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KEEPING TIME: ON MUSEUM, TEMPORALITY AND HETEROTOPIA

Hanna B. Hölling

ABSTRACT Are museums loci of fossilised objects, deprived of their initial vitality and immediacy of life? What kind of time governs the western museum culture, and how does it relate to the time of conservation and its object? And how does the temporal logic of museums and structures of keeping and care impact the artworks' identity? This paper offers an excursion into the temporal concepts underpinning the system of collecting, musealising and conserving works of art. Drawing on several ideas of continental philosophers and authors concerned with the theme of museums both as sites of revival and death, I interrogate the museum's alleged capability of keeping time. I further purport that recent art – including the dispositive of performance, event and media – subverts the idea of fixity and stasis that for decades underlined the logic of collections. How does art *matter* in these temporal constellations and how is this *mattering* always already temporal?

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Introduction

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) website reports that in 1977 two unmanned space probes, Voyager I and II, were sent off on an expedition to explore Jupiter and Saturn. After completing their mission to those planets, the probes were programmed to continue their journey through the outskirts of our solar system without a final destination. Like their forerunners Pioneer 10 and 11, they contained information necessary to 'communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials'.[1] On their interstellar journey, the probes contained a cross-section of artefacts, chosen for NASA by a group of scholars at Cornell University as representative of our culture, including a phonographic record containing images, audio tracks with greetings in different languages, ethnographic music, and the music of Mozart and Bach (Figure 1).[2] It will take about 40,000 years for the Voyager probes to enter remote planetary systems. This remarkable mission is like an archaeological project (archaeology understood as a search for the origins) which, in the words of the Swedish theorist Johan Redin, interprets the messages from civilisations directed to the future as an attempt to salvage the present.[3] Because it is impossible to render history accessible and readable outside the experience of culture, the mission, rather than seeking communication with imaginary extraterrestrials, becomes an attempt to represent and *preserve* the present.[4]

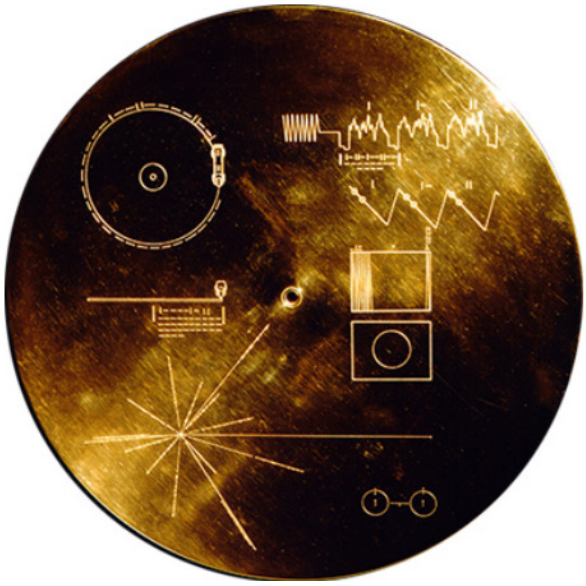

Figure 1 The Golden Record cover shown with its extraterrestrial instructions. (Photo: NASA/JPL.)

A time capsule of sorts, the Voyager mission stands as a helpful analogy to the enclosed space of the museum in which time stopped, isolated from the outside world. Museums appear to incubate their artworks as immobile objects in a slowed-down temporal flux that distinguishes itself from time 'lived' outside its walls. The everyday experienced outside the museum brings about material and conceptual change, degradation, obsolescence and continuous flux of things towards an entropic end. The traditional models of the museum fence off this change in the attempt to protect the works in their custody. This seemingly inhibited, frozen temporality that evokes not only a hetero-temporal understanding of objects but also a plurotemporal understanding of the world they inhabit will be the main concern of this paper. In what follows, I begin with a brief review of the ways in which museums formed their identity as institutions of knowledge and memory and how recent works contradict established models of the museum and its objects. The notions of life and liveness, as well as revival and rejuvenation are discussed alongside musealisation which effects a transition between the work's original context and its museum context.

Institutions of memory and their origins

According to Western episteme, museums, similar to other heritage sites, are institutions of memory that embody the 'spirit' of civilised society.[5] The evidence of history that they preserve is central to the identity and civility of people. The destruction of such materials may lead to forgetting resulting in the annihilation of culture and history.[6] Although the edification in museums may take different forms, there is a firm link between the acquisition of knowledge and the items on view in the museum: In the museums, we learn things.[7] Yet the elusiveness of objects so central to the museums confounds any fixity. The nature of objects bound with practice of storage, display and care allows the museum to function more as a site of memory and accumulated stories bound to these objects.

