“What is Important?”

Intersections Between the Conservation of Modern/Contemporary Art with Non-Western and Indigenous Heritage Objects

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**INTRODUCTION**

This project explores the overlap between the conservation of modern and contemporary art with non-Western and Indigenous heritage objects. These conservation subspecialties have been historically disparate, but both involve increased collaboration with the artist and source community and ask fundamental questions of what qualities we preserve and why. This project stemmed from an initial curiosity about artist interviews and expanded to include conservation’s assumptions and decision-making for treatments that fall within these subspecialties. To explore this, I conducted a review of the literature and interviewed experts. The following question guided my initial research: What is central to a cultural heritage object, the materiality or the conceptual intent behind it? Who decides, and what is the role of the conservator in these decisions?

However, my interviews yielded surprising results. I expected debate over a fundamental conflict, but instead nearly every interviewee asked, “what is important?” and expressed that this—whether physical or conceptual—was the essential element to preserve.[[1]](#footnote-1) Since my research question appeared to be less prevalent, this report focuses on how interactions with artists and communities have shifted conservators toward this opinion, how conservators negotiate these collaborations, and the overarching departures from traditional conservation methodology. Ultimately, these subspecialties focus on the human element, prioritizing a treatment’s impact on people in the present day.

**BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION OF RESEARCH QUESTION**

In recent decades, it has become accepted practice for conservators to consult the original maker on an object’s context and treatment. Typically, this process involves conservators at modern/contemporary institutions interviewing artists’ foundations, studio assistants, or the artists themselves, so much so that these skills have become foundational for modern/contemporary conservation. In parallel, conservators working with American Indigenous heritage objects (and more recently, with other non-Western cultures) will conduct consultations with leaders, craftspeople, and artists from the source community, often with the same goals. Consequentially, conservators working within one—or both—of these subspecialties have pointed out the overlap between them. The questions, goals, and methodologies are so similar that the overlap seems obvious. However, the traditional art historical canon that guides many museums has separated contemporary fine art from “ethnographic” objects, with the result that many museum professionals, which until this project included myself, would not expect these similarities.

This project became inevitably self-reflexive about conservation as a field. My initial working question explored the conservator’s assumed neutrality in these conversations and shifted toward a conservator’s decision-making as I learned more. We see our role as impartial stewards of cultural heritage, with no goals other than the preservation of the work for future generations. However, conservators abide by a set of professional ethics that carry their own conventions, assumptions, and goals, all of which fit within the Western mold of museums. The more I researched, the more I realized that conservation’s inherent goal of halting change to a physical object may be undesirable to the original maker, or culturally incorrect. By opening the conservation lab up to more voices, we are finding that one of the field’s fundamental operating principles is, at minimum, a self-imposed bias.

Modern/contemporary art and Indigenous and non-Western cultural heritage often have fundamentally different ideas around preservation that relate to the intangible nature of the piece. This intangible meaning complicates conservation, which has been focused on the materiality of the object. For example, artists create intentionally ephemeral artwork, an Indigenous community’s traditions may require that an object is allowed to degrade, and installations fundamentally change with each exhibition. These objects often bring an inherent tension between the physical, material importance of the object and the intangible importance, whether cultural or conceptual. In more and more cases, preserving the intangible significance of the piece goes against the preservation of the original material. To me, this conflict is at the heart of other ethical questions that arise in these subspecialties. What is the ethical response when the artist’s wishes, source community priorities, or stakeholders’ goals conflict with traditional conservation ethics? Does the value lie in the tangible or the intangible, and why? Perhaps most importantly, who assigns that value?

**INTERVIEWS**

**INTERVIEW PROCESS**

I interviewed four objects conservators who have worked in one or both of these subspecialties and published on these topics.. I hoped that my interviews would help me answer my initial question; should we preserve the material or the conceptual significance of an object, and what is the conservator’s role in this decision making? As it is a such an undefined idea, I was concerned that asking this question directly would yield equally undefined answers. I decided to ask questions that encompassed related concepts, hoping that specific discussion would avoid canned “it depends” responses and focus instead on *what* it depends on.

