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### Conceptual Art and Conservation

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# Conceptual Art and Conservation



Sanneke Stigter

**Abstract** This chapter addresses the function of a “conservation research approach” in the study of conceptual art in combination with the role of the curator’s expertise, advocating an autoethnographic approach in relation to contemporary art conservation as a function of museum practice. This approach is exemplified by means of the author’s personal testimonies of encounters with artworks by John Baldessari and Ger van Elk. These accounts help to provide a better understanding of the shaping of an artwork’s physical form in various contexts, while also laying bare the conservator’s personal bias as revealing traits of the profession. In addition, histories of works by Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt are used to develop the argument that although conceptual artists set out to dematerialize the object in art, they chose their materials and techniques carefully to underline their ideas.

**Keywords** Conceptual art · Conservation theory · Conservation research · Cultural biography · Autoethnography · John Baldessari · Ger van Elk · Sol LeWitt

## 1 Introduction

While some conceptual works of art are made anew every time they are put on display, others are taken from storage and assembled on site, depending on the work’s requirements and on the way in which they are managed. Aimed at negating the unique material object in art, conceptual artworks frequently confront the conservator with difficult dilemmas. This chapter explores a “conservation research approach” aimed at assessing conceptual art practices by tracing artwork biographies with a responsibility towards the future of the involved works. To read this angle, the chapter proposes autoethnography as a methodological approach to assess the influence of museum professionals on these artworks and to raise their sensibility of the role of personal input with respect to the lives of artworks in the museum. This

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in turn highlights the significance of contemporary art conservation research, and reveals the values and principles that underlie this approach (Stigter 2016a).<sup>1</sup>

While conservation theorist Salvador Muñoz-Viñas has suggested that conservators have little to do with the management of conceptual art, explaining that “conservation is technically prepared to deal only with material objects” (2010, p. 15), this study aims to illustrate the value of a conservator’s point of view in both the conservation and the study of conceptual art, suggesting that their materialised manifestations can be of greater significance than is generally thought. Although the focus of this chapter is on work from the classical conceptual art period, from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, its argument applies to all works of art of which it is claimed that their material make-up is of secondary importance and hence vulnerable to inattentiveness.

The general tendency to marginalise the material side of conceptual art follows from the dictum that “the idea or concept is most important aspect of the work” (LeWitt 1967, p. 80), something that conceptual artists proclaimed themselves right from the start, demonstrating and democratizing their art in manifesto writings and statements (see below). Although these artists were keen on explaining their work in statements and publications, most critics agree that conceptual art is difficult to pin down. Conceptual art is “all over the place” (Lippard 1973, p. vii), “an art of questions” (Osborne 2002, p. 14), and “a loose collection of related practices” (Corris 2004, p. i). Some critics simply refrain from giving a definition altogether (Newman and Bird 1999), or prefer “conceptualism” as an overarching term (Smith and Bailey 2017).

Art critic and curator Lucy Lippard’s description of conceptual art at the time is particularly relevant in this context: “Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious, and/or ‘dematerialized’” (1973, p. 18). By characterising conceptual art’s material form as ephemeral and cheap, one suggests that the materials used are quite specific in their ability to downplay the artwork as a precious object. In addition to being unpretentious and physically irrelevant, language and photography often served as media of choice, and these were interpreted as immaterial and reproducible, respectively, while many works are conceived as self-referential through the use of context and site. It is a question, however, to what extent the use of language is “immaterial” in the visual arts (Miller 2012), and how reproducible the medium of photography is when considering the materiality of photographs (Stigter 2016b; Marchesi 2017), and whether the use of site allows for variability without changing a work’s content (Scholte 2021).

The fact that the artists themselves emphasised their ideas rather than the materiality of their work could lead one to think that conservation has little to do with conceptual art. However, contemporary art conservation is not just about safeguarding the artwork’s material condition; it is also about preserving immaterial features, ephemeral properties and the way of making a conceptual work manifest,

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter is based on my PhD thesis, defended 29 June 2016.

depending on how the identified work-defining properties are valued (e.g., Laurenson 2006; van Saaze 2013; Stigter 2017; Marçal 2019; Giebeler et al. 2021). A conservation research approach, then, involves in-depth analysis of an artwork's various properties over time, both material and conceptual ones, down to the minutest detail and, importantly, with the aim of passing the work on to the future to the best of knowledge. This last aspect is pivotal in distinguishing a conservation research approach from a material culture studies approach, whereas the approach in itself merges well with studies into the materiality of art, as part of a broadening of the conservation discipline today (Hölling 2017a). I mention this distinction specifically because of the conservator's inherent responsibility towards the future life of artworks, and their perhaps common anxiety to do something wrong in this respect, because of their intimate proximity to the work of art when engaging in a conservation treatment or installation process. This makes that conservators have an extra sense for materiality, or a "material consciousness," as it has been called by conservator Hanna Hölling, borrowing from the work of Richard Sennett (2017b, p. 88). Materiality is not only understood here as a technical feature, but also as including social and historical connotations, in addition to signs of use and wear, properties and traces that conservators are keen to explain in terms of such socio-cultural background.

As a conceptual lens, a conservation research approach entails a heightened sense of awareness during scrutiny, triggered by the responsibility for the inevitable translation into practice, e.g., during conservation treatment, re-installation or remaking of the work, which will inevitably include the conservator's influence. As personal input is generally kept to a minimum by principle, indicated in various codes of ethics and guidelines for conservation (AIC 1994; Sease 1998; CAC/CAPC 2000; AICCM 2002), the inherent reluctance on the part of the conservator to interference is profound. While already difficult to adhere to in the practice of conservation, minimal intervention is impossible with artworks that require re-interpretation every time they are put on display, and this is even undesirable for artworks that require change. However, acting restraint is still key in the conservator's critical understanding of their own behaviour in relation to the works of art that they take responsibility for.

To put this strong emphasis on conservation into perspective, this chapter proposes self-study and autoethnography as a methodological tool. Autoethnography is an established qualitative research method from the social sciences that is helpful to expose personal bias in a critical observation of oneself, for instance when having to take decisions on intervening with an artwork to guarantee its future. From the definitions listed by sociologist Norman Denzin, it becomes clear that they vary, but that the common denominator is self-study (Denzin 2014, pp. 19–20). Autoethnography involves both a method and a written account that is evocative and, therefore, functional to others (Ellis and Bochner 2006). This is why I consider the use of autoethnography in conservation a form of conceptual reversibility (Stigter 2016c). The account is always a first-person narrative and constructed in such a way that it invites the reader to engage with the problem and think along. In the case of a conservator's testimony, the reader will take on the same sense of

responsibility steering the train of thoughts during analysis or practice. This also implies that the line of reasoning can be mentally undone in anticipation of a next step or different options eliciting similar care and critical analysis.