The French novelist and theorist Andre Malraux holds that museums are central to our understanding of, and our response to, those objects we regard as works of art, irrespective of their cultural origin.[8] Museums reflect varying senses of the urge to collect objects of cultural and aesthetic virtue.[9] With a Renaissance genealogy and classical etymology, museums were central to late Renaissance culture as an epistemological structure that encompassed a variety of ideas, images and institutions. Our current use of the word 'museum' reaches back to antiquity, to the word *museion*, the 'Institution of the Muses'. But the Musaeum at Alexandria was all but a collection of sculpture and painting presented as works of art – rather, it was a structure analogous to a modern university. A meeting place for scholars, the Musaeum was the home of music or poetry, a philosophical school and library and a storehouse of text.

Cabinets of curiosities preserve the connotation with philosophy in their name. The assemblage of treasures in these cabinets was designed to cause curiosity and marvel on the part of (a limited number) of beholders. While the humanist modest-scale cabinets were sites of demonstration of erudition and knowledge, the later cabinets became a 'princely hobby' appropriated by absolutist rulers who posed as erudite humanists, emphasising the pronouncement that knowledge is power.[10] Manifest in private collections and corporations which amass art, contemporary collectionism might be understood as a takeover of the latter, transmuting what once was the intellectually ambitious cabinet into a lavish spectacle.[11]

Today, museums are often thought of as timeless, lacking an end.[12] The word 'permanent' is featured in the International Council of Museums' definition of a museum. Museum codes of ethics cite 'for posterity' and the preservation of the inheritance of our past 'for future generations' as an aspect incumbent upon them.[13] But museums, in fact, have a relatively short history: not all museums survive the test of time nor do all their objects.

If museums evoke the sense of past, history, and memory, then the notion of the contemporary museum seems paradoxical. The commodity circulation and its accompanying capitalist values seem to overshadow the interests in the creation of episteme by building or amassing knowledge.[14] Often, the aesthetic experience of museum spaces supervenes upon the experience of objects, which culminates in disembodiment associated with the flow of global capital.[15] With the exception of several radical, alternative models of display and collecting institutions, museums have become populist temples of entertainment. Despite the more optimistic tones referring to museums as 'laboratories of ideas', 'temples of delight' or 'total works of art', museums are in a constant state of disruption and transformation.[16] This state of disruption is particularly acute with regard to critical debates directed towards museum as a colonial apparatus. According to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, the museum's imperial modality has implications that affect not only looted heritage of the colonial past – artefacts as products of the colonialised people's own cultural practices – but also a wide variety of stuff that enters the museum.[17]

Musealisation

Whether of traditional or contemporary art, the very concept of the museum as grounded in historical models troubles the idea of liveness by imposing on the works its own perception of life – museum life or afterlife. It is not without a reason that museums are closely associated with the term musealisation, an expression coined by the Czech museologist Zbynek Stránský.[18] Musealisation signifies the process of transforming an artwork or any cultural artefact from its original context into a museological context. Musealised works are removed from their previous life and endowed with a museum life. Musealisation thus implies the term *afterlife*, in the sense used by the German philosopher, sociologist and musicologist Theodor Adorno, who saw works that had entered the museum as works deprived

of their original vitality. In his essay 'Valéry Proust Museum: in memory of Hermann von Grab', Adorno discusses the museum in terms of the life and death of artworks.[19] This aligns with the view that museums fossilise their objects and that museum life cannot hypostasise the works' initial vitality. Whereas Adorno believed that art was ultimately revived in the museum context, the American philosopher John Dewey understood that relegating art to the museum separated it from the experiences of everyday life.[20] Experience, for Dewey, should be understood in terms of the conditions of life, which goes on in the interaction with the environment. Unlike practices and artefacts from traditional and contemporary cultures that are connected with rites and thus liveness, fine art, in our museums, runs the risk of remaining remote.[21]

'Life can never be a museum piece' contended biochemist F. Cramer evoking a biological framework. He continued: 'Life is a process that cannot be stopped along its path without a complete breakdown of its networks, without death'.[22] Nature brought into this setting, according to Cramer, would cease to exist; for instance, natural parks are examples of agonal nature (the Greek word *agonia* means anguish or physical suffering). Arguing against conservation, Cramer suggests that what needs to be restored is nature's capability to rejuvenate itself. Rather than being a process oriented toward the imagined, since in a direct sense unavailable past, restoration, here, becomes the capacity of an entity to perdure through the cycles of death and rebirth, preserving the genome in the ongoing renewal of its physical composition. The argument of rejuvenation becomes also the one of acceptance of evanescence and impermanence, which prompts the appreciation of change.[23]

Although there is a complex history to the treatments of the coexistence of nature and culture in varying disciplines, some productive links can be established between the environmental conservation preoccupied with nature which requires rejuvenation in order to exist, and art, which in many ways undergoes analogous processes[24] However, while in art, and especially in its traditional sense, change is often associated with loss, the conservation of nature accepts change as a fundamental principle that secures species their further existence. Species ought to adapt to a changing world in order to survive; to preserve them as they are dooms them to extinction.[25]

