Modern art: who cares?

Jan Marontate* Modern art raises many issues concerning its preservation. Restoration ethics is dictated by the art products of past centuries. Modern materials are complex both in their structure and their deterioration patterns. How should rapidly ageing videos be preserved? Are the artists themselves allowed a say in how their works should be conserved? Jan Marontate attended a symposium on the topic in Amsterdam, reflected on what she heard and saw, and suggests that one can learn a lot by posing the right questions.

Amsterdam was recently the site of a symposium on the care of new forms of art which highlighted the changing role of museum professionals in the coming millenium. The conference established the position of Dutch art experts in an international avant-garde which is developing innovative approaches to the conservation of recent art and raising provocative questions for cultural policy and museum practices.

As government official Jan Riezenkamp recalled, the disastrous floods of 1953 led to the 'Delta Plan' for the continued preservation of the low countries. Almost forty years later, in 1991, a second Delta Plan was proposed, this time to protect cultural heritage from the ravages of time.[1] One of the projects funded - the 'Conservation of Modern Art' Project - studied issues ranging from highly technical problems in materials science through administrative matters to legal, ethical, and art-historical concerns.

Conference plus exhibition

Research conducted for this project provided a focal point for discussions at the international symposium on the conservation of recent art called 'Modern Art: Who Cares?'[2] The symposium came about through the collaboration between the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art *(Stichting Behoud Moderne Kunst)* and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage *(Instituut Collectie Nederland)* with funding from a variety of sources.[3] Thirteen international museums and research institutes also helped prepare an ambitious programme of talks, seminars and panel discussions attended by about 450 participants from around the world. Unlike most conferences in art conservation which tend to concentrate on specific technical questions, the symposium was strongly interdisciplinary in its orientation. Hands-on conservators (still sometimes called 'restorers') and conservation scientists were joined by artists, museum directors, curators, art historians, philosophers, art educators and arts administrators in an intense reflection on issues related to the preservation of modern art.

On the first day of the meeting, conference participants visited an exhibition of works from the Conservation of Modern Art Project. The show was curated by Piet de Jong at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and also featured displays related to conservation research on the artworks (such as a packing crate and bottles of blue dye). The inclusion of the exhibition in the conference program is significant for several reasons. First, it is a manifestation of the enhanced status of restoration-related activities within the art museum which allocated prime gallery space to the show. (The inclusion of displays related to materials, techniques and conservation is a trend in shows organized by 'cutting edge' art museums lately.) Secondly, the display of technical materials used in laboratory research on the artworks reflects efforts at professionalization of the field of conservation-restoration, emulating practices at meetings of experimental scientists. Finally, the focus on specific works exemplifies the problem-oriented (rather than theory-driven) approach characteristic of much conservation research, an practice noted by philosopher Renée van der Vall in her analysis of the epistemological basis of current practices. During the rest of the conference there were more talks on the work done by the project as well as seminars, panel discussions and presentations on other research by an international roster of speakers.

The following synthesis focuses on key areas of concern discussed by participants during the event that have implications for future practices:

- conservation ethics in the contemporary context;
- technical challenges in the identification and conservation of modern materials;
- obsolescence and new technologies;
- materials and meaning in restoration strategies;
- the place of artists in preservation of their art, and finally
- documentation, decision-making models and interdisciplinary cooperation.

Before considering these issues let us briefly present the project which was behind the conference.

The 'Conservation of Modern Art' Project

The 'Conservation of Modern Art' Project grew out of specific concerns raised by a conflict between curator Marianne Brouwer of the Kröller-Müller Museum and a free-lance conservator over the treatment of a wallpainting conceived by Sol LeWitt which was covered with dirty fingerprints.[4] The curator suggested that the wall simply be repainted, since in her view the artwork itself is in the form of written instructions of the concept provided by the artist. The work had already been executed by others, not by the artist himself. The conservator objected, pointing out that total repainting violated the most basic principles of conservation ethics. She consulted other curators and found that contemporary art museums were in a quandary about how to approach the myriad preservation issues raised by new art works.