## 2 Autoethnographic Encounter

London, 8 January 2010. I'm looking at John Baldessari's calendar-shaped book *Ingres and Other Parables* (1972), displayed in a vitrine at Tate Modern.<sup>2</sup> It was opened at the pages with the title story. Here is what I read:

### INGRES

This is the story of a little known painting by Ingres. Its first owner took good care of it, but as things go, he eventually had to sell it. Succeeding owners were not so cautious about its welfare and did not take as good care of it as the first owner. That is, the second owner let the painting's condition slip a bit. Maybe it all began by letting it hang crookedly on the wall, not dusting it, maybe it fell to the floor a few times when somebody slammed the door too hard. Anyway the third owner received the Ingres with some scratches (not really tears), and the canvas buckled in one corner—paint fading here and there. Owners that followed had it retouched and so on, but the repairs never matched and the decline had begun. The painting looked pretty sad. But what was important was the documentation—the idea of Ingres; not the substance. And the records were always well kept. A clear lineage, a good genealogy. It was an Ingres certainly, even though the painting by this time was not much.

The other day it was auctioned off. Time had not been kind to the Ingres. All that was left was one nail. Maybe the nail was of the original, maybe it was used in the repairs, or maybe Ingres himself had used it to hang the painting. It was all of the Ingres that remained. In fact, it was believed to be the only Ingres nail ever offered in public sale.

Moral: If you have the idea in your head, the work is as good as done.

I was intrigued. Not because of the way the artist book was exhibited, in a closed vitrine instead of hanging on the wall, as the hole-punched pages would suggest. This detail came to my attention only later. Being an art conservator myself, it was the content of the story that first drew my attention.

In a playful and witty manner, Baldessari's text narrates the story that had caused a drastic change in the painting's material life, surprisingly in line with what anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has termed a "cultural biography of things" in his

<sup>2</sup>This work is known as Baldessari's first artist book, edition unknown. The work was exhibited during the exhibition *John Baldessari: Pure Beauty*, 13 October 2009–10 January 2010.

eponymous essay, which has greatly influenced material culture studies in tracing how an object changes, acquiring new meanings in different contexts (Kopytoff 1986). Baldessari lets an early modern painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres change from a painted canvas into a nail that once supported its presentation. This is, of course, an original way to ridicule the adoration of the physical object in art. Expressing critique of the object in art is one of the most important aspects that conceptual artists aimed for (Newman and Bird 1999, p. 19).

At the same time, the Ingres story makes clear that once an artwork enters the art world, many factors come into play that will shape its life, conservation being one of them. Time and social interaction—or neglect—alter the artwork's form and can impose a shift in meaning; the nail changed from support to icon. It is this trajectory, a material journey, notably caused by the lack of conservation that had sparked my attention.

Only later it occurred to me that something similar was happening to this work of Baldessari. The clean presentation of *Ingres and other Parables* in a closed vitrine compromised the work's intended function. The calendar format suggests a display on the wall to allow the audience to actively select a story by flipping the pages. I did not realise this at first, almost oblivious as I was towards these immaterial features that equally belong to the artwork and that are clearly just as vulnerable as the thin paper support of the offset-printed publication. Integrating the viewer's perspective and being able to interact with the work as implied by the informal style of the calendar book format can be seen as typical features of conceptual art. The vitrine, on the other hand, was closed.

### 3 Autoethnography and Object Biography

The autoethnographic account of my encounter with Baldessari's *Ingres and other Parables* above reveals my professional bias as contemporary art conservator. Careful protection of the physical object to prevent material decay is vital from an art conservator's perspective, which is why I accepted this as normal presentation, not aware of other options. Yet for Baldessari, at the time, the mass-produced calendar book was designed to undermine precisely the object-based approach and the museum's hands-off policy. *Ingres* is made as a commodity item that is to be hung from a nail so that one can choose a story to read after browsing through it. Due to good care, or different use rather, the holes in the pages to hang the book are still intact, intimating its intended form of presentation and use. These seemingly minor details illustrate the critical balance between conceptual message and material form, expressed not only in the way the artwork has been made or produced, but also in how it has been managed over time and is being presented to an audience, framed by a certain context, in this case a Baldessari retrospective in a major museum.

