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Conceptual Art and Reconstruction

Stigter, S.

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Abstracts:

- Marta Ajmar, Deputy Director V&A Research Institute
Re-making and Mimesis: Corresponding with Renaissance intarsia

In his *Historia naturalis*, Pliny the Elder foregrounds an almost anatomical approach to trees and the idea of a deep structural and physiological analogy between the vegetable, animal and human worlds, whereby the body of the tree and of man/woman are essentially the same, linked through a bond of embodied design that can become manifest. Building on this fundamental consonance, which enjoyed significant popularity during the Renaissance, this paper takes a fresh look at wood inlay or intarsia, a technology involved in an animated conversation with nature through the medium of wood. Intarsia will be explored through material mimesis, which might be understood as a form of correspondence and an active component of wider processes of artisanal epistemology whereby approximating another material – natural or man-made – does not reflect only an artistic and technological aspiration, but also an intention to connect at a deep level human making with nature's generative power. By examining recent experiences of research-led intarsia reconstruction, I will show that continuous processes of correspondence are also at the heart of embodied knowing through re-making.

- Georgios Artopoulos (Assistant Professor, The Cyprus Institute Nicosia & Anastasia) Christophilopoulou (Assistant Keeper, Antiquities, The Fitzwilliam Museum)
Immersing in virtual island-scapes: A case study in Museum Virtual environments

This paper explores one of the narratives developed for a major exhibition, coming to the Fitzwilliam Museum, in September 2021. The exhibition, 'Being an Islander': Art and Identity of the large Mediterranean Islands', aims to elucidate what defines island identity in the Mediterranean and explores how insularity affects and shapes cultural identity, art production and material culture, using the examples of Cyprus, Crete and Sardinia diachronically. As a project, it sits on the intersection of art and archaeological science, incorporating art interventions by young contemporary artists and confronting current debates in Material Culture studies and Mediterranean Archaeology alike. Our paper will focus on the integration of 3D data interactive visualisations and spatial digital technologies more broadly, for the virtual reconstruction and interpretation of major archaeological sites in Cyprus. This narrative, developed as a collaboration between the Fitzwilliam Museum's curatorial and digital teams and the Virtual Environments Lab, Cyprus Institute Nicosia, explores the opportunities brought by these techniques to spatial analysis of complex sites and their associated material cultures (archaeological assemblages); as well as discusses the way Museum visitors and researchers interact and engage with these interfaces and the challenges that come with their implementation. Ultimately, this paper discusses 'Being an Islander' as a case study in shifting Museum paradigms when it comes to exploring the complex palimpsest of material culture with a 'virtual lens'.

Contributors' dep. Pages and cvs:

Artopoulos: <https://www.cyi.ac.cy/index.php/starc/about-the-center/starc-our-people/itemlist/user/160-george-artopoulos.html>

Christophilopoulou: <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/users/anastasia-christophilopoulou>

- Spike Bucklow (Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge)
Sharpening Perceptions: The Role of Reconstructions in Training the Mind, Eye and Hand

The talk will provide an overview of the use of reconstructions in the post graduate training of conservators at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. It will suggest that the task of copying an Old Master painting focusses attention on details that might otherwise go unseen. The task involves perceiving visual clues and interpreting them in terms of physical processes. The degree to which those processes - optical, rheological, and physiological - can be replicated is judged in terms of their visual effects. Since the originals differ, copying constitutes research and since the copies are left at various stages of completion, they become a teaching resource.

- Edward Cheese, ACR, Conservator of Manuscripts and Printed Books (Assistant Keeper) Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Conservation or Reconstruction? The case of bookbindings

Reconstructions in conservation are usually made as learning exercises to increase students' skills in, and understand of, historic craft practice and to demonstrate original function and/or appearance to wider audiences. However, interventive work on medieval manuscripts can sometimes test commonly accepted definitions of conservation by 'reconstructing' codices altogether when past rebindings are removed and entirely new bindings are made.

