Towards a relational ontology of conservation

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Abstract

This article argues for a relational and situated ontology of conservation. It regards conservation as a practice that is influenced and communicated through ongoing relationships between people, nature, objects and technology. Drawing on a framework of *agential realism*, the paper proposes a new way of looking at conservation, conservation objects and conservation ethics. Conservation is presented as a set of activities that inherently impact the ways artworks manifest themselves. These activities are characterised by ways of seeing that encompass exclusions and inclusions. Conservation is then framed as an exclusionary process that creates, reifies or consolidates a given way of seeing artworks. The ontology proposed herein argues for an ethical accountability that addresses conservation's relation to human and non-human activities. Ethics in conservation is then proposed as a conservator's *response-ability*, or the capacity to acknowledge the conservator's own situatedness, the agency of others and the exclusions made in the conservation process.

Keywords: conservation, relational, ontology, new materialism, agential realism

Introduction

In what ways does conservation practice change through its interaction with the artworks as well as people, nature and contexts? This article draws on the processes involved in conserving performance-based artworks at Tate to develop an argument for a relational co-determination of conservation, people, nature and artworks.

In recent years, conservators across different fields of activity have partaken in developing a theoretical approach to the nature of conservation practice, one that recognises conservation both as a social construct (Clavir 1994 and 2009, Avrami 2009) and as a technique (Hölling 2017). Recent studies on the roles of people, nature and technology, i.e. of human and non-human actors, in changing artworks have highlighted the lifecycle of artworks inside and outside the museum (e.g. van de Vall et al. 2011, Wharton 2015). One of the main arguments emerging from these studies is that change does not simply happen to artworks; rather, it is a product of the relations of many agents that impact artworks in various ways and in different moments in their 'trajectory' (van de Vall et al. 2011).[1] Artworks' materiality can then be framed as a product of the relations among the many agents that are in some way involved with the artwork at any given time. This approach consolidates the idea that conservation is neither neutral nor objective. To quote the conservator and theorist Hanna Hölling, it is possible to say that conservation has evolved past the idea of 'prolong[ing] its objects' material lives into the future' and that the field 'is now also seen as an engagement with materiality, rather than material—that is, engagement with the many specific factors that determine how objects' identity and meaning are entangled with the aspects of time and space, the environment, ruling values, politics, economy, conventions, and culture' (Hölling 2017,

89). Connecting conservation activities with the materiality of the artworks and objects leads to a wider recognition of the context in which conservation takes place and therefore the actions that make some materialities more explicit than others.

The importance of the museum ecosystem, its policies and procedures and the knowledge cultures that underpin conservation practice was at the core of the development of research projects such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA) (2016–2019), led by Maastricht University, The Netherlands, and the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum (2018–2021), led by Tate, London. Both projects are strongly influenced by the perspectives of the social sciences on 'practice theory', which reflect the dynamic relationship between humans and structures in the creation of social worlds.[2]

Another aspect linking these two projects is their focus on contemporary artworks, ranging from more 'traditional media' such as paintings to time-based media and performance art. The changing nature of these latter categories is particularly useful when studying not only how conservation activities adapt to new forms of artistic creation, but also how changes in the understanding of conservation impact the way we address the possible futures of artworks. Artworks characterised by performative behaviours can therefore lead to a rethinking of not only what conservation is and what it can become – and thus its ontology – but also the ethical ramifications of a particular way of practising conservation and its impact in the world (see Marçal 2019).

Focussing on practices, entanglements and interactions, this article explores the nature of both conservation and performance artworks in a museum setting. The next section summarises the main ideas underpinning this approach, which is based on a new materialist epistemology[3] called *agential realism* (Barad 2003, 2007). Artworks from Tate's collection help to illustrate how the relations of museum, conservation and performance give rise to a permanent process of relational unfolding.

Living in a material world

Using studies in quantum physics (specifically, those of Nils Bohr) and post-structuralist theories (Michel Foucault and Judith Butler), as well as Donna Haraway's feminist-influenced studies (especially her ideas around 'situated knowledges'; see Haraway 1988), the feminist scholar and physicist Karen Barad proposed a framework for how physical relationships materialise in the world, which she called agential realism.