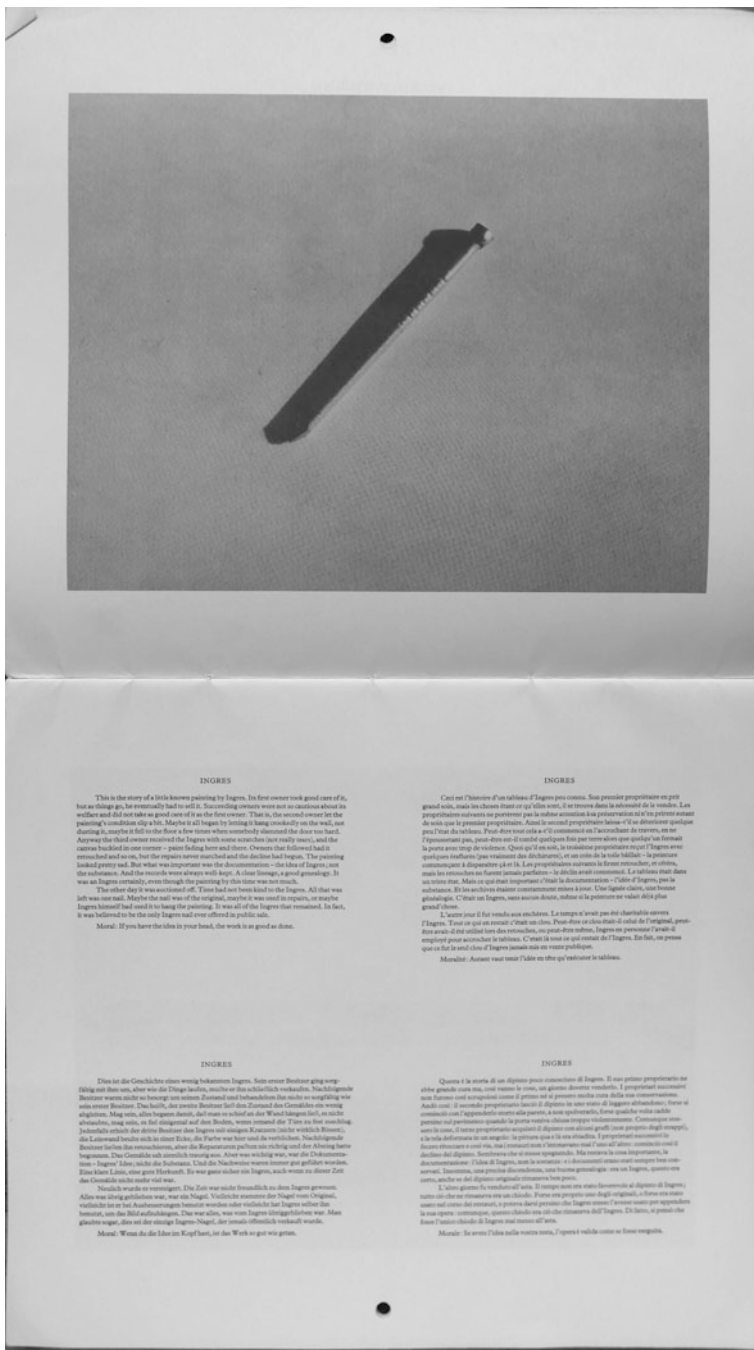
It goes without saying that it is essential to fully understand the relation between the work's conceptual message and how this relates to its material condition to inform decision-making for conservation, as is most clearly expressed in the

Decision-Making Model for the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art (Hummelen and Sillé 1999) and its revised version in 2019, updated in 2021, to accommodate newer artforms and theoretical approaches in contemporary art conservation (CICS 2021). While the first model was designed for object-based work and revolving around balancing a work's history, intention and materiality, the revised model incorporates process-based art and is accepting the notion that artworks can be in flux and change over time. This has become clear with time-based artworks, which differ with each instantiation (e.g., Laurenson 2006; Scholte and Wharton 2011; Laurenson and van Saaze 2014; Philips 2015). Conceptual art tried to free-up the artwork from its material form altogether, comment on it or resist a fixed material form. In *Ingres*, Baldessari seems to provokingly indicate this by illustrating his story with a photograph of a nail to represent the Ingres painting (see Fig. 1).

The Ingres story, in my view, points to the question whether we should try to resolve the relation between concept and material by a better understanding of the influence of an artwork's biography on what the artwork entails? Baldessari's parable seems to suggest that the idea of the artwork could remain in information, provided that the work is documented well enough and can be traced back by close reading of the object as presented. Evidence of the work's life is left behind in all sorts of tracks and traces, hidden in archives, in people's minds and, importantly, enclosed in the work's physical manifestations.

Triangulating these various sources and combining research methods is typical of a conservation research approach when assessing a work's condition, including the information derived from practice-led research, conducted during conservation treatment or reinstallation. Kopytoff's model of object biography has meanwhile been adopted in conservation research, after philosopher Renée van de Vall had proposed it, exemplified by using the work of Hanna Hölling, Tatja Scholte and myself (2011). This model should allow conservators not only to trace the work's changes over time but also to better understand the changes in relation to the different socio-political frameworks in which it has functioned. This can explain a different weighing of values around artworks for decisions made in the past and raise sensitivity for different viewpoints today.

Adopting a biographical approach aims to understand the influence of the artwork's social life on its appearance as part of its identity, transcending the traditional conservation paradigm that ideally looks for an artwork's initial form and appearance from around the moment of its origin. The biographical model, on the other hand, recognizes that artworks change, allowing for a more dynamic view than is traditionally the case in conservation. It should be noted, however, that compiling an artwork's biography is also shaping the work, as it is reconstructing the work's identity for a specific reason or from a particular point of view. This notion is important when such a biography becomes part of the work's archive, especially when considering the archive to communicate the artwork altogether (Hölling 2017b; Wielocha 2021). It is important to be transparent about who is compiling the artwork biography and for what reason and for which purpose, when it comes to putting the narrative into perspective.



INGRES

This is the story of a little known painting by Ingres. Its first owner took good care of it, but as things go, he eventually had to sell it. Successing owners were not so cautious about its welfare and did not take as good care of it as the first owner. That is, the second owner let the painting's condition slip a bit. Maybe it fell to the floor a few times when somebody cleaned the dust out of it. Anyway the third owner received the Ingres with some scratches that really worried him, and the canvas buckled in one corner - paint falling here and there. Owners that follow had it stretched and rewet, but the repairs never worked and the damage had Ingres. The painting looked pretty bad. But what was important was the documentation - the list of Ingres, not the substance. And the records were always well kept. A list through a good geography. It was an Ingres certainly, even though the painting by this time was not much.

The other day it was auctioned off. There had been four bids for the Ingres. All that was left was one bid. Maybe the sale was the original, maybe it was used in repair, or maybe Ingres himself had used it in his painting. It was all of the Ingres that remained. In fact, it was believed to be the only Ingres left over after its public sale.

Moral: If you have the list in your head, the work is good as done.

INGRES

Dies ist die Geschichte eines wenig bekannten Ingres. Sein erster Besitzer ging sorgfältig mit ihm um, aber wie die Dinge laufen, musste er das schickliche verkaufen. Nachfolgende Besitzer waren nicht so besorgt um seinen Zustand und behandelten ihn nicht so sorgfältig wie sein erster Besitzer. Das heißt, der zweite Besitzer ließ den Zustand des Gemäldes ein wenig nachlassen. Vielleicht fiel es ein paar Mal auf den Boden, wenn jemand die Luft aus dem Bild raubte, oder es wurde zerkratzt, was ihn, wie bei dem dritten Ingres, mit einigen Kratzen und einem abgewinkelten Bildrand besorgte. Die folgenden Eigentümer ließen es strecken und neu feuchten, aber die Reparaturen halfen nicht und die Beschädigung blieb bestehen. Das Gemälde sah ziemlich schlimm aus. Aber was wichtig war, war die Dokumentationsliste - Ingres' Name, nicht die Substanz. Und die Nachweise waren immer gut gepflegt worden. Eine kleine Liste, aber gute Herkunft. Es war ganz sicher ein Ingres, auch wenn zu dieser Zeit das Gemälde nicht mehr viel war.