Questions to be explored in this paper range from considerations of past rebinding practice, through explorations of possible tensions with conventional principles of conservation and museum practice, to possibilities for conservation to engage audiences in dynamic and creative ways. How far should 'reconstruction' of a long-lost structure to allow access be prioritised over the preservation of an old, but not original, structure which is not functioning well? Museum professionals are highly sensitised to object biography and the possibility of loss of information; but how do we decide what level of change is acceptable and possibly beneficial? How far is 'conservation' of a manuscript in these terms an act of interpretation, whether explicitly signalled or not? What is the potential for these acts to be made explicit and involve audiences in conservation practice?

- Ivan Day
Covered cups and hackled dishes - the reconstruction of a baroque feast in a museum setting

An attempt at reconstructing a late Mannerist table setting from a 1630 painting by Jan Breughel the Younger for the exhibition *Feast and Fast – the Art of Food in Europe 1500-1800*, currently showing at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge - is discussed. Recreations of this kind, which involve the display of period food and its associated material culture, raise complex issues of authenticity. In the Fitzwilliam reconstruction the resolution of these questions has been considerably aided by reference to both written and non-written sources, as well as careful scrutiny of the source painting and related works. The revived use of extinct culinary techniques outlined in seventeenth century recipe collections, as well as contemporaneous kitchen equipment, has facilitated the accurate recreation of the foodstuffs in the display. The combination of important period tableware from the museum collection with these unfamiliar edible elements, not only illuminates the nature of high status dining culture of the early modern period, but also sheds a light on the iconography of the many and varied works of art which were spawned by these mysterious meal settings.

- Amandine Didouan (Cambridge)

Real or Ideal? Re-enacting Illustrated Riding Exercises of the Seventeenth-Century

Seventeenth-century Europe witnessed a prolific growth in the publication of practical and theoretical manuals within the arts, mathematics, and sciences, with the gentlemanly art of riding, particularly the style of manège, one of the most popular treatise topics. These riding manuals not only reveal much about knowledge dissemination during the period, but attest to the seventeenth-century gentleman's social construction vis a vis attempted perfection in all matters having to do with the horse—an intellectual, physical, and spiritual pursuit aided by consultation of text and images. Within these manuals, lengthy paragraphs and illustrations offered instruction on perfecting one's riding techniques, as well as advice on correct equine training methods. One must ask, however, whether these exercises existing in fictional space (the printed page) were ever intended to be practicable, and as such were they intended to be contemplated within the realm of the ideal or the real. The only way to answer that question today is to have an expert equestrian with historical understanding of the period perform the exercises in the texts, interpreting information through the eyes of seventeenth-century authors and readers. This paper, through the use of video imaging and presentation, will explore the various ways early modern equestrian manuals (and their authors) transmitted the practical and theoretical knowledge of riding, and in particular, how successfully they communicated and explained exercises and sensations based less on the academic, but more on the ethereal 'feeling' of the horse.

- Sven Dupré (Utrecht University, University of Amsterdam)

Site Matters: Histories and Designs of "Re-Methods"

Performative methods are playing an increasingly prominent role in research into historical production processes, materials, and bodily knowledge and sensory skills, and in forms of education and public engagement in classrooms and museums. Such methods, which we refer to as Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Replication, Reproduction and Re-working (RRR), are used across fields in the humanities and social sciences, from history of science and technology to archaeology, conservation to musicology and anthropology, among other disciplines. First, I will look at how RRR methods have developed within these disciplines. With the exception of anthropology, "Re-methods" have long and venerable disciplinary histories. However, despite the growing interest in performative approaches across disciplines, so far, reflection upon these RRR methods has largely remained within the disciplines. Second, I will argue that there is much to learn from interdisciplinary methodological reflection. Bringing together process and product-oriented RRR practitioners makes explicit the variant constellations of human agents and produced objects, thereby providing fruitful avenues for RRR research design. Moreover, confronting RRR in the historical disciplines with ethnographic experimentation allows RRR researchers to compare past and current creative practices rather than opposing the research agendas of historians and less historically inclined disciplines. The Artechne project has adopted such interdisciplinary designed "Re-methods" to reconstruct lost colour worlds. Illustrated with examples of Artechne's collaborative research of re-making red glass (rosichiero enamels) and black-dyed textiles (fashionable Burgundian black), in this talk, I will reflect on the importance of site – the 'field' versus the laboratory – and the value of re-working with makers to the production of knowledge in RRR research practices.