I asked about the background and interests of my interviewee, how they saw the conservation field reacting to these ideas, their strategies for conducting artist interviews and consultations, and their treatment decision-making process (see Appendix I for the list of specific questions). For the sake of time, I chose not to create transcripts of these hour-long conversations, although I did record the interviews with Kelly McHugh, Stephanie Hornbeck and Steven O’Banion**.[[2]](#footnote-2)** I also spoke with Gwynne Ryan, former Head of Conservation at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC and Program Committee Member for VoCA. While our conversation is not included as a formal interview, Gwynne’s perspective certainly influenced this paper, and I’ve cited her where appropriate. More often than not the interviews became free-flowing discussions, as my interviewees answered one question while addressing another or brought up related ideas.

As necessary, I drew upon three case studies from the literature that illustrated my research question and which I could use as examples in the interviews. These included the treatment of the cedar bark on a Kwakwaka’waka Hamsamt Mask, the installation *Always Becoming* (created 2007)by contemporary artist Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo), and the treatment and discussion around *Expanded Expansion* (1969) by Eva Hesse (descriptions of these case studies may be found in Appendix II). However, I found that these case studies were more helpful in guiding my own thinking rather than those of my interviewees, who were already well versed in the dilemmas these treatments exemplified.

All quotations given below are from the interviewees unless otherwise noted.

**SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS**

**Dr. Nancy Odegaard** *Conservator and Head of Preservation at the Arizona State Museum, Tucson AZ*

November 20, 2019 (in person interview)

Dr. Nancy Odegaard has been at the forefront of consultations and collaboration with Indigenous communities since her 1995 article introducing the topic.[[3]](#footnote-3) She holds a Ph.D. in Conservation from University of Canberra in Australia and an M.A. in Museum Studies; Anthropological Conservation from George Washington University. Nancy has done extensive work with non-Western collections and pesticide removal in cultural heritage objects, and her PhD thesis examined decision making in conservation treatments in relation to the intangible qualities of Indigenous objects. I selected Nancy because her work has been foundation to this entire question and has pioneered much of the work done in community consultations. Because she has been so influential for so long, and I hoped she would have an interesting perspective on changes to the field that she observed over her career. Lastly, Nancy is known as a great educator and mentor and was visiting the Winterthur labs for a workshop so the interview could take place in person.

Nancy repeatedly returned to several overall points during our discussion. Her statements built on the assertion that a conversation with the caretakers or creators of an objects was an essential part of an ethical treatment, because it was only then that conservators could determine “what was the important part” of an object. She was comfortable with replacing elements or leaving what conservators might term “damage” or “degradation” (flaking paint, signs of wear, etcetera) if it did not go against the cultural importance for the community. In this way, Nancy prioritized the intangible importance of an object over the original material, provided she knew the right questions to ask to receive the relevant information, and from the correct party. In these conversations, she sees the conservator as a facilitator, and believes these consultations offer the chance to bring people together while providing essential information for treatment. She iterated that while conservators understand the degradation of the material, “we often know what we *could* do, but not what we *should* do”. Consequentially, conservators risk gearing treatments to their own aesthetics or assumptions and saying “we were looking for an aesthetic solution and it wasn’t an aesthetic problem”.

As I hoped, Nancy was able to speak to changes in the conservation field. When she first presented her paper on artist intent at the Arizona State Museum in 1995, she received two reactions. Conservators working on non-Western objects were in resounding agreement, while those that did not ranged from confusion to outright antagonism. While she sees significant changes over the past few decades, she felt that the museum field at large becomes nervous when institutions open their metaphorical doors and remove some of their cultural authority, citing the recent debate over ICOM’s definition of a museum.[[4]](#footnote-4) This shift has conservators anxious as well, most notably when the most appropriate person to complete a treatment is not a conservator, such as treatments performed by an artist’s fabricator or community member.