Neulich wurde es versteigert. Die Zeit war nicht besonders gut für den Ingres gewesen, aber was immer geschah, war ein Ingres. Vielleicht erinnerte der Ingres an seinen Originalen, vielleicht hat er bei Ausstellungen benutzt worden oder vielleicht hat Ingres es für ein Gemälde, um die Bildaufhängungen. Er war also, wie sein Ingres Vorgänger, ein Ingres. Man glaubte sogar, dass es der einzige Ingres-Nagel, der jemals öffentlich verkauft wurde.

Moral: Wenn du die Liste im Kopf hast, ist das Werk so gut wie getan.

INGRES

C'est un l'histoire d'un tableau d'Ingres peu connu. Son premier propriétaire en prit grand soin, mais les choses vont et ça change, et le tableau dans la collection de la vente. Les propriétaires suivants ne purent pas le même attention à sa préservation et il se permit sans de soins que le premier propriétaire. Avec le second propriétaire Ingres - il a détérioré quelque peu l'état du tableau. Peut-être est tombé sur le sol quelques fois par terre, ou peut-être quelqu'un l'a touché par erreur. Les propriétaires suivants ont essayé de le restaurer, mais les réparations n'ont jamais fonctionné et les dommages ont Ingres. Le tableau avait l'air assez mauvais. Mais ce qui était important c'était la documentation - l'absence d'Ingres, pas le tableau. Et les archives étaient toujours bien tenues. Une petite liste, mais bonne généalogie. C'était un Ingres, même si le tableau ne restait plus que grand débris.

Le jour où il fut vendu aux enchères. Le temps n'était pas idéal pour le tableau et Ingres. Il y avait eu quatre offres pour le tableau. Il n'y avait plus qu'une offre. Peut-être que le tableau avait été utilisé pour quelque chose, ou peut-être qu'il avait été utilisé dans un atelier, ou peut-être qu'Ingres lui-même avait utilisé ce tableau dans son œuvre. En fait, on pense qu'il s'agit du seul Ingres resté après sa vente publique.

Moral: Avoir votre liste en tête est ce qui compte le plus.

INGRES

Questo è la storia di un dipinto poco conosciuto di Ingres. Il suo primo proprietario ne ebbe grande cura ma, col tempo, non venne lo stesso, un giorno diventò venduto. I proprietari successivi non furono così attenti come il primo e il dipinto ricevette così della sua cura. Anche così, il secondo proprietario lasciò il dipinto in uno stato di Ingres deteriorato. Forse fu toccato con il dito o cadde a terra qualche volta. I proprietari successivi tentarono di ripararlo, ma le riparazioni non funzionarono mai e i danni rimasero. Il dipinto aveva l'aspetto di un Ingres non molto buono. Ma ciò che era importante era la documentazione - l'assenza di Ingres, non il dipinto. E le archiviazioni erano sempre ben conservate. Documenta, una piccola documentazione, una buona genealogia. Era un Ingres, anche se ormai era un Ingres originale rimasto poco.

Il giorno in cui fu venduto all'asta. Il tempo non era ideale per il dipinto e Ingres. Ci furono quattro offerte per il dipinto. Non restò che una offerta. Forse il dipinto era stato usato per qualche cosa, o forse Ingres stesso aveva usato questo dipinto nella sua opera. In realtà, si ritiene che si tratti dell'unico Ingres rimasto dopo la sua vendita pubblica.

Moral: In avere l'elenco nella vostra mente, l'opera vale come se fosse perfetta.

**Fig. 1** John Baldessari, *Ingres and Other Parables* (1972), Artist's book, 27.3 × 30.5 cm; 10 3/4 × 12 inches © John Baldessari 1972. Courtesy Estate of John Baldessari © 2023; Courtesy Sprüth Magers. (Photo: Sanneke Stigter. Courtesy De Appel)



A biographical model, however, does not solve the conservator's dilemmas. It absorbs them as part of it. After all, conservation becomes part of the artwork's biography—or not, which is exactly what Baldessari's Ingres story illuminates. Indeed, the biographical model is not normative and excludes accountability of personal input when orchestrating an artwork's manifestation. While curators are aiming to convey a particular message in exhibitions, framing the work accordingly, traditionally conservators are taking care to avoid personal input. This is, of course, impossible with contemporary art that needs to be reconstructed and reinstalled, which is why acknowledging personal input is something that conservators have become keen to incorporate in their accounts to distinguish their part from that of the artist (Stigter 2011, 2015, 2016c; Marçal 2012; Cotte et al. 2016; Ashley-Smith 2017; Sweetnam and Henderson 2021). An artwork biography can, and perhaps should, include some notion of oneself to make clear who is the narrator constructing it. An autoethnographic approach could serve well to render transparent the role of the biographer, researcher, conservator or curator in the life of the artwork.

Adopting an autoethnographic approach enables one to take personal, professional and cultural bias into account when conducting research and performing conservation practice. This not only helps to reflect on decision-making; above all, it solicits a reflexive stance from the researcher and practitioner, heightening the sense of responsibility at the moment when this is both critical and functional to the outcome. Although reflexivity is often used interchangeably with critical reflection, it differs in promoting critical awareness of how knowledge is created (D'Cruz et al. 2007) and how this translates to action. Being reflexive enables one to defer from predetermined assumptions and manage practice right when it happens, which is convenient when having to deal with art that is contradicting the traditional principles of conservation and providing instructions on how to make a work manifest, or stating what the work is.

## 4 Conceptual Art Statements

As introduced, in conceptual art the idea is considered paramount, a dictum that almost became synonymous with the subject of conceptual art (Corris 2004; Alberro 2009). As conceptual artist Sol LeWitt explained early on in his seminal 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art':

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. (1967, p. 80)

LeWitt suggested that making a conceptual work manifest is almost a clinical act, impersonal and factual—away from the artist's hand.