- Nicola Foster (Solent University)

Exhibition Reconstruction: When Attitudes Becomes Form, Bern 1969/Venice 2013

In 2013 the Prada Foundation in Venice attempted to replicate the curator's Harald Szeemann controversial 1969 exhibition in Bern. This was an explicit attempt – articulated as a research experiment - to produce an exact reconstruction which would differ only in time and place, hence the title. The presidents of the Foundation asked whether an exhibition could be replicated without loss of authenticity and might thus operate in the same way that performances, or even film projections which are identical but difer in time and place. At issue here is to what extent the materiality of the space, the exhibits and the time could be replicated. The attempt was in direct response to Benjamin's insistence that the 'original' art work its 'aura' could not be replicated. The exhibition, which replicated not only its space but also some of the exhibits was an attempt to demonstrate that it could be done.

The Foundation's curator Germano Celant was joined by the architect Rem Koolhaas and the artist Thomas Demand, well known for his work with architectural models. The aim was that with the help of the Getty's Research Institute who recently acquired Szeemann's archive the curatorial team would reconstruct a precise model of the spaces the exhibition occupied in Bern which would be populated by the precise works and spaces they occupied in Bern.

The paper will discuss the attempt to reconstruct the earlier exhibition in the context of Benjamin's discussion of aura and Deleuze argument that every repetition introduces differences. It would argue that whilst the question the exhibition posed was potentially very promising in opening the door for more exhibition reconstructions, it was based on a very partial reading of Benjamin. Every reconstruction introduces difference and this difference can be productive, but this difference requires acknowledgment as a productive difference. Benjamin's argument allows for it and at the same time insists that the notion of 'aura' nevertheless plays a role, albeit a more complex one than often assumed.

- Elsbeth Geldhof

The Many Faces of Reconstruction - Experiences from A Historic Paint Conservator

In the field of conservation, reconstructions are often created to learn about the materials and methods we utilise; in this case, we will look at materials and methods to reconstruct paintings and painted surfaces on historic artefacts. In conservation research, reconstructions are made to answer specific questions relating to the analysis of a specific artwork or to model a suggested treatment. These reconstructions are as historically accurate as possible, even to the degree that they also explore historic painting practices or workshop methodology. In addition, reconstructing an artefact can be informative as a process in itself and it might even produce objects which can then be used in contexts outside the field of conservation.

In this presentation, I will explore some of my experiences with making reconstructions for purposes other than individual or general education in a technical art history or conservation context. For example, I will discuss reconstructions of sections of polychrome ancient Egyptian coffins for an exhibition as well as pop-up projects for the Fitzwilliam Museum (University of Cambridge). I will also touch upon reconstructions made with the help of left-handed egyptologists at the Cotsen Institute and Near East Department at UCLA an artist's submission project and an outdoor colour-perception experiment with 50 volunteers on a summer's night in Cambridge.

- Amy Gillette (The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA, USA), Zachary Stewart (Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA)
The Mancroft Font Canopy Project

Preserved in the parish church of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, is an extraordinary timber canopy, perched over the baptismal font, with little parallel in the surviving corpus of medieval church furnishings in the British Isles. Iconoclasm, repair, and restoration have left the early sixteenth-century ensemble stripped of its sculpted imagery, scrubbed of its bright polychromy, and shorn of its original superstructure. But the recent discovery of four large figural panels--part of a cache of 700+ Gothic wood-carvings purchased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the 1920s in a short-lived effort to emulate the V&A (and thereafter relegated to storage)--has provided a new opportunity to investigate the long history of the canopy as both a unified installation and a dispersed collection.

