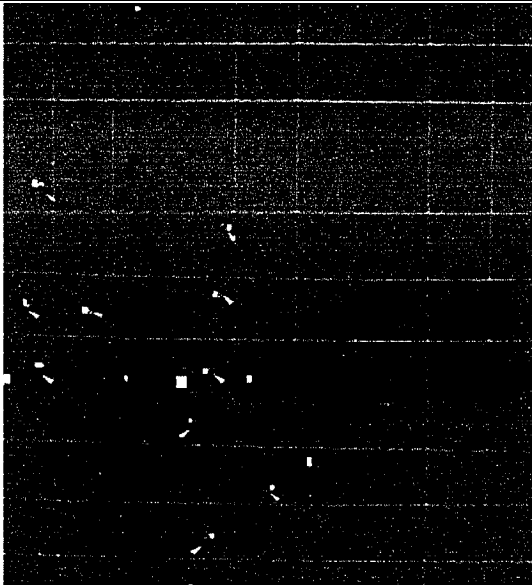


When Modern Art Shows Its Age

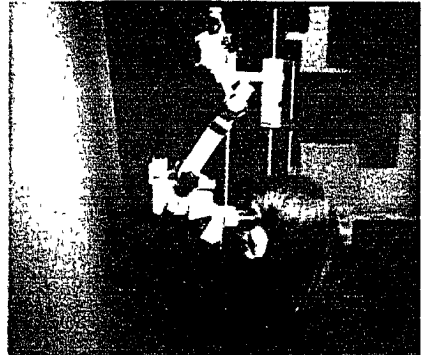
CAROL VOGEL

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Photographs by Sara Kulwich/The New York Times, above and left

The artist Ad Reinhardt, top, working circa 1966 on one canvas in his series of black paintings; Carol Stringari, above, top conservator at the Guggenheim Museum, analyzing damage to Reinhardt's "Black Painting" of 1960-66; and a model of the artist's paintings used to test repair methods at the museum's conservation studio.

When Modern Art Shows Its Age

Conservators Struggle to Reconstruct the Fragile and Ephemeral

By CAROL VOGEL

Where do you turn when the 1960's fluorescent cherry-red bulb in a Dan Flavin installation burns out? What's to be done when the rubber used in an Eva Hesse construction begins to crumble? How do you restore an all-black Ad Reinhardt painting damaged so badly that it has visible blotches and scratches?

In their quest to preserve 20th-century artworks, curators and conservators are riveted by issues of authenticity and obsolescence, artistic intent and interpretation.

While science and technology have made it easier to restore an old master painting damaged by water or sunlight, some paintings — monochromatic works from the 1960's, like Reinhardt's, for example — pose special problems. And the nature of some more recent works — collage, conceptual art, performance and video art and installations that use unortho-

dox materials or simple technology in unexpected ways — can be a curator's nightmare.

"Suddenly the warning flags are going up all over the media landscape," said Jon Ippolito, assistant curator of film and media arts at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan.

"People in the trenches uncrating an Eva Hesse sculpture like 'Expanded Expansion' can see that the rubber applied to cheese cloth is beginning to disintegrate, greatly altering the effect of the piece, which is lying in a crate in the warehouse like a patient on life support," he said.

"Or a curator trying to replace a fluorescent bulb in a Dan Flavin installation suddenly realizes he can't get the same deep cherry-red bulb that the artist originally used."

In a darkened auditorium at the Guggenheim last Friday night, viewers watched images of crashing waves emanating

Continued on Page 5

Fragile Materials, Fleeting Goals: When Modern Art Shows Its Age

Continued From First Arts Page

from a pair of 16-millimeter projectors. Each frame of "Bitemporal Vision: The Sea" was being carefully manipulated by the artist Ken Jacobs, whose work was being shown as part of a conference on preserving what the museum calls variable media. After Mr. Jacobs "performed" his piece live — controlling the images almost frame by frame — a state-of-the-art video recording of the same work was shown, and participants discussed the differences.

"I'll have to see it as something else," Mr. Jacobs said when his images unfolded without the hum of the projector. "I fear a magnificent performance with no human frailty. I do wonder about perfection."

Mr. Jacobs and the audience tried to imagine what would happen to the piece once the projectors he used to compose and perform it are as outmoded as a Brownie camera. How, they asked, could all kinds of art from the last century be preserved?

The question is a hot one at museums around the country, as institutions ranging from Harvard University to the Whitney Museum of American Art to the Guggenheim grapple with the conservation of contemporary art. At New York University the Conservation Center at the Institute of Fine Arts is announcing \$195 million in grants, some of which is to be used to train art conservators.