**Kelly McHugh** *Supervisory Collections Manager and Objects Conservator at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Washington DC*

December 2, 2019 (Interview via phone)

Kelly received her MA in Art History with a Certificate in Conservation from New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, and has worked at NMAI since 1996. Pre-program, she worked extensively with living artists at the National Gallery. She has played an active role in developing the collaborative conservation practices that NMAI is known for, specifically consultations and artist interviews. Since NMAI houses both traditional cultural heritage objects and contemporary studio art, Kelly’s expertise covers both subspecialties and I hoped she could speak to the commonalities and potential differences she sees with each area, especially as she has published extensively on the topic.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, Kelly entered conservation when consultations were becoming more common, and therefore brings a more recent perspective of the field.

Kelly described how her pre-program experience interviewing contemporary artists influenced her current role at NMAI. Both positions involved a great deal of self-interrogation and assessment of her role as a conservator. Specifically, she shared how making assumptions about the treatment, goals, or intent of a piece was never helpful, and in fact nearly always harmful. She saw the conservator as a facilitator in these consultations, whose pertinent skills included problem solving and creative solutions for treatment issues. Kelly often felt that the materiality of an object helped forge a bond with makers and described several experiences where she and an artist would “geek out” over an old repair or technique. Their shared excitement over the materials created a unique connection with artists or makers that her other museum colleagues did not share.

Kelly explained how these collaborative projects changed the way she approached conservation treatments. She was especially enthused to discuss my question about degradation (given in Appendix I), and referenced *Always Becoming,* which I utilized as a case study for this project. *Always Becoming* is an intentionally ephemeral sculpture, and its degradation means it is “performing the way the artist intended” rather than accruing damage. In discussing *Always Becoming*, Kelly essentially answered my research question, stating “I think a lot about what it is we’re preserving…Because the actual thing is not what’s important. It’s what it inspires, what it transmits, what its function is.” To illustrate, she shared a conversation with Yup’ik artists and scholar Chuna McIntyre regarding a Yup’ik mask that was missing a spirit hand and exhibited chipping pant. Kelly paraphrased Chuna, who explained that the missing hand was a crucial element for the function and integrity of the object and should therefore be replicated. Chuna asked “Can you run your car with flaking paint? But can you run your car without a carburetor? The spirit hand is like the carburetor.”

Finally, our conversation made me wonder about documentation, and Kelly shared how important documenting our rationale for treatment is crucial during these treatments. To her, this was an enormous point of overlap between her work at NMAI and the National Gallery, and she shared how she and Gwynne Ryan have discussed their same questions in treatments.

**Steven O’Banion** *Director of Conservation at Glenstone in Maryland, Program Committee Member for Voices of Contemporary Art (VoCA)*

December 19, 2019 (via phone)

A graduate of the WUDPAC program, Steven’s experience has focused on modern and contemporary art, with early experience at MOMA and Tate. He developed the artist interview program at the Hirshhorn with Gwynne Ryan. Steven has led VoCA’s artist interview workshops for many years, and his current work at Glenstone is extremely focused on artist collaboration. I hoped he could provide a uniquely contemporary art perspective and share his observations on how conservation has changed regarding artist interviews.

Steven brought fascinating observations about collaborating with living artists through his work in VoCA and Glenstone. He works closely with artists, studio assistants or fabricators, and curators, such that conservation is only one voice among several and treatment decisions are very much a dialogue. Consequentially, I was very interested to hear about how decisions were made at Glenstone and how Steven sees his role. He shared how conservators will represent the museum and mediate between interested parties, “advocate for the artist”, and that much of what a contemporary art conservator does is “mediates between different groups of people” and documenting the decision and execution of a treatment. More often than not, the treatment might be done by a fabricator or the artist rather than by the conservator, since they will have the appropriate tools or expertise. In this way, conservation at Glenstone is very focused on the intangible meaning of the piece and the artist’s vision.

