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THEORY AND HISTORY OF CONSERVATION

Time and conservation

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ABSTRACT

What does time mean in conservation? Is time present in conservation as an implicit or explicit dimension, and how does conservation, if at all, conceptualize time? By proposing a temporal critique of conservation, this paper argues that *thinking time* has been absent from the narratives of conservation, its episteme, theoretical and research-generating activities, and from its practical theoretical engagement with the material world. Reviewing varying implicit manifestations of time in conservation, it subsequently proposes an alternative way of thinking about time.

OVERTURE

The formulation "Linking Past and Future" has temporal undertones (and is a thematic concern of a conference on the occasion of which this paper emerged). It implies a certain understanding of time, while, simultaneously, it carries a promise for a better, brighter, and more conscious future. *Linking past and future* elicits the rhetoric of conservation that asserts its ability to enter the past by manipulating the objects' condition in the present. Oftentimes, this activity is underpinned by the belief that the past is within a reach and that it can be resurrected. Whether this assumption remains true or false, what interests me in this context is whether, and to what degree, such activity evokes a contestation with time, and why, for that matter, the notion of time has never been scrutinized in conservation. Is it possible that conservation implicitly manipulates time without explicating the time's intrinsic complexities? What does it mean that conservation is preoccupied with the past? And, what kind of *time* governs conservation?

THINKING TIME IN CONSERVATION

In what follows, I argue that the concept of time lies at the grounds of the conservation's practical and philosophical project. My paper pursues a purely theoretical approach; it is based on my readings of conservation theoretical texts, observation, and practical experience gathered through long-time engagement with changeable artworks, both traditional and recent. I have chosen a theoretical approach in the belief that there is a need for a meaningful theorization of conservation. *Thinking time* in conservation is necessary as it strives to advance conservation's critical theoretical discourse. My use of the gerund "thinking" instead of "rethinking," is deliberate: The latter would suggest that time in conservation has already been scrutinized. Fostering an interdisciplinary approach (combining the theory of conservation, heritage studies and philosophy), I suggest that time has come to revisit the temporal dimension of conservation in order for it to acquire a certain *temporal consciousness*.

WHAT'S (THE) TIME?

"What then *is* time? If no one asks of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not" contends Saint Augustine in *Confessions,* written in the 4th century (Book IX, emphasis mine). To be sure, time is

one of the most mysterious aspects of the world we live in. Even today, there is no universal definition of time. "In a sense, it is always too late to talk about time", posited French philosopher Jacques Derrida in 1972 (Derrida 1972, 42). In turn, after having acquired a vast number of books devoted to the topic of time, the Korean video artist Nam June Paik realized that he had absolutely no time to read them.

Too often, we find ourselves facing the unsolved and ubiquitous paradigm of time, the measured time of clocks and media, and subjective time that does not comply with its measurability. Time occurs within a range of various intensities and velocities while reading an interesting book or watching a play; it may turn into a painful expectation when we wait for something that we long for, an important message or a delayed train.

TIME AS MEASUREMENT

In the Western world, the common sense definition of time as a method of its measurement was initiated at the end of the 13th century by mechanical clocks. This moment also marks the inception of modern homogenous time, which replaced traditional methods of time measurement based on unequal intervals calculated by the length of daylight. Clock time was applied in monastic life. The monastery's towers became houses for clocks; they not only announced hours and religious festivities but also marked the beginning and end of the working day. French philosopher Michel Foucault saw in the religious orders the establishment of discipline and a chronological way of thinking linked with the application of timetable (Foucault 1995, 150). The beginning of time's secular life is marked by the moment when clocks began to announce the hours from the town hall's towers to regulate work of Flanders and Northern France textile towns (Mooij 2005, 105). But it was the modern science that confirmed time's tightness to irreversible direction, reaching its prominent stage with the refinement of the theory of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. Further, scholars consider railway and telegraph as media that helped to regulate and standardize time. The rise of capitalism and the expanding economy tied the attachment of humans to clock time and manifested in the control over the cycles of their labor and leisure (conceptualized by Karl Marx). According to the media theorist Bliss Cua Lim, this modern time consciousness became gradually natural and incontrovertible, obscuring the plurality of human existence in time (Cua Lim 2009, 11). We accepted it as a ready-made temporality.