Barad argued for an ongoing relation among matter, discourses and agents, putting forward a theory that not only recognises matter as an ongoing process (a verb, rather than a noun) but which also implies that the nature of phenomena, whether artworks, objects, museums, nature or people, is materialised through relational, inseparable connections. With a radical understanding of the relationships that make up the world, Barad argues for a 'relational ontology' (Barad 2003, 812) that posits an ongoing *intra*-relation between phenomenon and observer. For example, Barad develops an argument for the use of the prefix *intra* in referring to relationships, while *inter-action*, with the prefix *inter-*, refers necessarily to two distinct entities that undertake an action together. At a given moment, *intra*-actions imply that those

entities are never distinct nor separated nor even pre-existing; thus, actions and agents not only relate to each other but indeed exist through these relational processes. The following sections refer to aspects that emerge from this relational ontology and contemplate how to facilitate a transformative ethical reconfiguration of conservation activities.

On intra-actions

Looking at artworks in this context, in terms of analysing how they are materialised through their relationships, implies acknowledging and studying both those who intra-act with artworks and their agencies.

Agency can be understood as the explicit and implicit practices of agents that have consequences for the way things are seen, and for the way things are or can be. Agency is therefore the capacity to do something that has consequences in a given context. This is an important notion in understanding that the connection between people and non-human agents (objects, nature, technology and infrastructures) impacts how reality is perceived and acted upon. New materialist scholars recognise non-human agency as being on the same level as human agency, and these perspectives are relevant for object-led practices such as conservation.

The conservation of Mark Rothko's painting *Black on Maroon* (1958) serves as an example. Both the agency of the conservator and that of other people who might influence the artwork's biography, for example the artist, curators and public, need to be considered (Figure 1). The agency of a member of the public was particularly visible when a visitor graffitied the painting with black ink on 7 October 2012.[4] The ink is a non-human agent, and its characteristics (solubility, type of pigment, etc.) influenced the conservation treatment. The artist's interaction with the materials that ultimately resulted in the painting we now recognise as *Black on Maroon* also influenced the course of action (Barker and Ormsby 2015). The interaction between ink, painting (and all its constituents), conservators and their tools and contexts, conservation scientists and their instruments, the museum's structure and procedures, among other agents, is what made the conservation treatment happen; in other words, agency is performed through intra-actions.

Non-human agencies also influence the ongoing materialisation of artworks that, at first glance, seem to be solely dependent on human actions. The performance artwork *Balance of Power*, created by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla in 2007, for example, consists on an action performed by three people. Dressed in military uniforms, the three performers carry out yoga warrior poses, shifting from one warrior pose to another every 30 to 45 seconds (Figure 2). While partaking in this highly demanding physical activity, the performers must be aware not only of one another in the space, but also in the timing of the performance. Several non-human agents impact their activity, from the clothes they are wearing to the environmental conditions and even the devices used to temporally coordinate the performance. In the last activation of the piece at Tate Modern (2019), for example, performers used a smartphone app that allowed the phone to vibrate every 35 seconds, notifying the performers that it was time to change poses. The ease of receiving a notification was balanced by the struggles in synchronising the app across the three performers and the ability to feel the vibration during the performance.

Another example of the impact of non-human agents in the making of artworks is provided by the work *A Life (Black and White)* (1998–ongoing), created by Nedko Solakov. The performance work consists of an ongoing process of painting walls in a gallery space (Figure 3). The artwork requires a set of conditions for its activation: it needs to happen in a passage between two spaces, it must encompass continuous painting and repainting of the walls and has to be placed inside the gallery space. The water-based paint used to perform this work, of course, will intra-act with both the people who visit the gallery and the artworks that inhabit the spaces adjacent to the performance. The intra-actions between paint and artworks, the risk of paint within a gallery environment, influences the materialisation of the performance; to put it simply, the how, where and when of the performance. The notion of intra-action has repercussions in the way matter is understood: Solakov's artwork can be seen as a performance work, a conservation risk and some conjunction of these two categories. But do these ways of seeing impact conservation actions?

Agential cuts

One natural consequence of considering the world as a product of intra-actions is the understanding that every act of knowing transforms both the knower and the known. This way of seeing knowledge-production activities means that every intra-action with an artwork changes the conservator. In that sense, not only do the conservator and the artwork change with that encounter, but possibly also conservation itself. This argument gains traction if the knowledge of matter is defined as occurring through acts of observation (or intra-actions), which are inevitably partial and situated.