At Harvard, officials are establishing a Center for the Technical Study

of Modern Art. The Whitney has a \$5 million grant to support conservation and is starting its own conservation department. The initiatives at Harvard and the Whitney will be run by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, a leading expert on conserving modern art.

James Coddington, chief conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, said that "as the number of collectors of contemporary art increase and the values go up, these issues are becoming ever more pressing."

Across town from the Guggenheim, at the museum's conservation studio, Carol Stringari, senior conservator of contemporary art, was examining a classic black painting executed from 1960 to 1966 by Reinhardt, who died in 1967. It looks like every other Reinhardt from that late period: a geometric pattern of nine squares in subtle variations of black. On closer inspection, many blemishes are visible, like a large blotch resulting from poor restoration on the lower right and two long vertical scratches at the top right. An even closer look with a microscope and ultraviolet light reveals other blemishes and a slightly cloudy spray that had been applied to the surface.

Some of the damage to "Black Painting" occurred when the canvas was in transit several years ago. The AXA Nordstern Art Insurance Corporation deemed the harm to be irreparable.

A black Reinhardt from the same period in pristine condition would fetch about \$2 million today, experts say. Unsure what to do with the painting, the company donated it to

the Guggenheim Museum Study Collection, which is exploring new technologies for conserving monochromatic surfaces. The painting is now part of a two-year study pairing conservation teams from the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art and financed by AXA Nordstern.

"Most conservators don't want to touch monochromatic paintings," Ms. Stringari said. "There's a level

Asking whether obsolescence was the artist's intent.

of forgiveness in conserving a traditional painting that you don't get working with flat planes of color."

Nestled in tissue paper inside a box on a nearby table was an audiotape of Bruce Nauman's "False Silence" from 1975. Part of a larger conceptual installation, the tape had begun to disintegrate, and the Guggenheim had it restored and transferred digitally to a CD. "We had to bring it to an audio restoration specialist with a lab that had obsolete equipment," Ms. Stringari said. "The tape had been spliced in the middle of the dialogue and we had to put in a missing word, which we could only do on the digital version."

The original, which Mr. Nauman recorded on older equipment, includes popping sounds from the microphone. Ms. Stringari said she re-

tained the popping sound during the digital transfer but also retaped it without the noise when the artist is alive, as Mr. Nauman is, conservators and curators can go straight to the source to deal with the issue of respecting the artist's intentions. If the artist is gone, the conservator must try to deduce what is not always obvious.

Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro said that conservators have worked on conservation processes for so long that they often spend more effort perfecting technical solutions than they do exploring the nuances that matter to the artist. "We need to get our blinders off, to talk to artists and see what they want," she said.

This is slowly beginning to happen at museums, she said. "Normally the dealers and curators dealt with the artists," she explained. "A lot more now, the dialogue is with the artist, the curator and the conservator. It's more interesting since we all look at things from a different perspective."

But how does a curator deal with the work if the artist has died? What should be done, for example, to preserve installations by Felix Gonzalez Torres, who sometimes used piles of candy that viewers were meant to take away with them? What happens when the manufacturer stops producing the candy or has updated the packaging? Or when a work by Hesse, which could be worth more than \$2 million, begins to disintegrate?

"It's complicated," said Pam Kramlich, a San Francisco collector who, with her husband, Dick, has been buying video art for more than 12 years. "Maybe there is a 50- to 100-

year life span to these works." In the case of Reinhardt's canvases, Ms. Stringari and Mr. Coddington said, the opportunity to use a work from his famous series of black paintings was invaluable. The conservation issues range from undoing a poor earlier restoration to trying to recreate unusual materials.

Reinhardt's surfaces are extremely delicate and the mildest solvents tend to do damage, so conservators are considering several methods of removing the misty coating that was applied in that earlier restoration. One method is enzymatic digestion, in which an enzyme is tailored to break down the overpainting. Another relies on laser technology, to delicately remove the coating without affecting what lies beneath it.

The Reinhardts are especially difficult to work with because the artist routinely poured turpentine into commercial oil paint and then let the mixture sit until it separated like milk and cream. Then he would pour off the top and use what would remain, a powdery substance that dried to a suedelike consistency. His effect is nearly impossible to imitate; Ms. Stringari has tried working on a Reinhardt painting that has been written off as irreparably damaged allows conservators to test possible solutions without worrying about ruining the work. "Now we can use a substantial portion of the painting to determine whether or not an experimental treatment is possible," Ms. Stringari said.

Added Mr. Coddington: "This is one of the future old masters. Now it's up to us to be responsible for it."