THE READY-MADE TIME OF CONSERVATION

Conservation, I argue, adapted the sequential, chronological time that results in the understanding of time merely as a method of its measurement – the time of clocks, machines, scientific apparatus, historic chronologies, industry, and labor. While critical theory, philosophy and art practice have long been engaged with anachronistic and heterochronic interpretations of historical time – the belated and the put-of-synch, seriality and repetition, to name but a few – conservation, so it seems, has overtaken the ready-made temporality expressed in linear structures – the inheritance of the clock-time discipline of capitalist modernity.

In conservation, however, time exists as a merely implied dimension. It manifests itself, among other things, in the way conservators adapt thinking about events that take place in the life of artworks as occurring on a timeline, valuing them according to their precedence. This valuation is revealed in the wish to access the point of creation, the author's intention and the sources of the original object. The paradigms of conservation such as the concepts of reversibility, the belief in an original/preferred condition of an artwork, and the notion of restoration rest on the implied notion of measurable and linear time. I will now gradually unpack these concepts.

As a rule, "original state" concerns the material condition of an artwork and corresponds to the idea of an artwork's history being restricted to its physical history (Villers 2003, 5). At times, however, the idea of an "original state" can also be applied to a work's "concept," as when the "purpose of restoration" becomes "the conservation of an object so that it can be seen, or even used, in its *original concept* and *original beauty"* (Ashley Smith 2004, 19). It is widely accepted that, when a museum purchases a piece of installation art, for instance, the artwork becomes "frozen" in that particular historical moment at which it enters the collection. The traditional understanding of an artwork being "locked in time" is expressed by the term *freeze strategies;* similarly, the formulation *freeze-frame paradigm* referred to the conservation of an artwork based on scientific analysis that excluded truths derived from phenomenological awareness and interpretation.[1]

The ideal of restoring a work to a past condition was closely associated with the notion of the state of an artwork as the artist intended it. This was largely due, as Steven Dykstra put it, to scientific techniques introduced to the conservation laboratory in the 19th century that made it possible to analyze materials and thereby to discern between the materials originally used by the artist and those added later.[2] There is a close relationship between the "intended" instance of a work and what has been referred to as the "authentic condition" (as a rule, a material condition). In traditional conservation the term "authentic condition" is associated with a sequential understanding of time: in the life of an artwork, events that occur earlier on the timeline appear to have a higher authentic value than those that occur later. Thus, the "authentic" is often tied to an early state of the work, while the "original" lies proximate to the origins of an artwork or its conception. Similar ideas are expressed in the argument that the goal of conservation should be to capture not the "original" of a work but its "ideal state" – a state "defined by time, not by physical description" (Appelbaum 2009, 176–7). To determine an object's ideal state, we first need to fix it to a specific historical moment and then determine the physical state that corresponds to that moment. The "return" to the past inherent in the ideal state confirms once again conservation's deep-rooted belief in sequentiality and a recoverable past.

The concept of reversibility – a much-contested theory related to the paradigm of minimal intervention – reveals an implied obedience to sequential, linear time and, at the same time, attempts to question it. It does this by positing a state to which an object can return if the

materials and processes employed by conservators are reversible. This also approximates the idea of *re*-storation, which, from an etymological point of view, already involves the notion of "redoing."[3] The impossibility of such a return in traditional *and* multimedia artworks reveals the paradox here. The concept of reversibility violates the principles of decay and aging (nothing can ever become younger) and exposes the lack of an appropriate conception of time.

The understanding of temporal progression that follows a sequential timeline leads to peculiar situations: in order to satisfy the patterns of chronology, changeable artworks that are characterized by multiple materializations such as multimedia installations, performances, (Fluxus) events, and conceptual artworks (conceived as a concept and conveyed in an instruction) would have to be reduced to a preferred, singular state.[4] It goes without saying that to reduce a changeable work which manifests itself in different spatio-temporal constellations runs the risk of impoverishing its potential. Unlike traditional media, which are conceived as unique works in a singular medium, it is precisely the ability to change and transform that allows these artworks to survive and to be transmitted into the future.