In 1993 a working group was set up which eventually expanded to include representatives from six museums of modern art in Holland and other art experts. A key figure in the group was a young graduate of an arts administration programme, Dionne Sillé. The project investigated treatment options for ten specific case studies of artworks made of non-traditional materials. They were chosen from museum collections according to the following criteria:

- each work had to present technical problems for conservators which were considered ‘unsolvable’ at the beginning of the study, and
- each work had to be considered worth saving from the point of view of art history.

Ten works studied

The works were done between 1959 and 1982 by the following artists: Woody van Amen, Marcel Broodthaers, Tony Cragg, Krijn Giezen, Piero Gilardi, Manzoni, Mario Merz, Pino Pascali, Henk Peeters, and Jean Tinguely. All were three-dimensional objects made using non-traditional materials. *Città irreale* by Mario Merz (1968, Stedelijk Museum) consists of a wall-hung triangular metal frame covered with wax-impregnated gauze pierced by neon tubes that form the words ‘città irreale’. It is now discoloured and disintegrating. Jean Tinguely’s *Gismo* (1960, Stedelijk Museum) is a construction made of salvaged pieces of metal, a motor and ready-made parts like bicycle wheels that are rusting and worn. Piero Gilardi’s *Still life of water melons* (1967, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) is a brightly painted three-dimensional polyurethane foam object, now dirty and crumbling. Similarly Henk Peeter’s *59-18* (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage) is made of a different type of discolored, cracking foam rubber. Woody van Amen’s *Ice machine, Willem Barentz’s winter on Novaya Zemlya 1969* (Centraal Museum Utrecht) is a wall-hung aluminium and plastic construction containing fluorescent tubes, mechanical parts, a broken freezing unit (that once worked) and hay (infested with insects). *MB* by Marcel Broodthaers (1970 Bonnefanten-museum) is a pair of brittle black and white plastic reliefs of the artist’s initials. *Morocco* by Krijn Giezen (1972 Frans Halsmuseum) is a fabric-covered chipboard cabinet containing a wide range of items including a dead bird and organic materials in advanced states of deterioration. Manzoni’s *Achrome* (1962 Kröller-Müller Museum) is made of tufts of fibreglass wool attached to polystyrene on a red velvet background encased in plastic and is very dirty. The works by Pino Pascali and Tony Cragg are discussed in detail below.

Two teams of investigators studied different issues related to the treatment of each object. One team specialized in technical and scientific issues; the other in ethical or art historical concerns. The researchers studied the history of each object (including conditions of acquisition, previous owners, and past conservation treatments) as well as documentation on the materials and techniques used. When possible they interviewed the artists and people who knew them. (Four of the artists were deceased at the time of the project). Recommended treatment programs were developed for each artwork. The suggestions ranged from active restoration through preventive measures to the recognition, in one case (a polyurethane piece by Henk Peeters), that some artworks in a state of advanced deterioration may be beyond rescue. These case studies were used to develop models for information-gathering and for decision-making processes related to the conservation of modern art in the future.

Conservation ethics

One of the over-riding concerns voiced in many different ways during the symposium was the difficulty of deciding on guidelines for ethical conservation practices in the treatment of contemporary art.

Restoration ethics as developed by conservators in the past century are most readily applicable to old art, as art historian Ernst von der Wetering and others pointed out. Since intervention is risky, conservators have generally come to the conclusion that doing as little as possible is a good idea. When intervention is necessary, modern conservation ethics stress the importance of reversibility to avoid condemning future generations to our interpretations. The awareness that every restoration is an interpretation strengthens the arguments for restraint. There is a deep fear of introducing anachronism and a desire not to impose today’s visions on future generations.

In cases of conflict about courses of action, contemporary conservation practices tend to give maximum authority to respect for the original material. Since written documentation about art is always fragmentary and biased, the art object itself still constitutes the primary source in most art works. However codes of ethics developed for art of earlier periods when the art object itself constituted the principal record of the creative act do not apply to many new artistic practices. Artist Michelangelo Pistoletto explained that ‘the concept is stronger than the material’ for contemporary creators. He destroyed a work called *The mirror of infinity* and built another to make this point.