Artist interviews are a large part of this process, central to the institution’s goals and mission. Steven said that his approach is to listen carefully, so the artist freely shares their point of view. The conservator’s view comes out in the treatment proposal, and then all parties can negotiate as necessary. When I asked about who has the final say in a treatment, Steven explained that a consensus must be reached—no one voice can dominate the others. He is a big proponent for artist interviews but reminded me to use a “critical eye” when using them to inform treatment, since they are often edited for archiving or publishing. He stated “artists are dynamic human beings” and will contradict themselves or simply “make stuff up”, a perspective I did not here from conservators working in Indigenous heritage. When conducting an artist interview, he advocated asking questions that brought up topics which conservators could not answer through analysis or examination, rather the artist’s “attitude and context…[those answers] are the most valuable nuggets to pull out of an interview”. These referred to intangible qualities of a piece, such as how site-specific installations may or may not be altered, or what is the essential elements of an installation. This oral history approach is preserved in the documentation practices at Glenstone, where email correspondence, interviews, and the thought process is all recorded and saved.

Steven saw some changes in the conservation field over his involvement with the VoCA artist interview workshops. He believes that interviews have become more common, but more importantly, he has seen a shift in the approach that conservators take over the past seven to eight years. Participants used to approach the workshop seeking a formula or standard lists of questions to ask artists, which is not the goal of the workshop or interview. However, now they arrive with more far-reaching goals in mind around oral history, how to use interviews, and how to build relationships with artists. Lastly, he sees “hot topics” arise in the field—be it plastics, time-based media, or most recently performance art—that conservators are most concerned with.

**Stephanie Hornbeck** *Chief Conservator at the Field Museum in Chicago, IL*

December 18, 2019 (via phone)

Stephanie received her pre-program training at the Guggenheim museum and graduated from the NYU IFA conservation graduate program. She served as the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art from 1998-2009 and ran a private practice in Miami between 2010-2017 where she worked on a range of projects including modern/contemporary art. She directed the Smithsonian’s Haiti Cultural Recovery Project between 2010-2016 and has been at the Field Museum since 2017. Stephanie has published some exceptional articles on the overlap between African art and modern/contemporary art, illustrating ethical dilemmas with concrete case studies. This made her an ideal candidate for this topic. Additionally, her publications demonstrate a framework and clear rationale for treatment decisions, and I hoped she could elaborate on this approach during our conversation.

Stephanie shared her personal approach to treatments, which was minimally interventive and focused on stabilization of the physical object. She applied this approach equally to both non-Western heritage objects and modern/contemporary art, which set her apart from the other conservators I spoke with. In her view, dramatically interventive treatments are “deeply concerning”, in that they often depart from tradition conservation practices. She pointed out how this is more common with contemporary art, but as time marches on the definition of “contemporary” expands, and this widening definition remained unexamined within the conservation field. We discussed several treatments with this in mind, one on a Sol de Witt sculpture where she opted for a minimal repair where the artist would have allowed a something more interventive, and another that involved the complete replacement of pigment, also sanctioned by the artist.[[6]](#footnote-6) These examples exemplified her point that each treatment is, as always, case by case. Decisions depended on the institution or age of the piece and the conservator’s personal approach.

To Stephanie, the condition of the object dictated how she approached collaboration. That is, she did not think she would consult with a community for a minimal treatment (such as vacuuming museum dust) or a stabilization that utilized minimal or easily reversible materials. However, for more aesthetic treatments or questions of technique, she would reach out to curators, makers, or the source community. She reiterated these roles when we discussed which stakeholder decides the treatment step – conservators, with their expertise in materials and aging properties should make decision regarding stabilization, while makers and curators should decide aesthetics or reanimation. While the artist’s feedback is certainly valuable, she believes that “the conservator’s goals are different than the artist’s goals”, so conservators are not beholden to the treatment suggested by the artist and should be the ones creating repairs.