Conceptual artists distanced themselves from artistic crafts and instructed third parties to produce their work, preferably in reproducible form to demonstrate that

this can be completely outsourced. Advances in communication systems greatly facilitated the organisation of conceptual work. Instructions by mail, telephone or telefax sufficed. In 1971, after having installed a work according to instructions in their Cologne gallery, Paul Maenz wrote to conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth: “We hope you are satisfied with the interpretation of your instructions” (Galerie Paul Maenz).<sup>3</sup>

According to LeWitt, a conceptual artwork *may* be executed, but does not have to be materialised in order to exist as a work of art, as specified in line number 10 of his ‘Sentences on Conceptual Art’ (1968) (1999, p. 107). Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner expressed this idea around the same time in his ‘Declaration of Intent’ (1968), initially only published in the catalogue of the exhibition at Seth Siegelau’s gallery, *January 5-31, 1969* (Barry et al. 1969):

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.

Later, Weiner’s ‘Declaration of Intent’ became known in painted form, in typical Weiner lettering, on long term display at Dia Beacon in New York State, high on the walls of the entrance hall ever since its opening in 2003. As with most contemporary work, it is indeed “a fantasy” to think that conceptual artworks solely exist as ideas, as art critic Camiel van Winkel calls it, for “without a material medium, nobody can become aware of any concept” (2005, p. 28). Van Winkel quotes conceptual artist Mel Bochner to illustrate his point: “Outside the spoken word, no thought can exist without a sustaining support” (2005, p. 28). Indeed, a catalogue page already does the trick, while Weiner’s statement in silver lettering on museum walls makes the work accessible to a much wider audience.

Baldessari, too, made his work manifest in a format that could be widely distributed in the case of *Ingres and Other Parables*. The materiality of the calendar book adheres to some of the main principles in conceptual art; it is a reproducible and cheap commodity item, expressed through the work’s fabrication and its calendar form respectively. This makes the physical artwork a carrier of information just as much as the content in undermining the worship of the unique material object in the visual arts. The calendar has a flimsy character typical of a throwaway product that has served its purpose at the end of the year. These associations are evoked by the chosen materials and techniques as well as its form, all supporting the work’s conceptual message. This line of reasoning is indicative of the conservator’s perspective, focussing on material connotations that serve the work’s narrative.

The examples of Baldessari’s calendar, LeWitt’s manifesto writings and Weiner’s ‘Declaration of Intent’ include the role of the viewer to complete the work as art, turning the artmaking process into an intellectual endeavour of the spectator. Weiner

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<sup>3</sup>Unsigned carbon of a letter to Joseph Kosuth, 16 February 1971.

calls upon the imagination even, placing the choice for the way of completion of the work with the viewer. This idea echoes the spirit of Roland Barthes' famous essay from that time, 'The Death of the Author' (1968), which states that the reading of a text, or any artwork, is not determined by the author's intention, but by the individual's reception of the work (2006). The creation of the artwork in the eye of the beholder is in line with mitigating the artist's authority and the unequivocal idea of artist's intention. After all, anyone may perceive the artwork and, therefore, make the work, anywhere at any time.

While the idea of distributed authorship, acknowledging personal input when seeing and interpreting artworks, is valid from the viewpoint of the spectator, such open interpretation can hardly form the foundation on which those entrusted with the care for artworks can take decisions. This becomes especially clear in the case of conceptual art that needs to be remade every time it is being put on display. This shift in authority towards the viewer seems of little use to conservators who are seeking evidence in the artwork itself, its history and artist statements to guide their decisions on whether or not to intervene, a general starting point in conservation (Price et al. 1999; Clavir 2002; Muñoz-Viñas 2005; Stigter 2011). Conservators are concerned about whether the physical manifestation of a work is in such condition that it enables the artwork to function as intended or deemed in order. Once a work of art is released from the artist's studio, or from the artist's mind in the case of conceptual art, their execution may be delegated to third parties. Museum professionals may take over once such work has been acquired, engaging in a commitment to care for it.

## 5 Conceptual Art and Museum Practices

The aim of conceptual art to have the idea prevail over its material execution led to many new forms of expression, influenced by the social and technological developments of the time. Artists came to think more in terms of networks and relations rather than objects. A good example is Ger van Elk's *La Pièce* (1971). It seems a simple wooden block painted white, but this has been done on the most dust free part of the world on both poles of the Atlantic Ocean, reached on board of an icebreaker. The result was minimal in material and size, but large in gesture and geographical scope. Van Elk documented the art-making process in photographs and film and plotted the exact locations of the art-making process on a nautical map. Finally, the object, *La Pièce*, was displayed on red velvet in a vitrine during the exhibition for which it was made, *Sonsbeek: Buiten de Perken* (1971). Although this took place in Park Sonsbeek in Arnhem, *La Pièce* was exhibited in the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, in reaction to the exhibition's subtitle, which translates as *Beyond Borders*. The wooden block was exhibited together with the photographs and the map, while the film was part of the film programme at the heart of the exhibition in Park Sonsbeek under a distinct title, *La Pièce—A piece for Sonsbeek* (Cherix 2009, pp. 86–87). After the work's inaugural exhibition, the map was never displayed again, while the wooden block has been part of many exhibitions, as has the film in

separate exhibition programmes. Such museum practices demonstrate the museum's arbitrary attitude towards associated documentation and what it is that makes up the artwork, being focussed on the object rather than the process.

Indeed, I realized that the nautical map was never discussed during the sale when it entered the Kröller-Müller Museum in 2009.<sup>4</sup> This is where I worked at the time, and I had been engaged in the conservation of the artist's work before. I was amazed when I saw *La Pièce* mounted to the wall in Van Elk's studio in Amsterdam one day, for this was an icon of conceptual art in the Netherlands. Moreover, it had been made for a seminal edition of the Sonsbeek exhibition.<sup>5</sup> I knew that the Kröller-Müller Museum would be a great context for the work because of its collection of Sonsbeek works, as well as its conceptual art collection, including early work by Van Elk. Directly after my visit, I called the museum director, Evert van Straaten, to inform him that *La Pièce* was still in the artist's possession. This was something I had never done before. Initiating acquisitions is beyond the conservator's remit. However, as I expected, the museum director was interested and managed to find the funding to acquire *La Pièce*. It was only upon receiving the object and the two photographs in the museum that I enquired with Van Elk whether the map still existed. This alerted the artist, and he found it much later, after moving his studio, and handed it to the museum.