With any kind of art object, ancient or modern, conservators are faced with a conflict between the existential power of the work of art and the inevitability of the object’s transformation, both with treatment and without it. In a discussion of the dilemmas confronted by conservators, philosopher Renée van der Vall depicted the situation as one of tragic conflict since the choices presented cannot be evaluated by rational application of scientific rules and inevitably involve some sacrifice of values. Treatment of modern works, as conservator Margaret Ellis explained, is ‘humbling for most of us [restorers]… since ours are often the first hands on the work’ after those of the artist. Complex ethical issues are raised by the diversity of new artforms and new artmaking practices.

Museum professionals in the creative process

With some types of works, such as large-scale installations, conservators and curators are called upon to participate actively in art-making activities - performing tasks in roles akin to that of fabricators or studio assistants. Artist Suchan Kinoshita promoted even greater involvement, expressing her belief that museum professionals who install her work should also be actively engaged in decision-making and share the risks with the artist. She discussed experiments with providing instructions for installation of her work which took up the ‘idea of a score like in music… in which the interpreter has a certain amount of freedom’.

How much should the tastes of museum professionals be allowed to shape artworks? Restoration ethics are particularly difficult to define for extremely minimalist conceptual art and highly site-specific works, such as a window cut into the wall of a villa in Italy. The Guggenheim Museum owns the plan for the work but re-installing it in a museum environment in a way which respects the original concept is highly problematic. Under what conditions are replicas and refabrications of artworks or their components acceptable?

The question of whether art experts can accept physical change or aging in art works may be cultural, rather than aesthetic or scientific. This issue is made more complex by the association of contemporary art with youth culture. Conservation scientist Stefan Michalski remarked that the first appearance of aging, such as a crack in a painting, seems to became almost an emotional event. Conservator Carole Mancusi Ungaro commented that there is a ‘need to accept change’ and that ‘in Europe the acceptance of decay is greater than in America where there is the idea that avant-garde art should be forever young’. As conservation scientist Thea van Oosten observed every material has a limited life span (though the life

span of metals or stone is much longer than that of modern synthetic materials). Prevalent notions in conservation ethics seem geared towards 'stopping nature' giving conservators the unrealistic mandate to forestall deterioration indefinitely. Conservators called for new ethical guidelines which take natural aging into account.

Modern materials create technical challenges

Contemporary art presents special technical challenges. One set of problems has to do with the materials used. Many new materials do not last as long as traditional artists' materials and deteriorate differently. Furthermore, taste conventions and artistic goals legitimate some kinds of physical transformations while rejecting others. A flaking, yellowed piece of foam is less likely to be aesthetically acceptable in the museum than a patinated bronze. Participants agreed that synthetic materials (like various modern plastics and rubbers) are by far the weakest component of most contemporary artworks. Yet it is difficult to identify synthetic materials because of their complex and often composite character. Conservation scientists have powerful analytical tools available to identify materials but the techniques are time-consuming and expensive.

Gathering information about materials sometimes involves elaborate detective work as many speakers explained. The most direct and economical solution for identification of materials would seem to be to collect information from the artist but erroneous information is frequently provided by artists themselves. Speakers repeatedly stressed that it is important to recognize the limits of the artist's memory, giving many specific examples of errors in information which had been supplied. According to Pieter Keune, director of the Foundation for Artists' Materials, even artists who make an effort to keep detailed records of the technical processes and materials in their works sometimes make mistakes and record product names incompletely or incorrectly. Although industry knows a great deal about the technology and degradation processes of modern synthetics, the information is difficult of access. Large corporations often do not want to make sensitive information available and even when they are willing it is frequently difficult to locate knowledgeable specialists within the corporate structures. Moreover when information becomes obsolete for current industrial applications it may be discarded or stored in cumbersome archives.

Even if the composition of the synthetic materials and their degradation process is known it is impossible to predict what will happen. This depends on techniques of application, on storage conditions and on the combinations of materials used in each work. For example, polyurethane foam coated with paint has a different life expectancy than uncoated foam. Furthermore, many museums do not have adequate storage facilities for contemporary art containing synthetic materials. The director of the National Gallery in Prague, Jaroslav Andel noted that museums which now have state-of-the-art facilities may have significant numbers of twentieth-century art works that have not been kept in ideal conditions in the past. His new museum facility has inherited over 13,000 paintings, some in bad shape. New knowledge about preventive conservation measures cannot be applied retroactively.