This paper will present the preliminary findings of an international research initiative dedicated to tracing that history via the collaborative efforts of a dozen specialists in the fields of art history, architectural history, literary studies, heritage preservation, art conservation, and museum curation. It will proceed in three parts. The first, leveraging extensive archival research, will provide an overview of the tortuous evolution of the font canopy from the early sixteenth to the early twentieth century. The second part will survey ongoing efforts to reconstruct the canopy in terms of process, including laser scanning, photogrammetric scanning, and lab-based testing (part of which is being conducted at the Hamilton Kerr Institute in Cambridge). The third part will discuss ongoing efforts to reconstruct the canopy in terms of product, including 2D illustrations, 3D animations, and AR technology geared toward enabling viewers to experience various historical iterations of the ensemble in both the medieval environs of the church in Norwich and the modern environs of the museum in Philadelphia.

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- Ellen Handy
Photography as Reconstruction: Hiroshi Sugimoto and W.H.F. Talbot, A Case Study

In 2008, renowned artist Hiroshi Sugimoto initiated a project of image reconstruction in which the 19th and 21st century histories of photographic process joined hands, as do representation and mortality; the medium's evidentiary and expressive status was highlighted, and the agency of photographer was reimagined. The reconstructive paradigm of copying as a form of artistic homage and the principle of scientific replication of experimental results are both relevant. W.H.F. Talbot, the inventor of negative-positive photography, produced notoriously fugitive images in the 1830s whose photo-sensitivity today challenges museums and conservators as regards to preservation and display. Documents of the very inception of the medium, images of surprising modernity of vision, these images can almost never be seen. Printing or viewing one of Talbot's negatives is a step toward its destruction; the action of light activates irreversible image degradation. Yet unseen and unprinted negatives are proverbial trees falling unheard alone in forests.

Sugimoto's Talbot images are recuperations of images otherwise un-seeable, performances of a score encoded by Talbot, and demonstrate reconstruction's incorporation of preservation and destruction as well as interpretation. Sugimoto explored the parameters of reconstruction as a mode of imaging: a photograph is a reconstruction of the visible world; a print is a reconstruction of a negative. His prints from Talbot's negatives amount to an archaeological reconstruction of images inevitably to be lost from the world over time. Partnering with the Getty Museum to render Talbot negatives in their collection is a reconstruction by the artistic intervention which may also be seen as a form of activist conservation practice.

- Deborah Krohn (Bard Graduate Center)

Practicing What We Teach

As a historian of early modern decorative arts and material culture, I initially turned to cookbooks as a way to gain insight and information about objects that were created to aid in food preparation and service, and have come to see food itself as a crafted object, subject to the same material and patronage networks that governed the production of the objects used to make and eat it. Its ephemeral nature, however, means that the recipe collections must be treated in the first order as texts which must be activated as instructions, guides to facture. Reconstruction, or re-creation, is deeply bound up with the attentive, critical reading of these texts, and it is this, rather than the authentic reproduction of dishes, that is the goal in my practice. This is in sharp contrast to those for whom reconstruction is a tool for accurate conservation treatments or other practical ends. The role of the historical imagination is very much part of the process in reconstruction as a pedagogical strategy, perhaps not frequently acknowledged as such. Instead of getting caught up in the infinitely imperfect attempt to make dishes that faithfully represent a particular recipe at a certain moment in time, presumably the moment when the text was created, my students are encouraged to see their reconstructions a form of close reading. In this sense, their experience of choosing the recipe, sourcing the ingredients, and following the steps to produce the dish, becomes a way to work through the text, understanding the limitations of their modern circumstances. This is in keeping with much educational theory from the Enlightenment onwards that values process over outcome. I'd like to explore this dichotomy through a discussion of the pedagogy of recipe reconstructions.