But do traditional artworks, such as painting or sculpture, not evolve and change over time, only slower, rather than fast?[5] And are they not inhibited in a singular, preferred condition?

THE NOTION OF DURATION

As a supplement to the concept of entropy (second law of thermodynamics) and temporal irreversibility (decay), I propose to consider an alternate conception of time in conservation. This concept aligns with artworks being human cultural creation, rather that the product of measurement, analysis and chronological orders. Here, the temporal analysis by French philosopher Henri Bergson has profound implications for the resolution of conservation's engagement with time.

The philosophical project of Henri Bergson (1859–1941) posits that time does not exist as a linear entity marked by a succession of separate points in the past, present, and on into the future – a view of time that follows Aristotelian notion of time as a line and merely coincides with the trajectory of a clock hand.[6] Bergson believed that the reduction of time to space and numbers is caused by science's capacity to measure points on a line and simultaneities as starting and end points of movement. (This reduction reverberates the conservation scientific approach to measure materials and determine their properties in the search for the essence of the work.) For Bergson, time is neither theological, nor cyclical (time cultivated by agrarian societies). Rejecting a homogenous, conventional, spatialized, numerical conception of time, Bergson argued that we become acquainted with heterogeneous time, or *durée*, meaning duration. *Durée,* the movement of time itself, the permanent, unstoppable changing of things, is first of all a critique of the time of the natural sciences conceived on the basis of space: fragmented time. Instead, *durée* is based on the idea of a present involving a past and an anticipation of a future. And I propose to apply

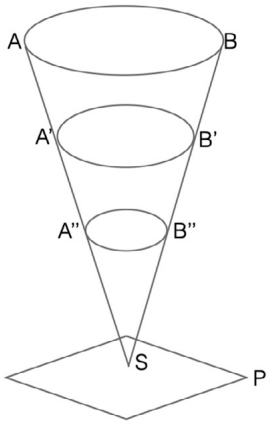

Figure 1. Diagram drawn by the author after Bergson's cone of memory. The diagram illustrates the coexistence of varying temporalities in the present

this idea to the understanding of time in conservation and to artworks as entities enduring in time, subject to a continuous, indivisible flux of change.

In his book *Bergsonism* (1966), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze provides us with a comprehensive insight into Bergsonian's method. Deleuze's analysis of Bergson's includes a visualization of the contemporaneity of the past in the form of a cone (Deleuze 1991[1966], 59–60) (Figure 1). The cone is divided into three sections – AB, A'B', and A''B'' – symbolizing the coexistence of all layers of the past with the present. The past AB coexists with the present S, including sections A'B' and A''B''. The sections are virtual, symbolically representing the distance of the past from the present, yet including the entirety of the past rather than its particular elements. The identity of duration is presented as an ever-growing image of the past in the present and "the *conservation* and *preservation* of the past and the present." Every successive moment contracts and is condensed with the former and, simultaneously, "always contains, over and above the preceding one, the memory the latter has left it" (Deleuze 1991[1966], 51).

So in their contemporaneity, the past and the *present that has been* coexist, but the past also preserves itself endlessly within itself, while the present passes. Bergson argues that the past, in its entirety, is prolonged to its present and acts in it. Duration is the survival of the past, an ever-accumulating ontological memory that is wholly, automatically, and ceaselessly preserved. In duration, the current moment does not depose that which came before. Could an artwork's present preserve all its pasts? And could conservation cease to depose of the moments which came *after* the imagined, original moment of creation?

Following the Bergsonian conception of time and its Deleuzian interpretation, I propose, first of all, that in artworks the present is the survival of the past. Rather than being virtual, the past is actualized in the present, which is all we are able to analyze from our inhabited temporal perspective. Duration is crucial for understanding the continuity of artworks and essential to divorcing conservation from its traditional views of time. Instead of positing a return to the past as the most justifiable goal of conservation, the Bergsonian concept of duration offers us a profound way to reexamine the assumptions of the profession. One possible consequence of applying *durée* to works characterized by change is that their changeability can exist unrestrictedly in a continuum of duration; in other words, each instantiation of a changeable artwork is equally important and *preserves*, to some extent, previous versions.