Stephanie sees artist and community interviews becoming more standard practice in the last decade, and the conservation field becoming more transparent. In particular, conservators tend to share their point of view with other stakeholders. She gave an example of documentation at the Field Museum, where they are “approaching documentation in a much more expansive way” for community consultations. The conservation lab takes extensive notes and photographs during consultations and shares their notes from community consultations to the consultants, asking for edits and feedback. This collaborative document then becomes part of the treatment documentation. They are considering more expansive documentation methods, such as video, but Stephanie emphasized that the rationale, thought process, and decision making was at the crucial aspect. Finally, Stephanie felt that documentation of the object and context could provide information on the intangible qualities.

**DISCUSSION**

Two guiding assumptions emerged during these interviews which seem to be shared between these subspecialties, and which differed from traditional conservation. First, the conservators I spoke with did not see the objects in their care as static. Instead of unchanging examples of history or artistic expression, they framed the objects as active, changing with use, or still evolving in concept and meaning. Secondly, my interviewees agreed that the conservator’s expertise lies in materials and documentation, but adamantly denied knowledge of cultural context, intangible meaning, or “what was important”[[7]](#footnote-7) about an object, saying that this information could only be obtained from the artist or source community. These assumptions are markedly different than other conservation specialties where preservation means on halting an object in its existing state and the conservator’s own aesthetic and historical knowledge will contribute to the treatment. I attribute these changes to interactions with artists and communities, which both gave rise to these assumptions and guided the conservators’ approach to treatment and further collaboration.

Between the treatment examples they provided and their assertations that “what was important” might be something separate from the original physicality, I understood that my interviewees felt the essential part of a cultural heritage object might be its intangible qualities, and they were comfortable replacing or changing an object to preserve them. However, two factors seemed required for this comfort. First, the artist’s and communities had to either suggest or sanction the choice, and second, each choice had to be backed up by extensive documentation of the rationale behind the decision.

**THE CONSERVATOR’S NEUTRALITY AND EXPERTISE**

While conservators are comfortable learning “what is important” from outside voices, the personal views of conservators still had a decided impact on what and how a treatment would take place. However, the conservators I spoke with assumed they held a certain neutrality in artist interviews. Several described themselves as the “facilitators” of the discussion, which I understood to imply they felt they held no stake and were there to problem solve others’ decisions. Steven explained how the conservator represents the museums, a stakeholder if there ever was one, and Stephanie Hornbeck’s personal ethos of minimal intervention meant she advocated for minimal treatment. Stephanie Hornbeck stated that she was the wrong conservator to perform an invasive treatment even if it was sanctioned by the artist. Nancy Odegaard, on the other hand, implied her priority was the source community, and seemed willing to perform either invasive or non-invasive treatment as long as it was desired by the source community. I left with the impression that an object might receive very different treatment in the hands of each conservator. While neither approach is necessarily better or more ethical than the other, this demonstrates how a conservator’s personal opinions are a contributing factor and belies our attempted. Gwynne Ryan clearly expressed her own bias and influence artists. She discussed how she slowly realized continuing collaboration made her almost an “author” of an artwork as her work to preserve the piece actually altered the artist’s choice in materials, installation location, and other crucial factors.[[8]](#footnote-8) Later in her career, she tried to avoid this influence and worked to shift her involvement to “documentarian”. No other interviewee discussed their own bias so explicitly.

It is possible that the assumption of the conservator’s neutrality comes from our innate lack of context in these subspecialties. In traditional conservation of, for example, decorative arts, the conservator might bring contextual knowledge and aesthetic conventions of the field to the treatment. However, traditional conventions do not apply to these subspecialties, especially if the essential quality of the object is culturally or conceptually based. My interviewees relinquished nearly all connoisseurship or aesthetic-based decision making and sounded comfortable assuming no knowledge of “what is important” about an artwork. Conservators seem to be deciding they are not the experts; hence the artist interview should provide the guiding information on treatments. Nancy in particular pointed out that the conservator needed to know *what* the important aspect of an object was*,* and more importantly, *why* in order to properly execute a treatment. Several interviewees wanted to reach out to the source makers for everything, and Steven’s work at Glenstone makes the artist interview routine.