- Annette Loeseke (NYU Berlin)

Deconstructing Reconstructions: Berlin's Pergamon Museum and the Panorama Exhibition by Yadegar Asisi

This paper takes Berlin's Pergamon Museum and the exhibition PERGAMON. Masterpieces of the Ancient Metropolis and the 360° Panorama by Yadegar Asisi as a case study to explore different kinds of reconstruction from the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since its opening in 1930, Berlin's Pergamon Museum has housed the reconstructions of architectural monuments from the Ancient Near East, such as the Pergamon Altar. The panorama exhibition, a pictorial canvas in a rotunda of 30 meters in height, offers an all-round view of the digitally reconstructed ancient acropolis of Pergamon. By examining the various multi-media components of the respective displays, the paper discusses how the historical as well as current reconstructions produce a multi-layered, situated 'cultural heritage' that might be perceived as an iconic museum exhibit or experienced, immersively, as an exhibition of (assumably) ancient cultures. The paper further explores how the respective reproductions/displays generate 'expertise' and frame the museum as a scholarly (as opposed to imperialist) institution.

- Petra Maclot (KU Leuven)

Fact and Fiction: the reconstruction of sixteenth-century houses in Antwerp

Despite sophisticated research methods and current knowledge, the truthful reconstruction of historical buildings struggles with methodological problems and prejudicial habits that seem difficult to unlearn. Setting false examples and generalizing unfounded opinions have disastrous consequences on the preservation of an authenticity of heritage. Not only listed buildings suffer disrespect, especially the great number of buildings that silently blend in with the urban fabric are being mistreated.

Cross-disciplinary investigation in the historical centre of Antwerp revealed the basic characteristics of 16th-century private houses, namely type, construction and finishing, along with the social identity of their initial inhabitants, aspects that should be respected. Instead of the generally applied typological analysis that departs from formal features, an alternative method was used, that takes functions as the basis for ranging. This enables more truthful reconstructions, even when buildings have been transformed beyond recognition. Apart from small technical improvements, persistent traditional construction techniques appear to have been significantly influenced by standardization.

The effective detection of the finishing of facades and interiors proved the existence of most frivolous and colourful concepts, quite different from what was generally believed. Remnants are systematically destroyed, undocumented, declared as non-existent. Occasionally fragments are displayed as isolated 'decorative objects'.

Presented as true statements of facts, reconstructive restorations show no consideration with these scientific observations and create a false image, that subsequently serves as a model. Schemes, finds and reconstructions illustrate how ongoing ideas are overruled by facts.

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- Hélia Marçal, Tate, London

The body as source: practices of re-enactment in the preservation of performance art

What do we mean when we talk about performance re-enactment in art historical and conservation research? Performance is an art form known by being fugitive, hard to inscribe and even harder to preserve. After the movement is gone, the action ends, or that moment in time finally passes, there is always the question of what remains, what sticks with us, what is dragged beyond the present. Reconstructions have been a way of recovering materials, forms, and affects manifested as cultural heritage. In this paper, I will explore the potential of the performative body as source for historical research, along with the role of experimental processes of quasi-replication in understanding the material makings of performance art.

Performance art re-enactments consist on informed embodiments of a performance artwork after the inaugural event. The process of re-enacting an artwork starts by analysing its score, which can be implicit or explicit (Holling 2016). Following the instructions of the score, however, does not render exactly the same result as before. Differences in cultural contexts and bodies indeed contribute for material differences in how these artworks manifest themselves. The anachronic relationship between the inaugural event and the traces that are dragged across time – that inhabit multiple archives, documental and embodied – is also what allows for the transmission and historicisation of performance art. Re-enactments then appear as forms of recovering 'flesh memory' (Schneider 2007) akin to other forms of embodied knowledge that only come to be close of being understood through replication. Reflecting on the process of three re-enactments, and referring to the conditions of the re-enactment, methods of data collecting, and forms of data analysis, the discussion will also make clear the possibilities and limitations of re-enactments in the study and preservation of performance art and other artistic forms that rely on embodied knowledges.