To explain how artworks experiencing change can be understood as existing in a continuum of previous and future manifestations, we briefly need to change our focus from the ontology of time to phenomenology, the philosophy of consciousness as dependent on subject. The continuum of duration encompasses what might be defined as retentions and protentions. The idea of retention and protention is based on Husserl's phenomenology of temporality, in which he neglects the experience of the world as a series of unconnected instances. The protention is distinct from immediate experience but still retained in our consciousness; it relates to the perception of the moment that has yet to be perceived. The continuity rests upon

the idea that each moment of protention becomes a retention of the next. Retentions and protentions may illustrate the factual existence of an artwork's instantiations, stages in its life or "conditions." Retentions and protentions create a conceptual realm of duration where the past is becoming present (or where, returning to the Bergsonian idea, the past is actualized in the present). Protentions might be conceived of as an openness of the artwork to its future change. Because there is never a disjunction between protention and retention, from an ontological perspective, the past is preserved *automatically*.

CONCLUSION

In brief, the orientation of conservation toward the past involves back-and-forth movements between abstract times, or, at best, a misinterpretation of linearity – in the common sense, conservators "take care of the past" and "pass it over to the future." If the past is contemporaneous with the present, then we do not need to "preserve the past" in the traditional meaning of the word, but rather *preserve the present*. In fact, the present is the only given reality and the *only* reality to be preserved. Conservation could thus be defined as a process that shapes changeable artworks. Conservation can reduce undesirable change, but never prevent it. So, in my thinking, and following Bergsonian *durée,* artworks – as objects that undergo transformation – abide in their present which is constituted by their many different pasts. In other words, they are constructed by their "present" as much as by their "past conditions."[7] This not only results in the abandonment of the search for authenticity somewhere in the remote past, but also moves conservation away from its attempt to manage change (measured in an artwork's former conditions) and toward a process intervening in the artwork's temporality. Additionally, such a stance unquestionably releases conservation from the drive to "recover the past" or "the original" or to "give back the authentic object," which, in my view, are approaches based on a misconception of time.

Whether engaged with traditional art or multimedia works, conservation can no longer claim to be neutral. Each intervention is a process that transforms the work of art. According to Cesare Brandi, conservation is a methodological recognition, the moment when the consciousness of the observer recognizes an object as a work of art (Brandi 2005, 48).[8] In discussing the significance of the past, David Lowenthal holds that every act of recognition alters what survives (Lowenthal 2003, 390). This is a positive gesture because, as he claims, the past can be used fruitfully when it is "domesticated . . . to inherit is to transform" (Lowenthal 2003, 412).

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NOTES

[1] For 'freeze strategies' see Hummelen et al. (2008, 1041–47). The freeze-frame paradigm was used in the context of Dutch conservation projects, such as New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (2009–13).

[2] In literary and philosophical circles, intentionalism was opposed by the anti-intentionalists resulting, among others, from the term coined as "intentional fallacy" and an eponymous publication by Wimsatt and M. Beardsley. See also Dykstra (1996).

[3] "Re-": word-forming element, c. 1200, from Old French and directly from Latin *re-* "again, back, against." In *Online Etymology Dictionary.* http://etymonline.com/index.php?term=re-&allowed_in_frame=0 (accessed 12 October 2016).

[4] I elaborated on the notion of changeable artworks, which I relate to the concept of the archive and temporal materiality in Hölling (2017).

[5] For artworks' slower and faster response to time, as well as their active and passive engagement with time, see Hölling (2017, 120–22).

[6] Bergson laid out his ideas, to which I refer throughout the text, in the following books: *Matter and memory* (1896), *Time and free will* (1889) and *Creative evolution* (1907) (see References).

[7] Not yet advancing the concept of time but arguing from within the conceptual framework of authenticity, Salvador Muñoz-Viñas posits the only "authentic condition" that we know is the condition in which the artwork currently *is* (Muñoz-Viñas 2005, 94).

[8] Brandi uses "restoration" in his *Theoria* (see Brandi 2005), where I use "conservation."

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