Obsolescence and new technologies

Problems are posed by the use of industrial artefacts as 'parts' in artworks. Curator Christian Scheidemann gave the example the need to replace a mercury light bulb in one of Michelangelo Pistoletto's works. The manufacturer had ceased to make the bulb. Can a different light bulb be substituted? Should a copy of the old one be made? Or should the 'original' bulb be left even if it no longer works? Pistoletto refused to accept the substitution of a new shape of bulb on aesthetic grounds. Even when using new materials or ready-made objects or assistants to fabricate their works, artists do not surrender connections with their works. The concept of the original has not faded but has been widened. Any object - even a light bulb - can be considered an original if the artist declares it.

Some forms of recent art have engendered whole new approaches to conservation. Video artist Nam June Paik predicted years ago that 'the cathode ray will replace the canvas'. Pip Laurenson, conservator of the Tate Gallery in London, explained that although video did become an accepted mainstream art form 'canvas is still going strong whereas the cathode ray tube has become obsolete'. Laurenson spoke about two major types of problems in maintaining a rapidly growing video collection: preservation of the videos themselves and preservation of equipment for playing videos.

For example: artists' videos

The Tate Gallery has taken the controversial measure of digitizing artists' videos. This is controversial because analogue techniques used by many artists record the picture elements with continuously varying electrical voltage whereas digital video converts the signal to a binary code which involves some loss of information. However, an advantage is that once digitized it is possible to make exact clones of digital versions whereas analogue recording always introduces distortion in copies.

The gallery has also developed procedures for the assessment of videos before acquisition which take conservation issues into account. Before the purchase the museum asks to view the master tape. (The master tape is the first generation of video and in the case of analogue recording should have the best quality image). At this point the condition of tape which is proposed for acquisition is compared with the master tape and display requirements are analyzed. A pre-purchase report on the condition includes the estimated conservation and display costs. On acquisition, 'preventive conservation' arrangements include producing a copy of the tape in digital format. This is done working with professional video engineers but conservators carefully supervise the work in order to preserve the original characteristics of the work since art videos often present particular characteristics which engineers are tempted to change to conform to tastes in the commercial video industry. If possible the artist is asked to view the digital copies.

Another problem related to videos - the obsolescence of video equipment - can be particularly acute when the equipment is integral to the piece (for example in some of Gary Hill's complex installations). The Tate has taken the precaution of acquiring a spare set of monitors but storing 'spare parts' adds additional complexity to the museum's role. The gallery has begun to try to involve artists in the process of archiving their works. For example, artist Bill Viola is very concerned about what will happen to his work after his death. With the artist's assistance the gallery has amassed elaborate documentation of control systems, wiring diagrams, the calibration of monitors and other technical aspects related to the exhibition of his work. Laurenson emphasized that the care and preservation of video collections is an on-going process. The condition of tapes must be monitored and works must be periodically copied onto new stock.

Materials and meaning

In some contemporary artworks, materials or parts must be replaced frequently. For example Pino Pascali's *Campi arati e canali d'irrigazioni* (1967), one of the 10 objects in the foundation's study, consists of five metal trays that are filled to the rim with blue water, and four corrugated 'fields' of asbestos cement sheets covered with earth. The work evokes the image of ploughed fields with irrigation canals that appear to reflect sky in their blue water.[5] The water must be newly prepared for each exhibition but instructions on the exact specifications for the dye preparation are unclear leaving conservators with considerable latitude in the choice of hue. Does the shade of blue matter for the meaning of the work?

When the issue of replacement parts or materials arises it is not always clear how to situate their place in the total meaning of the work. Christiane Berndes, curator of the Van Abbe Museum, presented a model for recording information for future conservation and installation needs which takes into account the meaning of materials in the context of the work, the artist's oeuvre and trends in art history as well as the intended function of different parts in the specific work (for example the importance of movement or sound). Above all, she stressed the need to develop conservation strategies on a work by work basis.