- Mary-Ann Middelkoop (Cambridge)

'Those Sumptuous Embassies': Reconstruction Practices and German Art Exhibitions in the Interwar Period

At the beginning of the twentieth century the principle of reconstruction, or the research practices deployed by critics and art historians, featured heavily in the reviews of exhibitions of national art staged all over Europe. These written testimonies of representations of the nations' greatest artistic achievements, described by the late Francis Haskell as 'the modern equivalents of those sumptuous embassies, whose official 'entries' had been designed to dazzle the capitals of Europe in earlier centuries', often provided audiences abroad and back home with a written introduction to the show, occasionally accompanied by images and photographs of the display.

This paper explores the genealogy of reconstructing international art exhibitions, in particular reviews of the German national art exhibit in the interwar period. It concentrates on the various tools and techniques utilised by art critics and museum officials in art historical writings at the time, and does so with a focus on the international display of German art in the 1920s and early 1930s. Reconstructing research practices on exhibitions this way, opens up a new interpretation of the works of art and the exhibitions they formed part of, establishing relationships that existed in the minds of the makers and assessors of these ephemeral events, which often remain imperceptible in art historical research today.

- Fabrizio Nevola (University of Exeter) and Donal Cooper (University of Cambridge)

Virtual (Un)Certainties: Reconstructing Historical Contexts for Florentine Renaissance Paintings

This paper presents recent results from the Getty Foundation funded 'Immersive Renaissance' project, which aims both to realize and to establish new standards for the digital visualization of cultural heritage in Florence, combining art historical research with 3D visualization to recover now-lost aspects of Renaissance buildings and to re-integrate artworks that are now housed in museums and galleries within the spatial contexts for which they were designed. Digital methodologies open new possibilities unavailable through conventional scholarly outputs: for example, 3D reconstructions of lost or altered buildings are particularly efficient in communicating the dynamic nature of the architecture and its changes over time. At the same time, the necessity to offer a complete visualization of a structure and the inevitable limitations of historical data require a sophisticated approach to uncertainty and its embedding within digital assets.

Our presentation considers the case study of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie degli Innocenti. Through presenting a digital reconstruction of the Renaissance church interior with its altars and their changes over time, the project team will discuss a methodology for visualizing uncertainty, addressing gaps in the sources, and acknowledging the limits of scholarly interpretation in digital outputs. By linking the model to data underpinning the reconstruction, we aim to communicate a fluid narrative that does not necessarily follow temporal order, but rather opens up the possibility of understanding works of art and architecture through thematic and spatial connections. This will also be an opportunity to discuss our recently launched AR experience of the lost church of San Pier Maggiore, as we will review the project, highlighting the benefits of interoperability for 3D models, and expanding on the potential of ontologies for documentation and long-term sustainability.

- Daniel Pett

Digital embellishment of the Great Shrine of Amaravati

This paper will present on a successful pair of digital installations housed within the British Museum and implemented in the time that the presenter was the Digital Humanities lead for the British Museum. It will discuss the methods used to create these two pieces and the lessons learned by the multi-disciplinary team – interpretation, archaeologists, art historians, technologists, audio-visual and educators.

In 2017, the British Museum partnered with Google's Creative Lab (based in Sydney) to work on an immersive digital experience focused on a single piece of the world revered Buddhist site of the Great Shrine of Amaravati. This experience used projection, sonification and human computer interaction methodologies to blend together an experience built upon bring your own device principles (BYOD), which enabled the public to unpack in depth information about the focal point of the gallery. In just under 3 months, over 100,000 people visited this single gallery installation bringing with it a wide array of lessons for technologists engaged with in gallery digital works. The source code for this project was released under an open licence by Google on Github and the 3D model generated was released on Sketchfab and was download ready for people to reproduce in their own homes. A video detailing this exhibition can be found here: <https://fitz.ms/xyfi>

- Sophie Pitman (Aalto University)

Making Material: refashioning the clothing of early modern artisans

Very few garments survive that represent the fashions of European artisans or the 'middling sorts' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and written and visual sources about them are thinly dispersed. Yet non-elite men and women who were wealthy enough to own several outfits did engage in fashion trends, which shaped the visual and material culture of the early modern period.