Materials knowledge and documentation fell squarely within the conservator’s purview. Kelly and Steven both cited materials knowledge as a unique point of connection conservators have with makers. More significantly, documentation became a common refrain and central point of conservation of modern/contemporary art and non-Western heritage objects.

**DOCUMENTATION**

Documentation plays a key role in both of these sub-specialties; conservators question their documentation procedures while relying on it heavily to answer ethical questions. Traditional conservation documentation methods have proven inadequate at capturing the relationships, conversations, and opinions that affect a community collaboration, not to mention issues of format, access, and storage. Most importantly, documentation in itself acts as a form a preservation and is seen as a solution for preserving either the physical material or the intangible meaning of a piece. For example, Steven saw no ethical problems in replacing an element with communication from the artist, thorough before treatment records, and retaining the original element. Here, their documentation preserved information about the tangible elements, and the original element itself was retained as both a record and for future use. In an opposite approach, Stephanie Hornbeck maintained the emphasis on documentation to preserve the intangible importance through photographs, interviews, and record keeping. I observed both attitudes in the literature as well, as if documentation can preserve whatever a treatment might add or remove. It began to feel like a “magic bullet” for ethical dilemmas, where any decision can be sanctioned with thorough enough recordings.

This is not to say that I disagree with this approach. Documentation is an invaluable tool which conservators bring to the table, and I admire the conservators addressing its limitations and pushing its boundaries. However, I wonder if conservation’s reliance on documentation is siloed. If we are using it to effectively preserve the essential qualities on an art object, then the paper report or MP4 recording becomes nearly as important as the piece itself. However, documentation is by and for other museum professionals, and I wonder if and how it is shared with viewers and makers. I would be curious to hear from artists and source communities on this topic; I wonder if they find it as helpful and important as museum professionals treat it.

My interviewees shared how auto ethnographic and collaborative the documentation must be for these two sub-specialties, which goes a long way to solving this problem. Ironically, documentation almost stands in for treatment and decisions. Stephanie Hornbeck and I discussed this idea regarding the case study on *Expanded Expansion*by Eva Hesse. The conservation problems caused by its deterioration, ethical dilemmas regarding artist intent, and options for treatment, replication, and exhibition have been exhaustively discussed at conferences and publications. These discussions have been recorded, shared, and reflected upon, and yet the sculpture remains in storage, almost as if in documenting the conversation we have treated the sculpture.

**THE IMPACT OF THE INSTITUTION**

While artist interviews demonstrate a marked shift toward openness and transparency within conservation, our field is still structured around museums. An institution’s resources, internal structure, and mission statement has an enormous impact on the treatment of an object and whether or not consultations can be conducted at all. Gwynne Ryan believes she had the opportunity to build the artist interview program at the Hirshhorn largely due to institutional goals and organizational structure. Stephanie Hornbeck noted the necessity of compromise in an institution as opposed to private practice, where a conservator can simply choose to not take a job. NMAI and Glenstone exemplify how this affects treatment. Kelly McHugh explained that NMAI’s mission meant that all treatments were guided by the cultural relevancy for the original community, and Steven O’Banion expressed Glenstone’s prioritization of the artist’s vision. Consequentially, objects in these collections may be used, replaced, or maintained according to another set of values besides traditional preservation. Because the mission statements of both institutions require collaboration with the makers, the treatment decision will be made as a consensus with stakeholders beyond conservator and curator.

**WHO IS PRESERVATION FOR?**

The audience of treatment and the timeline conservators worked with was another overarching theme I gleaned from the literature and interviews. As Kelly McHugh put it, “people matter in these decisions”, and each conservator was acutely aware of the personal stake in their work. However, I noticed a difference regarding which people they were thinking of. Interviewees focusing in Indigenous heritage material were concerned with present community members and, by extension, past family members or ancestors. Conservation of these art and artifacts were layered with political histories, cultural traditions, lineages of makers, and a myriad of other meanings that were all considered in the present consultation. However, ultimately Kelly McHugh and Nancy Odegaard seemed the most focused on the benefits to the living communities who live with, make, and love these objects. They expressed this responsibility with excitement and reverence, and I understood it as the most meaningful part of their work.