When Tinguely repaired, he replaced

Restoration approaches to sculptor Jean Tinguely's sound and motion machines provides an example of some ways in which the meaning of the work can be integrated into conservation strategies. Tinguely's machines are noted for complex movements and each machine is defined by the idiosyncratic character of the motion. Their 'unsmooth' movements cause strain on the moving parts. If left to run the machines wear themselves out - drumming hammers wear holes through plates. Belts and motors break. Conservators Lydia Beerkens of Amsterdam and Andres Pardy from the Jean Tinguely Museum in Basel both came to the conclusion that preserving Tinguely's works as stationary objects is not acceptable, though keeping the works in motion presents complex restoration and maintenance problems.

Although Tinguely is deceased, there is evidence about his way of dealing with restoration but museums have not followed his approach. Tinguely was often called in to repair his machines but his own practices do not conform to standard conservation 'ethics' - he often replaced old motors with different styles of new ones and he left his welds showing. This is particularly problematic for unpainted constructions (before 1969) and might be better described as reconstruction than as restoration. Conservators have not adopted the artist's insouciance about the choice of dissimilar replacement parts in restoration. The first restoration principle adopted by the Jean Tinguely Museum is that repair is better than replacement. Functional additions are permissible only if they make no noticeable changes and only if they are absolutely necessary. In this case the choice of replacement parts gives priority to aesthetic rather than functional considerations. The museum has foreseen preventive conservation measures such as mandatory rest periods in order to extend the lifetime of the works and, not incidentally, to make the exhibits more enjoyable. Many of the works make a great deal of noise and setting too many in motion at once in the same place detracts from the effect.

Cragg's concept or his material?

A completely different set of principles is evident in the restoration plan for Tony Cragg's 1982 work *One space, four places*. A team from the 'Conservation of Modern Art' project developed an original, though controversial approach in consultation with the artist. The piece is an installation which takes the form of four chairs and a table, constructed of scavenged materials attached to a metal frame. Some of the objects were in an advanced state of deterioration. Conservators were perplexed by how to approach restoration and decided that different courses of action should be taken depending on the fundamental artistic meaning of the work. On the one hand, if the essence of the work lies in formal qualities then, the damaged pieces should be replaced with pieces which are as similar to them as possible. (This course of action posed problems because materials were detritus from consumer society which had been fished out of the Rhine, including broken pieces of products no longer made and each bore distinctive markings.) If, on the other hand, what matters is the concept and not the exact material then more freedom in restoration choices would be allowed. It is this second approach that Cragg promoted.

The artist helped conservators develop a set of guidelines for maintenance of the work which elaborated general principles for choosing replacement parts such as 'never place two objects with the same color, or the same material or with the same shape or function next to each other'.[6] The idea was to apply these abstract principles in the choice of replacement parts rather than try to build replicas of the original components. This constitutes a radical approach to restoration and provoked debate since it would eventually lead to a transformation of the iconography of the work over time obliterating references to the 20th-century consumer society debris which were present in the original. The proposed solution to the problem of replacing deteriorating portions of the work did not take into account the symbolic meaning of the materials since this was not an aspect of the work which the artist deemed important.

The place of artists

The treatment of Tinguely's machines and Tony Cragg's installation introduces troubling debates about the place of artists in preservation of their work. What are the rights and responsibilities of artists in conservation decisions? Should the artists' wishes be respected even if they endanger the survival of the work? What is the relative importance of the artist's opinion in conservation decisions as compared to the views of owners, art experts and the public?

In many cases museums have preferred not to imitate the artist's restoration strategies because artists feel free to take liberties with their own works introducing modifications which compromise the historical value of the works as a record of artistic practice at an earlier moment in time. Elisabeth Bracht of the Stedelijk Museum discussed the dilemmas she confronted in her search for an alternative way to treat soiled paintings rather than allow color field painter Ellsworth Kelly to repaint his own works. In fact it is often not the artist, but the 'owners' of works - such as art historians and museums - who insist on the authenticity of the materials. One speaker gave the example of a Western conservator repairing an Asian wallpainting in a temple who was stopped from using a modern material which would have allowed the consolidation of the original. The monks in the temple refused to accept the use of non-sacred materials for religious art and preferred overpainting.