Karen Barad calls these observations *agential cuts*, which can be understood as the frame through which any given phenomenon is observed. For example, the use of X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) to analyse a given object generates only the set of data that the instrument can provide. Consequently, some aspects of the materials that constitute that object will become visible, but others will remain invisible. In this sense, XRF performs an agential cut in the process of knowledge-making. Frames are also part of the way humans understand the world. We all recognise how much our perspectives are grounded in our past experiences, and how our processes of knowledge production and decision-making are also products of our biases (Marçal 2014). For example, if a complex artwork with both sculptural and performance elements is acquired by a museum and that museum displays the work primarily as a sculpture, there is a risk that the features of the work related to performance will no longer be acknowledged or made visible. In this sense, institutional policies, agendas and procedures also influence the way we see an artwork and they will impact our own biases. Decision-making in conservation can also be influenced by other types of agential cuts, such as executive aspects concerning budgetary and material conditions, time and resources.[5] All of these form part of a conservator's situated practice.

Agential cuts resonate across conservation in different ways. The understanding of conservation as a practice dedicated to 'tangible cultural heritage' (ICOM-CC 2008), for example, might have contributed to the late adoption of conservation perspectives on intangible heritage, or even to a wider awareness of the inherent intangibility of all cultural heritage manifestations (after Smith 2006). A methodology that recognises agential cuts could help explain omissions, or assumptions such as that safeguarding the future of performance art is outside the realm of conservation. The same can be said about the differences between the

conservation theories underpinning the care of 'traditional' media versus that of contemporary art. Discourses around the 'paradigm shift' afforded by contemporary art and its conservation create an ontological separation that would not exist otherwise. These agential cuts impact the way conservators understand artworks and standards of care. While it is clear that all conservation specialisms have complex distinctions regarding their conservation interventions, a critical analysis of conservation ontologies, i.e. the existence and actions of conservation in the world, shows that conservation paradigms are not all that different, but that agential cuts influence the ways artworks are cared for. Agential cuts can also be seen in the understanding of the key concepts that underpin conservation practice, such as condition, risk or even the idea of conservation. The notion of 'condition' serves an example. Thus, it is possible to say that an acceptable condition is usually associated with a stabilisation of the original materials. The association between conservation and stabilisation seems to be in contradiction to other forms of safeguarding (tangible and intangible) cultural heritage, such as the use of replicas. The unstable condition of objects could, however, be a trigger for considering other preservation strategies. This mode of thinking led to the creation of replicas of the Lascaux caves. The process is also in use in contemporary art conservation, whether in the replacement of sculptural objects or, through an expanded idea of replicas, in the migration of formats, the replacement of equipment or the activation of performance works. An understanding of the act of making replicas as one of the last strategies to consider (again, in opposition to stabilisation) implies an agential cut in itself. The stabilisation of an artwork's original materials might jeopardise its conservation, for example, when it implies the permanent maintenance of objects in storage such that further access is no longer possible (Taylor 2013). Understanding the condition of an artwork in such terms can be considered an agential cut that affects its ongoing materialisation: an artwork is kept stable but therefore becomes invisible, or a replica is made that enables access. Accordingly, conservation activities are reframed to reflect a given 'cut' about an artwork's current condition.

This exploration has highlighted some of the ways conservation activities engage in a process of observation that produces agential cuts. The impact of those cuts in the artwork's ongoing materialisation implies that conservation produces and consolidates certain manifestations, and that some aspects of an artwork will be made visible, while others will remain excluded both from discourse and from conservation practice.

Agential cuts: Inclusions and exclusions of the process

The understanding that knowing is ultimately performative leads to an ongoing construction of what we are able to know. If what we observe, e.g. an artwork, or even conservation practice itself changes with our observation, there is an immense field of material possibilities that is afforded by these phenomena. This necessarily implies that neither artworks nor conservation practices have a fixed or true 'nature', but are constantly constructed in every act of observation, in every practice of knowing. Ways of knowing are then acts of excluding possibilities, and thus of performing agential cuts. The creation of a given existence against all others therefore entails a sense of both accountability and responsibility. Choosing one possibility over others, or observing an artwork through a given frame, can be considered as an ethical stance.

As conservators we are accountable for our cuts, as we are responsible for discovering how they mis- or un-represent other existences. Barad's proposal of an 'ethics of entanglement'

precisely targets an individual's accountability across space, time and different ways of seeing and being in the world. She posits that

> an ethics of entanglement entails possibilities and obligations for reworking the material effects of the past and the future. ... Our debt to those who are already dead and those who are not yet born cannot be disentangled from who we are. What if we were to recognize that differentiating is a material act that is not about radical separation, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments? (Barad 2011, 150)