Conservators such as Gwynne Ryan and Steven O’Banion who work within the context of fine arts also approached their treatment in the present, but with an eye toward posterity and future viewers. The artist and artistic vision are paramount in their day-to-day work, but all the documentation and interviews had an eye toward future viewers, future interpretations, and future conservators. Contemporary art conservation sounded based in the present in order to inform the future. Gwynn Ryan stated this the most clearly, saying how she saw all contemporary art as “in its infancy” and “evolving” until the artist has finished installing, exhibit, reworking, or thinking about the piece. After some time, the piece becomes codified, its meaning static. [[9]](#footnote-9) Just as with the conservators of Indigenous heritage material, this was the most meaningful and fascinating aspect of contemporary art conservation, and why they loved the subspecialty.

**CONCLUSION**

My initial research question assumed an intrinsic conflict between the physical object and the intangible concept behind it. However, these subspecialties have a fundamentally different view of objects in their care. Traditional conservation assumes objects are in statis, and any preservation halts an object in a moment in time. Artist interviews and collaboration have turned this assumption on its head; and object’s meaning changes over time or actively functions within a culture. By and large, the conservators I spoke with took this approach without question, readily shifted their practices to preserve whatever aspect of an object the community deemed essential.

Of course, conservation is still rooted traditional methods of documentation and museum conventions, and personal ethos means we can never be a completely neutral party. The institution may be the deciding factor in a treatment, since the conservator is often one among several voices and the museum’s mission and resources will determine if collaboration is even possible. However, community consultations and artist interviews have opened the conservation field, and conservators are slowly relinquishing the power to decide the fundamental question of “what is important”. To me, this is the most significant area of overlap between these subspecialties. Both challenge the ingrained traditions of a young field and shift our focus to the present day and the people who made the objects in our care.

**APPENDIX I: Questions for Interviewees**

How did you become interested in contemporary art/Indigenous heritage material/or the overlap between them?

What made you start thinking about these issues?

Was there a particular position or treatment that brought them to your attention?

What was the field of conservation like when you started thinking about these things?

Do you see the conservation field changing around these issues? In what way?

What is your thought process when you approach an artwork or object that brings up these questions? Do you have a mental framework you use to approach the treatment, or goals you find helpful?

How do you explain your goals to someone who may not have a background in conservation—say a source community, artist foundation, or curator.

What helps you navigate that conversation?

Do you have any further thoughts?

How do you see your role/the conservator’s role in these discussions?

When do you choose to reach out to the source community/artist/artist’s foundation? When do you choose not to?

Has thinking about these ideas changed your approach to documentation? How?

*(Question added 12/2/19 while interviewing Kelly McHugh*)

Is there anything else you would like to discuss, or anything you feel I have missed?

**APPENDIX II: Case Studies**

1. Renewal of the cedar bark on a Kwakwaka’waka Hamsamt Mask for exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). This treatment included the reproduction of the cedar bark elements by Kevin Cranmer, a Kwakwaka’waka artist, in consultation with Cranmer and Kwakwaka’waka representatives. The goal of the treatment was for the mask to appear as if it was about to dance to convey its active role in Kwakwaka’waka culture.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This case study dealt with Indigenous heritage material specifically, reproduction, and use.

1. The site-specific installation *Always Becoming*by Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) at NMAI. *Always Becoming* is an ephemeral outdoor installation of ceramic and other materials meant to degrade and change over time, which the artist sees as the “continuous creation of the piece”, rather than degradation. Nora Noranjo-Morse is Santa Clara Pueblo, and the piece was inspired by the tradition of Pueblo ceramics “returning to the earth”.