This miniature story of how a conceptual work of art enters a collection shows that the way in which it has been exhibited over time is detrimental to what is being conveyed and remembered. Art historians Deborah Cherry and Fintan Cullen importantly point to the other side of display: "that which is hidden or removed from view" and yet renders significance to the displayed (2007, p. 476). By omitting the documentary material, paradoxically *La Pièce* had gained the object status it aimed to ridicule, so nicely underpinned by its presentation on an especially made red velvet cushion (see Fig. 2). Van Elk explained its use as follows: "I always do this with style, the cushion, that is part of it. It is a bit ironical" (Depondt 1996).<sup>6</sup> Van Elk used the visual language of precious object display with this choice of materials for *La Pièce*, exploiting the connotation of red plush, contrasting it with the immaculate little white block, which he mockingly called a "piece of soap" to devalue its object status once again (S. Stigter 2012, p. 107).

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<sup>4</sup>Inventory number KM 131.538.

<sup>5</sup>*Sonsbeek: Buiten de Perken* was curated by Wim Beeren, later director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and assisted by, among others, Evert van Straaten, later director of the Kröller-Müller Museum.

<sup>6</sup>Translated from Dutch: "Dat doe ik altijd met stijl, dat kussentje, dat hoort erbij. Het is een beetje ironisch."



**Fig. 2** Curator Toos van Kooten and Ger van Elk unpacking his work *La Pièce* (1971) in the conservation studio of the Kröller-Müller Museum, 15 May 2009. Painted wooden block on velvet cushion,  $1.5 \times 7.15 \times 9$  cm (without cushion). Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 131.538 (Photo: Sanneke Stigter/Kröller-Müller Museum)

## 6 Certificate and Paradox

Once conceptual art entered the art market, ironically this led to a reinforcement of exactly the system that the artists had attempted to undermine. Their work turned into marketable goods and became valued in the monetary system of economics, which is measured by scarcity. A curious paradox. The red cushion for *La Pièce* cunningly accentuates this ambiguity.

Curator and art-dealer Seth Siegelaub ingeniously managed the practice of conceptual art (Alberro 2003). In 1971 he had a lawyer draw up ‘The Artist’s Contract’ to lay down the artists’ rights about their work once it was sold.<sup>7</sup> The agreement included a clause on “repairs,” suggesting that this could be necessary for conceptual artworks, or desired (Siegelaub 1973, p. 349). In practice, the artist’s contract has rarely been used (Buskirk 2011, p. 100). Lawrence Weiner even pointed to the perversity of the agreement, as it was based on the system that they were trying to undermine (Eichhorn 2009, p. 84).

Siegelaub’s business strategy to protect the right of executing a conceptual artwork, based on instructions provided, means that the potential physical existence of the work is being controlled by sales. This proceeds through the exchange of a document that became known as the certificate, which includes the title of the work, or statement, and sometimes instructions. However, such a certificate is not

<sup>7</sup>The Artist’s Contract is officially called The Artist’s Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement.

necessarily a license to refabricate a work, as became strikingly clear when the Italian collector Giuseppe Panza had copies of his works by Carl Andre and Donald Judd made for an overseas exhibition in 1989. Andre and Judd publicly distanced themselves from these copies in an advertisement in *Arts in America* (Scheidemann 1999, p. 242). Although this incident relates to minimal art rather than conceptual work, it shows that the relation between a work defined on paper and its material execution is a precarious one.

On the art market, certificates are also used to certify a work's authenticity, and to provide the semblance of protection against fraud. It was for this reason that van Elk has made a certificate for *La Pièce* nearly forty years after it was made. His concern was raised when MoMA curator Christopher Cherix had also seen *La Pièce* in his studio and asked him whether he had made a second version, as he could not believe that no museum ever bought it (B. Stigter 2012).<sup>8</sup> This is when van Elk realised that there is no way to prove the work's material authenticity. It was not signed, and the idea of the ultimate white piece of art did not allow for that. To overcome this, van Elk suggested signing a highly detailed photograph of the painted wooden block by way of securing the work's physical identity as part of the sale transaction. This signed document would then function as a "displaced signature," in the words of art historian Martha Buskirk for certificate (2011, p. 99).

Being the responsible conservator at the time, I made those detailed photographs for this purpose, some in raking light showing the wood grain of the block and the paint texture. I brought them to the studio, and the artist selected two of the photographs, which he printed-out in order to sign. At that moment, a telling situation occurred. Right after he had added the work's title to the prints and placed his autograph, he suddenly said, "But this cannot be exhibited," realising that with this gesture he normally authorises new work. Upon my suggestion to add this for clarity, he added *This print is not for display* (see Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> A remarkable consequence of this whole course of action is that while the concept of *La Pièce* reflects fierce criticism of the art world's object-based focus, the newly made certificate emphasises the work's status as a unique object, stressed by its specific material characteristics now specified in a certificate. In 2004, only a few years before, van Elk had called it a "trick question" when I informed about the significance of the sloppy brushstrokes as a reference to the art making process at sea (2012, p. 107). Perhaps this interaction had contributed to the development of the idea for a certificate based on these brushstrokes, which would illustrate that every action around and artwork, even discussing it, can inform its future.

While Baldessari and van Elk were wittingly mocking the celebration of the physical object in art in their work, they did use specific materials and techniques to

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<sup>8</sup> Also conveyed in personal communication, Amsterdam, 29 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup> In Dutch: "Deze afdruk is niet voor exposeren." Personal notes, 9 July 2009, conservation archive Kröller-Müller Museum. The certificate was made in Van Elk's Amsterdam studio in the Palmdwarsstraat at the time, 17 June 2009. It is catalogued with a separate inventory number, KM 131.541 and related to *La Pièce*.

Amsterdam, 17 juni 2009.

Op woensdag 17 juni '09 verklaar ik  
deze foto als certificaat van echtheid.  
in deze staat verkocht aan museum



Kröller-Müller, genaamd "La Piece" 1971  
Aan deze verklaring is gehecht een tweetal  
foto's met strijklicht gemaakt op  
29 mei 2009, Ger van Elk  
deze afdruk is niet voor exposeren.