Art object versus artists' views

In current conservation practices described by speakers the weight given to artists' opinions is evaluated on a case by case basis. This is in part because artists have different

attitudes towards the meaning of materials for their work. Some are casual about materials and others are very tied to specific characteristics of the materials they use. Moreover, artists' attitudes to their works change over time and there can be great discrepancies between opinions expressed at the time the work is first created and later. As artists mature they generally become more concerned with the preservation of their work, and their tastes change too. In the opinion of curator Jaap Guldemond 'if you want a restoration of a work to reflect the work at the time it was made then don't ask the advice of the artist' at a later date, but instead consult interviews with the artist at the time of acquisition or better still when the work was first produced.

Some contemporary artists have opposed conservation of their works raising a fundamental question about artists' intentions: is it more important to protect the art object than to adhere to the artist's views? For museum professionals in most instances (when the work of art is not jeopardized) the artist is the ultimate authority but cases in which artists oppose restoration or preventive conservation pose particularly difficult ethical and legal dilemmas. Rules about the limits of artists' ability to exercise aesthetic control are changing. Artist's advocate Koen Limperg described recent legal decisions in Holland supporting architects' rights to enforce aesthetic standards and control subsequent modification of buildings they design. However, when the artists' desires conflict with the duty of collectors and museum professionals to protect cultural heritage, museum professionals stick to their mandate. Jean-Christophe Ammann, director of the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, observed that although some artists represented in his collection dislike seeing their drawings covered with plexiglass, he believes that it is necessary to protect works because 'the museum is the collective memory' and the future generations should have the chance to see art from this century.

Whose responsibility?

One of the ways in which contemporary artists endeavour to maintain control over their work is through written instructions, blueprints and other documentation governing the exhibition, fabrication and replication of their art. These instructions may constitute the work of art in some cases. Carol Stringari of the Guggenheim Museum explained that contemporary installations have engendered a wide range of new arrangements between artists and museums. For example, occasionally, for reasons of economy or due to the nature of the piece, works are entirely refabricated. When some of artist Bruce Naumann's works go on loan the museum sends blueprints and certificates of ownership to the borrowing institution. When the loan is over the installation is destroyed and the papers must be returned with a certificate of the destruction of the work. Similarly, as Christian Scheidemann observed, sculptor Donald Judd provided a statement with blueprints allowing for the reconstruction of some of his works under specified conditions.

Debates about the artist's place in conservation often bring up concerns about the professional responsibility of artists to produce enduring works, or at least help resolve problems in caring for their art after it is sold. Some artists (like Tinguely and Kelly) have taken an active role in the restoration of their art, actually performing the work themselves. However, as conservator Shelly Sturman of the National Gallery of Art in Washington found, other artists, like Frank Stella, believe that 'the artist's responsibility ends when it leaves the studio'. In a round-table discussion on co-operation between artists, curators and conservators the three artists present (Suchan Kinsoshita, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Carel Visser) all expressed hesitancy at being held responsible for the preservation of their works. As one curator explained 'conservation is about preserving the past and artists are interested in shaping the present and the future'.

Documentation, internal democracy and interdisciplinary cooperation

Increased participation of museum professionals in installation art and the special features of new art forms (like video art) have stimulated interest in developing coordinated systems of documentation for use in both conservation and display. Access to information about the original condition and meaning of the work is essential for future analyses of conservation options and for guiding later installation of complex works. Given the complex nature of contemporary artforms, conservators increasingly stress the importance of dated sound and video recordings in addition to written documentation. Several models for computer-based data registration systems were presented at the meeting, since efficient methods of storing and retrieving the data are vital if all the information collected is to be used. At the moment many museums share this information freely, although the Canadian Conservation Institute is now offering its expertise for sale. Jay Krueger, president of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, noted widespread interest in setting up a computerized information-sharing network for specialists in contemporary art conservation although legal issues in sharing privileged data from artists and materials manufacturers need attention.