This case study encompassed both Indigenous heritage material and contemporary art. Noranjo-Morse is an active artist and part of the Santa Clara Pueblo community, and this artwork is inspired by the traditions of the Pueblo. NMAI has an artist interview process that assumes the static aspects of the work, which will not make sense for *Always Becoming****.*** This case study deals with deterioration and objects with known, finite timelines.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. *Expanded Expansion* (1969) by Eva Hesse. This case study could have encompassed all of Hesse’s work, and her opus is well known in conservation as the artist expected her materials to degrade and change, yet the conservation of her sculptures poses ethical questions for conservators. *Expanded Expansion* is a favorite example. The piece is comprised of a series of vertical pillars connected by draped latex-covered fabric. The poles are mobile and can be installed in many configurations, altering the drape and exhibition. Hesse enjoyed how the piece changed with each exhibition.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This case study dealt specifically with modern/contemporary art, and drew upon issues of artist intent, expected and accepted deterioration, and reproduction.

1. This view was directly or indirectly expressed by all interviewees with the exception of Stephanie Hornbeck who clearly prioritized the original material of an object, a viewpoint expressed in her publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The interview with Nancy Odegaard took place in a busy restaurant over dinner and was therefore was not recorded. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Odegaard, Nancy. 1995. “Artists’ Intent: Material Culture Studies and Conservation.” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 34: 187-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to the ICOM website, “museums have radically transformed…to the point where the ICOM museum definition no longer seems to reflect the challenges and manifold visions and responsibilities” and solicited a new definition from its membership. The new definition is far more democratic and transparent, and received pushback for catering to current politics. The full definitions and debate may be found at: International Council for Museums: Museum Definition. “Created a new museum definition- he backbone of ICOM”. https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/. Accessed December 15, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McHugh, Kelly and Ann Gunnison. 2016. "Finding Common Ground and Inherent Differences: Artist and Community Engagement in Cultural Material and Contemporary Art Conservation." Studies in Conservation, 61 (sup2): 126-129.

Naranjo-Morse, Nora, Gail Joice, and Kelly McHugh. 2012. "Always Becoming." Object Specialty Group Postprints. Washington, DC: American Institute for Conservation, 19:147-157 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Both treatments are described in Stephanie’s publications, including Hornbeck, Stephanie. 2009. A Conservation Conundrum: Ephemeral Art at the National Museum of African Art. *African Arts*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Ephemeral Arts 1: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center. 52-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The phrase “what is important” was used by Steven O’Banion, Nancy Odegaard, and Kelly McHugh. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gwynne Ryan. December 20, 2019. Personal communication. Winterthur Museum and Gardens, Wilmington, DE. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gwynne suggested several examples of “some time”, including after the artist has passed away or once the artwork has become important enough to take on a life of its own. Interestingly, she also observed that after fifty years everything becomes “vintage”, and she saw the meaning and expression of art objects codifying after this time frame as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kaminitz, Marina Andrew, Barbara S. Mogel, Barbara Cranmer, Jessica Johnson, Kevin Cranmer, and Thomas V. Hill. 2007. “Renewal of a Kwakwaka’wakw Hamsamt Mask: Community Direction and Collaboration for the Treatment of Cultural Heritage at the National Museum of the American Indian-A Panel Presentation” *Persevering Aboriginal Heritage: Technical and Traditional Approaches: Proceedings of Symposium 2007*. Canadian Conservation Institute. 75-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Naranjo-Morse, Nora, Gail Joice, and Kelly McHugh. 2012. "Always Becoming." Object Specialty Group Postprints. Washington, DC: American Institute for Conservation, 19:147-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*.” September 20, 2012. Getty Conservation Institute. Panel discussion at "The Object in Transition: A Cross Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art”, Los Angeles, CA. Panel discussion including Michelle Barger, Deputy Head of Conservation, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Carol Stringari, Chief Conservator, Guggenheim Museum; Elisabeth Sussman, Curator, and Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography, Whitney Museum of American Art. Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHlb999NEB4>, December 10, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)