The Refashioning the Renaissance project, funded by the ERC, combines material, visual, and textual sources with digital, scientific, and craft experiments to reconstruct non-elite Renaissance fashions. As lead of the experimental strand of the project, I have designed a series of reconstructions which build upon the emerging methodology of experimentation. But while many historians of science, art, and culture have profitably followed written recipes or reconstructed a single object or set of processes, the Refashioning project has been forced to ask what we can do when there is no 'ur-object'? Is it possible to reconstruct objects that do not survive? How can we make material and visible objects otherwise lost to history? And how can historians profitably gain hands-on experience while working to reconstruct an object that would have been made in the early modern period by a number of highly-skilled craftspeople? This talk will discuss the challenges and opportunities of the emerging methodology of reconstruction, which has inspired a series of experiments, including the commissioning of a doublet based on the inventory of an Italian innkeeper, to give a vivid material presence to the sartorial expression of early modern artisans.

- Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge)

"Be-feathered" men: Reconstructing a Renaissance Fashion

This paper argues that re-working historical processes through the actual reconstruction of objects deepens an engagement with material knowledge, craft experiments, ingenuity and the complexity of problem-solving techniques employed by historical makers, which in turn tells us about their ideas, ambitions and their clients' interests. It involves researchers in sensorial experiences which suggest new research questions and provide a different acuity for the attractiveness of materials than if one merely studies images (or texts, in the case of the history of books) on screens. These methodologies complement historical skills for the early modern period which often have solely concentrated on a disembodied and de-materialized textual analysis. They imply working with as well as about artefacts to comprehend them more fully as sites of sophisticated materialized understanding rather than simply as "symbolic", "representation", or an emblem of style. Such methodologies help us to explore how people responded to a particular material at a given time, what kinds of energy they invested in an object, why they did so, and how it sparked the imagination.

The paper more specifically shows how such an approach can open new windows onto feathers as a material whose dimensions we have largely lost touch with. It first sustains the argument that feathers forged a new aesthetics for European headwear among men and women as early as the sixteenth century, a development neglected in the history of fashion as much as in the history of cultural encounters. It then discusses how this fascination with feathers was influenced by experiences of the Americas and the Ottoman world, and throughout considers how affective worlds, new perceptions and actions connected to this animal material. In contrast to those who argue that Western society already treated matter entirely as life-less, or birds as commodified things, this reveals a potential to allow for notions of the animation through and agency of natural matter. It makes us think differently about the power of such materials as they interacted with human perception and the mind. In what we might wish to term a "reciprocal dynamic" between matter and beliefs, feathers invited treatment with specific techniques and through ways in which they fitted into ideas about beauty, civility, masculine boldness, eloquence or erotic comportment, which finished artefacts and their performance elaborated in turn.

- Sanneke Stigter (University of Amsterdam)

Conceptual Art and Reconstruction

Conceptual art is not preserved in storage but by re-execution or reconstruction. The question is, however, whether reconstructing a conceptual artwork is at all possible. For conceptual art there is no hierarchical value between the one and the other manifestation, between a first and later iteration, provided that all is done in keeping with the work's concept. To find out whether this is indeed the case, it is not only the resulting product that deserves attention, but also the practices that make conceptual art manifest.