How can all this data be used? Ysbrand Hummelen of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage outlined a decision-making model for the assessment of conservation options which takes into account the artist's opinion, aesthetic and artistic factors, authenticity, historicity, functionality, financial conditions, ethics, legal aspects and technical considerations.[7] Some participants felt the model presents an idealized notion of interdisciplinary cooperation which is undermined by the organizational frameworks in which conservation takes place. In practice most contemporary art museums are strongly hierarchical and it is doubtful whether the democratic ideals embodied in this model will rapidly find expression in most institutions where conservators are ranked below curators, and where directors or executive boards reign supreme.

Rudi Fuchs: 'never'

Jacqueline Burckhard, editor of Parkett magazine, asked a panel of five museum directors a series of tough questions about place of conservation issues and conservators: Rudi Fuchs of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Jean-Christophe Amman of the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Maria de Corral of the Fundaci 'La Caixa' in Barcelona, David Elliott of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Jaroslav Andel of the National Gallery in Prague. The directors expressed different aspects of their love-hate relationships with their conservators but perhaps the most succinct expression of the ultimate position of conservators was given by Rudi Fuchs. In answer to a question about how often he consulted conservators about the acquisition of new works he replied simply: 'never'. Nonetheless the very presence of the directors at the conference attests to the fact that many museums are beginning to take conservation issues seriously. Some museums have started to take conservation, storage and

exhibition costs into account when they purchase works, especially large-scale installations. At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art conservators hold an unprecedented degree of authority since they have veto power over new acquisitions and are expected to assess the practicality of maintaining and exhibiting proposed works in their museum environment.

Is it important now?

There were a few resistors to contemporary practices at the meeting, among them Frederik Leen, curator of the Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, who insisted that museums should not collect ephemeral works or enormously large installations. He even proposed that museums should not acquire works with a life span of less than 173 years. This was, according to Leen, a legally defensible definition of eternity based on a 1988 Belgian court decision to abolish the title to land rights given in 1815 to the Duke of Wellington 'for eternity'.

Most speakers at the symposium - conservators and curators alike - accepted the fragile nature of some contemporary art as a fact of life. They expressed the belief that aesthetic and art-historical factors should guide museum acquisitions and that conservators should continue to search for solutions, hopefully with the increased participation and understanding of artists, curators and other concerned experts. In the words of Piet de Jong the fundamental issue in art acquisition for curators is not 'how long will this work will last' but 'is this an important piece now?' And, given the evidence presented at this conference, they may rest assured that conservators will continue to search for ways to deal with impossibility of prolonging the present by making the passage of time seem slower and less visible.

* I wish to thank Mars Cramer for helpful suggestions on the draft of this paper.

Notes

1. Perhaps not coincidentally it was in this year that a well-publicized scandal involving the failed restoration of a Barnett Newman painting owned by the Stedelijk Museum alerted the public and politicians to the need for more research on the special problems of preserving recent art. The painting was slashed in 1986. It was sent New York-based restorer Daniel Goldreyer for repair only to be returned completely repainted in a manner which obliterated its art-historical value from the point of view of many art experts. Goldreyer returned it to the Stedelijk in 1991. The museum contested the treatment and refused to pay his $500,000 fee. Lawsuits were filed and a settlement was just reached this year with the city of Amsterdam paying Goldreyer Dfl.170 000 for his damaged reputation (about US$100 000), Source: National Gallery of Art (Washington) conservator Heather Galloway and Art and Auction, March 1997.
2. The international symposium on the conservation of modern art was organized by the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, and was held in Amsterdam, 8-10 September 1997. For all the modern art lovers who do care but could not get into the fully booked meeting, a publication of conference proceedings is promised for the spring of 1998.
3. The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) formed in April 1997, is part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and comes under the Cultural Heritage Department. It represents a combination of several previously existing institutions: the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science, the State Training School for conservators and the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts.
4. Anonymous. "The 'Conservation of Modern Art' Project", Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, August 1997, 8 pp. and interview with Marianne Brouwer, September 11, 1997.
5. Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art. 'Zichtbaar of onzichtbaar restaureren/visible or invisible restauration', n.d.
6. *One space, four places: analysis report*, Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, March 1997 and talk written by Jaap Guldemond, curator, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven and delivered by Christiana Bernedes on September 8, 1997 at the conference.
7. Anonymous. *Decision making model for the conservation and restoration of modern art*. Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, March, 1997.

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