**Fig. 3** Ger van Elk, *Certificate for La Piece (1971) (2009)*, inkjet print, 29.7 × 21.5 cm, one of three sheets. Collection Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 131.541 (Photo on certificate: Sanneke Stigter; scan of certificate: Kröller-Müller Museum)

express their ideas. A contemporary art conservation research approach makes this connection apparent and underlines the significance of certain material features for the works of art, illuminating a different side of conceptual art, valuing their physical manifestations as carriers of meaning. These “carriers” have entered collections, meaning that they are cared for when stored, installed and put on display. For the artists, however, the work might have been concluded with the idea, recalling Baldessari’s motto of the Ingres parable: “If you have the idea in your head, the work could be considered as good as done,” LeWitt’s notion of execution as a “perfunctory affair” and Weiner’s statement that the work “need not be built.”

## 7 Conservator and Curator

As the story of *La Pièce* illustrates, acquisition is a pivotal moment in an artwork's life at which time the work is redefined for various purposes, starting with the museum's collection inventory. The work's properties are articulated by the professionals responsible, the curator, museum director or registrar and perhaps mediated by the conservator when assessing the work's material condition or requirements, predicting future behaviour or impossibilities, exploring possible alternatives even when the work includes immaterial and ephemeral features. It is precisely at this moment that the work of the contemporary art conservator ideally begins; in a critical stance to observe what is happening to the work during this phase, including a reflection of one's own part in this process.

The question is, however, whether conceptual artworks require the attention of a conservator at all when they exist primarily in idea. This is an often-heard claim, and it was also Ger van Elk's reaction when I explained about my research.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in theory conceptual art challenges the idea of conservation as part of the museum mechanisms it opposes, in practice conceptual art has become part of this system, which calls for an assessment of the conservator's role in relation to this art form.

Conservators always relate an artwork's manifestation to its alleged content and history. Similar to technical art historians, they pose questions about the way a work was first made, possibly intended, and how this has evolved over time. Close reading of an artwork's material specificities is necessary to interpret their condition in relation to its function. This requires not only in-depth knowledge of materials and techniques, but also a thorough understanding of the artist's ideas, those of the art movement and the socio-cultural context in which they have originated, which is crucial to make good judgements as basis for well-informed decisions on conservation and presentation of a work.<sup>11</sup> The process of decision-making is a valuable process that includes weighing various stakeholder opinions and treatment options. It will illuminate the artwork's various characteristics from different angles, enriching their significance to the artwork, which is potentially insightful from an art historical perspective as well.

As many conceptual artworks become visible only when being installed or materialised, this moment of installation can be seen as an act of conservation in its own right. Therefore, both the conservator's role and the curator's involvement are vital to the way conceptual artworks evolve over time. Curators generally do not interfere with an artwork's material form but may ask others to do so based on their ideas about the work's appearance in a given context. However, their role in decisions for the artwork's materialisation and display is seldom found in documentation in museum archives and can only be traced afterwards through research in exhibition archives, photographic evidence and oral histories.

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<sup>10</sup>Personal communication, Amsterdam, 8 November 2013.

<sup>11</sup>All of these aspects are considered in the Decision-Making Model for Modern and Contemporary Art.



Conservators, on the other hand, are trained to meticulously document change throughout an artwork's life, be it caused by accidents during handling, storage and exhibition, or by their own interventions during a conservation treatment. As indicated, they are overly aware of intervening with an artwork given their restrained attitude imposed by their professional codes of ethics. This is different for curators, who generally focus on an artwork's overall function and appearance as part of an exhibition or collection. If conservators are not involved in the care for conceptual works of art, which is often the case, significance of a work's materiality can be easily overlooked precisely because of the proclaimed secondary status of a conceptual work's physical form. To prevent unnecessary loss of information and to facilitate optimal presentation possibilities, a conservator's input is helpful with every new instalment of a conceptual artwork to ensure its careful perpetuation in time.

The dual identity of materialised conceptual artworks is why it is so valuable to have both a curator and a conservator involved when managing the practices that may influence their future. This is not just because curators and conservators supplement each other in knowledge, as conservator Lydia Beerkens suggests, attributing desired appearance to the curator and material feasibility to the conservator (2012, p. 41). Ideally their insight overlaps, so that both professionals provide insight on content as well as form to make well-informed decisions about the work's preferred state in a given context. Both specialists can read the same source with a different understanding, thereby enlarging their mutual insight. It is not a matter of dividing tasks, but of joining forces in the conservation and presentation of conceptual art. A dialogue is required precisely because of the complex intertwining of concept and material in conceptual art, in which idea and form function in unison. If conceptual art is about content and form, contemporary art conservation is about works of art and collaboration.

## 8 Contemporary Art Conservation

The conservator's role in preservation and the presentation of conceptual art, however, is not always self-evident. Conservation theorist Salvador Muñoz-Viñas has referred to an artwork's intangible and performative qualities as a "slippery path," suggesting this should not be taken on by conservators. He takes conceptual art as an example to illustrate his point, quoting LeWitt and Kosuth to demonstrate their detachment from the material object in art, as if this were reason to exclude their work from the conservator's domain. Muñoz-Viñas claims that "since the material aspects have become secondary, it is the *process* of creation that is considered important" (2010, 14). I argue, however, that it is not the process *of* creation, but

the process *as* creation that is important in conceptual art. Not the act of creating, but the processes set in motion by conceptual artists in institutions and through viewer participation. A conceptual work of art is often a critical reflection on these processes, as seen in Weiner's 'Declaration of Intent', and more metaphorically in Baldessari's *Ingres and Other Parables*, both of which are undermining the idea of the creative act as being related solely to the artist's genius.

Attempting to strengthen his argument, Muñoz-Viñas elaborates: "Most notably for conceptual artists, it is indeed the creation of the idea within the artist's mind that is considered to be relevant" (2010, p. 14). He sees this confirmed in author and journalist Tom Wolfe's satirical essay *The Painted Word* (1975), in that "Conceptualists" consider "genius and process of creation" as the only two things at the heart of art (2010, p. 15). This is an odd explanation of conceptual art, since conceptual artists set out to make art democratic, precisely in opposition to "genius" painters, such as the abstract expressionists.

The physical artwork as a symbol of the artist's persona is something that conceptual artists highly criticised. Conceptual artists started leaving their studios to enter the public domain and engage with the public. Kosuth, for instance, used the newspaper as a platform, while van Elk employed the public pavement and Baldessari invoked the notarial sector for an affidavit to declare that he had burned all of his paintings.<sup>12</sup> It was the politics of their work that was important to these artists, not how they came up with ideas. As art historian Alexander Alberro explained: "the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual [...] and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution" (1999, p. xxvii). In other words, conceptual art attempted to move away from the artist genius and the process of creation rather than the other way round.