This contribution explores such practices with reference to the Well-polished floor sculpture (1969) by Dutch conceptual artist Ger van Elk (1941-2014). It argues that the installation process is not only insightful to explore a work's parameters, its elasticity and the content, but also museum practice, including its possible effects on the artwork's form. This case reveals how the artwork is being tossed around between the artist, the museum and the architectural context, in search for its optimal form, based on assumptions that are not really made explicit. Addressing the steering mechanisms as part of this process is crucial to the conservation of conceptual art to understand the reasoning behind the form that is finally put on display an becoming part of its biography.

In addition, the authoritative power of documentation photographs is feeding into the collective memory of work that is only known through their photographic reproduction. When artworks are loosely defined in certificates they tend to freeze by their icons. This is where the notion of reconstruction comes into play. Apparently, museum practitioners look for images to reconstruct artworks rather than a text to construct it. However, the idea to learn about the work by critically following the art-making practices, holds true as much for conceptual art as for traditional work – if not more.

- Annette Tietenberg (HBK Braunschweig)

The Way Beyond Art: The Kabinett der Abstrakten in Hanover under Reconstruction

The paper focuses on the Kabinett der Abstrakten (The Abstract Cabinet), which Alexander Dorner, curator of fine arts at the Provincial Museum in Hanover, commissioned in Autumn 1926 from the Russian architect, typographer and artist, El Lissitzky. Today, the Kabinett der Abstrakten in the Sprengel Museum Hannover is acknowledged as a significant contribution to the history of art exhibitions. In 1937, the original Kabinett fell victim to the National Socialist confiscations of Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art). With two reproductions of the Kabinett from different epochs the artistic programme, the socio-political function and the social components come in for differing interpretations.

- Tianna Uchacz and Tillmann Taape (Columbia University)

Revisiting the Making and Knowing Lab

On February 6th, the Making and Knowing Project launched its digital critical edition of a French artisan's notebook and recipe compilation. The transcribed, translated, and encoded text of BnF Ms Fr 640 is accompanied by research essays, lab notes from recipe reconstructions, text-level editorial comments, a glossary of terms, search and navigation features, and raw data files for export and analysis. The Project's nearly six years of hands-on reconstruction work with students and collaborators have generated a motley assortment of laboratory products which embody a methodology that was always more about process than about product. While these objects have usefully opened up new questions for pedagogy and research, we reflect to what extent they have provided answers, and to what extent we can expect them to do so. For example, we ask what the epistemic stakes are of a twenty-first-century researcher achieving a "proof of concept" through reconstruction and how reconstruction can function as historical evidence.

- Charlene Vella, University of Malta

Reframing and presenting Antonello da Messina's nephew's Renaissance altarpieces

My research on Antonello da Messina and the family members who inherited his workshop drew attention to seven panel paintings extant in Maltese public collections by two of Antonello's nephews who were active in Messina - Antonio de Saliba and Salvo d'Antonio - and has informed their current conservation/restoration. The seven panels derive from four different works, two triptychs and two polyptychs, associated with churches (the cathedral, a Franciscan Observant convent and a Benedictine nunnery) in Mdina/Rabat, Malta's main medieval centre before the foundation of Valletta. In none of these cases does an original frame survive, although comparisons may be drawn with Antonio's works from Sicily, notably his polyptych in Taormina cathedral and his crucifix now in the V&A, which both preserve substantial passages of their florid gothic framings.

One of the Malta triptychs, Antonio's Madonna del Soccorso, will soon be returned to Mdina Cathedral Museum. It consists of three panels which must have been divided by gilded late gothic framework elements. Together with architectural designer Carmel Spiteri, I am working on a new framework for its redisplay, taking account of surviving parallels and the unusual shape of the panels. Meanwhile four paintings from local private collections that belonged to the Franciscan polyptych (c.1515) will be re-united with two extant panels still in the church for the first time since the eighteenth century in a framework that will allow the pictures to be viewed in a structure that reprises the original polyptych.

As well as describing these particular projects and their attendant decision making processes, this talk reflects more generally on the pros and cons of reconstructing historic frames, an area where interpretation and authenticity are drawn into tension and which has been the subject of considerable debate at major collections like the National Gallery in London.