Groys 2007: 11.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. These features can also be true for certain forms of non-contemporary art. However, a key difference with respect to contemporary art is that, despite these features, in most traditional art the physical objects continue to be the ultimate forms of artistic expression.
27. Since the early 2000s, the situation has changed: museums have started to collect live works by acquiring the means and the rights to re-perform them. See, for example, Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014.
28. Bishop 2012.
29. Bishop 2012: 194.
30. Gratton and Sheringham 2005.
31. Foster 1995.
32. Gratton and Sheringham 2005: 2.
33. Gratton and Sheringham 2005: 1.
34. Gratton and Sheringham 2005.
35. Groys 2002.
36. Kunst 2014.
37. Groys 2002.
38. Buckland 1997.
39. Briet 2006: 36. The work of Suzanne Briet has previously been analysed and applied as a theoretical framework in the context of contemporary art documentation: see Dekker 2018; Giannachi 2016; Gordon 2015; Macdonald 2009.
40. Briet 2006: 10.
41. Britet 2006: 11.
42. Hölling 2013, 2015, 2018.

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Biography

Aga Wielocha is a collection care professional and a researcher specialised in contemporary art. Currently, she holds a position of Conservator, Preventive at M+ in Hong Kong. She holds a PhD from the University of Amsterdam. Her doctoral research carried out within the program 'New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art' (NACCA) situated at the crossroads of art history and theory, conservation, museology and heritage studies is focused on the lives and futures of contemporary art in institutional collections, particularly on works which are variable and unfold over time.