It is undoubtedly in a polemical way that Muñoz-Viñas claims that conceptual artists "unashamedly show a complete ignorance or disregard for the technical matters of art" (2010, p. 15). However, apart from the fact that this is not completely true, judging from the case studies on van Elk and Baldessari, in addition to examples for LeWitt (see below), Muñoz-Viñas omits to address what happens with conceptual artworks in museums, possibly following his own assumption that their preservation is not the conservator's task. In fact, this merely illustrates the vulnerability of seemingly informally produced artworks that can be remade time and again.

Because of the low-cost and inferior materials used, the material make-up of conceptual art is prone to be neglected or discarded, whether or not intentional, but bound to happen precisely when conservators are not involved. Admittedly, it could be the case that original materials have been kept in use by mistake, using initial parts instead of making new ones, as has happened with many of Kosuth's *Proto-*

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<sup>12</sup>I am referring to Joseph Kosuth's *I. Space (Art as Idea as Idea)* (1968); Ger van Elk's *Luxurious Street Corner (1969) and his Replacement Piece* (1969); and John Baldessari's *Cremation Project* (1970).

*Investigations* (Stigter 2011). If original materials are kept, their fragility and subsequent material failure may cause problems later on, which could then still lead to heedless replacement or renewal, discarding the work's material history and potentially meaningful details. On the other hand, there is also a chance that intentional change of specific parts could be mistaken for a licence to pursue additional changes that might be too radical. Ultimately, incomprehension of the function of specific materials or parts in a conceptual artwork could lead to careless alterations and even shifts in meaning as a result, making the work drift away from the initial idea, incorporating new ones instead.

It is not without reason that fierce discussions arose when the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, the Netherlands, destroyed a wall drawing of Sol LeWitt during refurbishments in 1998. It upset the artist, who had not been consulted. When asked whether it makes a difference for a conceptual work if its execution disappears, LeWitt fiercely replied, "Of course! The representation of the idea is essential" (Sütö 1998).<sup>13</sup> LeWitt had personally approved of the wall painting's final form, which, moreover, had been made for permanent display. This account suggests that conceptual artworks are generalised too easily as existing independent of their materialised form, leading to the destruction of authorised executions as a result. LeWitt's wall drawings require craftsmanship, as "each execution is unique according to the specific site and the interpretation of the drafter(s)" (van de Vall 2015, p. 292).

If Muñoz-Viñas suggests that it is not the task of conservators to treat intangible heritage, but that they can help by "directly acting on tools" (2005, p. 41), I argue that artworks always consist of both idea and manifestation in one, and that these cannot be considered in isolation. A conceptual artwork is expressed by its physical manifestation, which is in turn communicating its immaterial features. Therefore, conservators cannot treat one aspect of a work of art without considering the other and vice versa. One can only consider an artwork's physical manifestation *in relation* to its function, content and context, which may be interdependent and thus to be considered and treated as a whole. By looking beyond the idea of conservation as restricted to material aspects only, the question as to whether conceptual art should be conserved is not put aside but taken as a challenge, and turned into the question of *how* this can be done best.

A clear advantage of having a specialized conservator involved when dealing with conceptual artworks pertains to their ability to interpret the way in which visual information is communicated through physical matter and in relation to time and place. These less obvious lines of information may remain unnoticed when they are not brought together in the mind of a specialist who is able to combine various sources in relation to an artwork's material specificities in order to interpret the work as a whole, relating material condition to the conceptual idea or content and vice versa. Many conservators of contemporary art are also fully trained art historians and focus on precisely the difficult dilemmas that Muñoz-Viñas calls "inconvenient"

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<sup>13</sup>Original quote in Dutch: "Natuurlijk is de verbeelding van het idee essentieel."

(2010, p. 15). Conflicting viewpoints present a challenge that needs to be addressed, preferably in an effort that combines both research and practice, and ideally involving all stakeholders, e.g., the artist, owner, curator and conservator.

It must be emphasised that intangible features, such as the idea of renewal, change and interaction, can be just as vulnerable as the supposedly insignificant materiality of conceptual artworks, and may be readily overlooked in a museum context. Hence my own failure in taking a critical stance when I first saw Baldessari's *Ingres and Other Parables* presented in a closed display case, preventing people from flipping the pages. It was only later that I realized that the display had turned the work into a museum object, revisiting my experience from an autoethnographic point of view. This is something to consider when deciding on a form of presentation as to whether it allows the work to be fully functional. Once the specific materiality of a work's manifestation or a specific immaterial feature is neglected, this can trigger a chain of reactions misleading other professionals who may continue to work with flawed artworks as a consequence, without knowing even. Presenting Baldessari's *Ingres* nail as a work of the French neoclassical painter would be a telling result.

## 9 Conclusion

Using examples of John Baldessari, Ger van Elk and Sol LeWitt, among others, this chapter has illuminated how a "conservation research approach" can reveal a generally underexposed side of conceptual art, placing the work's identity and history in a different light. The practice of remaking instructed artworks has caused clashes with artists before, demonstrating that the relation between concept and material is a delicate one, and suggesting a change in the idea of conceptual art's alleged independence of its material form, or at least a different perspective, which flags the importance to be careful about the materiality of conceptual art, in whichever form the work is being communicated. The chapter has furthermore demonstrated that it is useful to analyse museum practices through the lens of conservation to expose the influence of museum practice on the way a work proceeds in time, using a biographical model and autoethnography as methodological tools. This methodological approach serves not only as an additional lens on conservation research and practice but also as a mirror, raising a critical eye to professional bias when having to take decisions about conservation strategies that will shape an artwork's biography, pinpointing potential personal interest. The awareness raised by the autoethnographic approach elicits a reflexive stance and a heightened sense of responsibility on the part of the professional during practice when this is functional to the outcome, something that is important to both conservators and curators. In addition, the use of storytelling in autoethnography can also be valuable to engage a larger audience interested in the workings of the behind the scenes of the museum and a closer look at artworks. Therefore, to preserve and enjoy conceptual artworks, the critical eye of both the curator and the conservator are welcome to interrelate their capacity to focus on content, materiality and immaterial features, regardless of

whether or not the material form is considered to be of secondary importance. In the end it is the presentation of an artwork's manifestation that should allow the work to function, on the wall, in a vitrine or on a red velvet cushion.

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