Accepting the ethical responsibility that comes every time we perform an agential cut is, for Barad, essential for creating a just world. In the framework of agential realism, this is done by recognising and connecting differences. Barad (2007) and other agential-realism-leaning scholars (such as Geerts and van der Tuin 2016) propose processes of highlighting previously excluded possibilities and connecting them to ongoing phenomena as a way of bringing new perspectives to the fore. The process, for Barad, is dependent on one's ability to respond to the Other in their own situatedness in time and space, or response-ability. This approach to ethical accountability links to a relational approach to conservation. Based on the earlier discussion about 'condition', it is possible to see that a strategy to bring together apparently competing approaches to this concept and the realisation of that strategy in conservation practice can come through an awareness about these cuts and what they exclude. There is an expectation that an oil painting needs to maintain a given state to be considered as being in an acceptable condition whereas the expectations regarding the 'condition' of contemporary artworks will be different. An acceptable condition for an artwork such as Solakov's *A Life (Black and White)* resides in its capacity to be activated in the museum space and, as noted above, the idea of condition is dependent on factors other than the artwork itself. An overarching notion of 'condition' able to express the ability to fulfil some pre-established function, whether one of a historical document, a performance artwork or a given aesthetic stimulus, would encompass the relational, and yet situated, nature of the conservation process. The response-ability of conservators would be realised by considering the multiple possibilities for the artwork and the interactions that make it what it is, thereby opening the field for what it could be. Arguing for a given materiality – and putting forward a reasoning for including some aspects of the artwork and excluding many others – is a way of expressing a conservator's response-ability. A broader awareness of the impact of decision-making in the ontologies of both artworks and conservation helps to foster a wider understanding of conservation. Considering *accountability* as something that brings us together reframes it to refer to our responsibility to another, whether people, artworks, spaces, technology or nature. If conservation ontology is relational and ethical decision-making needs to encompass our relation with the Other, how can we bring multiple social others into our decision-making processes?

Practices of entanglement: Rethinking ethics through the relational

This article discussed how conservation and performance art are co-constituted through processes of situated knowledge production. It argues for the recognition of conservation as a practice in a constant and recursive state of unfolding. In this sense, the museum is a place where objects and subjects are created through practices, and practices consolidate or refute our understanding of the artworks we aim to preserve. Perspectives stemming from agential realism are useful to dilute long-standing oppositions and to frame conservation actions as

agential cuts that impact the ways artworks are manifested. Identifying the exclusions and inclusions inherent to those processes is thus paramount both to moving from dialectical views of objects and their care and to transcending disciplinary and political boundaries in conservation practice and ethics.

In proposing a relational ontology of conservation, this article has also helped reframe conservation ethics as a *response-ability* towards the Other, which includes human and non-human agents. The recognition of the wider ethical stance of conservation is an important step in rethinking the way we approach objects and their care. At the same time, it also highlights the need to think of conservation as a practice that not only reacts to the objects and their context but that can also be shaped by them and by the people who give them meaning.

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Notes

1 Based on the notion of cultural biography of objects (via Gosden and Marshall 1999, Hoskins 2006, and Kopytoff 1986), understanding an artwork's biography means accepting the artwork's changeability and acknowledging that such change can happen over time and be induced by the interaction of the artwork with multiple agencies.

2 Although both projects articulate perspectives that link to overall research on practice theory, it is important to mention that NACCA does so through the writings of Theodore Schatzki (see, for example, Schatzki 2002), while Reshaping the Collectible develops its approach through Knorr-Cetina's work on epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999).

3 New materialism is a growing field that encompasses multiple perspectives. Drawing on Marxist theories of labour and what has been considered a new wave of feminist studies, new materialist scholars reject binary ways of seeing the world.

4 See 'Rothko painting defaced at Tate Modern', *The Guardian,* 7 October 2012. Available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/07/rothko-painting-defaced-tate-modern (accessed 12 November 2019).

5 Barad calls the structures or media, whether human or non-human, that allow for the measurement of an emergent property *apparatus*. For example, an XRF machine is an apparatus that is used to identify (or measure) atomic elements in objects, while our eyes are apparatus we use to identify (or measure) the sampling area. The author develops her notion of apparatus by departing from Foucault's homonymous use of the term, criticising his definition

as failing to encompass how an apparatus changes and is changed by the phenomena it measures.

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Figure 1. Mark Rothko, *Black on Maroon,* 1958, Tate. © Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/DACS 2019

Figure 2. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, *Balance of Power,* 2007, Tate. © Allora & Calzadilla

Figure 3. Nedko Solakov, *A Life (Black and White),* 1998–ongoing, Tate. © Nedko Solakov