Liveness and rejuvenation: iterant forms and traditional 'media'

Thus could we, hypothetically, speak of a revival, a rejuvenation of sorts, in those iterant art forms – performance art, events, conceptual forms and media installations – which are subject to cycles of disappearance and reappearance, enactment and re-enactment? The performance's objectual manifestations – that is, the relics, residues, detritus, props and documents derived from a performance – not only stand in for the variety and intensity of the event in its absence, after it has been completed (and are in fact proportional to its intensity, an issue addressed in my previous writings), but also satisfy the logic of collecting fixity and stasis that underpins the logic of collections. This fossilisation or the rendering quasi permanent an otherwise short-duration event might be countered by its rejuvenation which allows for a reperformance of the event with the help of different resources, bodies and props brought into constellations in changing spatial settings. Here, the circle closes again, since the event, once reperformed and, at least for the time being, completed, leaves behind an objectual trace history which feeds again into the material repository reminding us of, but being never equivalent with, the life experience of the work. Akin to performance as an art form, media works are characterised by a performance of their mediatic constituents, in which the labour of performing has been delegated to the technological apparatus. A rejuvenation of sorts is thus also familiar to conservators who, mandated with the task to keep obsolete technologies of media works from the 1960s onwards alive, follow the strategies of emulation (replacing the defunct playback or display equipment with similar but newer, functional models), migration (replacing the equipment with different, newer apparatuses) or reinterpretation (in which new technological constellations need to perform the historic function of an otherwise defunct media). What in performance art forms is considered the residual trace history might in media installations take the form of the so-called 'dead media', witnesses to their bygone actuality. Unobliged to perform a technological function (playback or display of a moving image), not only do these dead media retain the sculptural and aesthetic value of their historic dipositive, but they also leave behind the forward march of progress by transcending technological obsolescence.

Whether related to the performance of media apparatuses or human (or robotic) body, the concept of rejuvenation does not appear constrained to the recent past. The ancient architectural complexes of Shinto shrines existed in their form for over 1000 years, not because they were kept as groupings of fixed objects, but because they underwent processes of periodical renewal that allowed the assemblage of skill, technique, memory and material to be brought into the constellation and to persist over time. These organically connoted persistence of architecture – or the 'metabolism of architecture' as Harvard scholar Yukio Lippid has named it[26] – reflects a continuous growth and decay of things, only emphasised by the processes of rebirth. Museums are challenged by this logic since they build on the system of materially stable, authentic, physical objects upon which conservators and curators perform acts of care.

Museums, to reiterate, preserve objects by taking them out of their initial contexts. An exception might be works which are 'museum-born' rather than musealised – artworks that are created in and subsequently collected by museums. As opposed to works which are converted to museums from elsewhere and re-contextualised in their new environment (which, too, is a form of context creation), works created *in situ* begin their life in a museum

context. Examples can be found in the institutions of contemporary art that invite artists to realise their concepts in situ and also develop and maintain collections.

As we have seen, musealisation is often seen as a process of separating artworks from the 'immediacy of life' – their previous vital function – and preparing them for their afterlife as museum objects. Let us once again turn to Adorno and his association between a *museum* and a *mausoleum*. According to Adorno, 'the German word *museal* has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying.[27] ... Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art.'[28] This viewpoint echoes Martin Heidegger's contention that artworks placed in a collection have been 'withdrawn ... from their own world'[29] and Hegel's remark that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past'[30] But Adorno juxtaposes Valéry's and Proust's views on art – Valéry emphasised the autonomy of the artwork, and Proust gave primacy to experience and memory. Adorno suggests that artworks must be sentenced to 'death' in order to live. Similarly, art historian Deborah Cherry in her essay 'The afterlives of monuments' confirms the positive shift in the term *afterlife*: she believes that afterlife can become the 'promise of survival, of living-on, through change'.[31]

Figure 2 Gauri Gill, Untitled (5). *Notes from the Desert: Traces*. 1999–ongoing. Archival pigment print, 58 × 86 inches © Gauri Gill.

Notes from the Desert: the politics and poetics of decay

Notes from the Desert (1999–) (Figures 2–4) is a series of photographs of unmarked and marked graves in the desert from the archive of images by Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill. Recalling the Adornian dialectic, we encounter places of burial and revival, sites of accumulation of objects and memories. These handmade graves were created for and by people from the Muslim and Hindu communities, peasants, nomads and other inhabitants of remote villages in Western Rajasthan with relatively few economic resources. Gill's work seems significant not only because it contradicts the nationalist politics of today's India, but also because the graves, which exist above the ground, have been created with materials found in nature. They include hand-inscribed gravestones and personal items, offerings brought from people's homes. Some of these items are known to have belonged to the deceased; they may tell a personal story and are available for further usage – which inscribes them back into life. Accepting transience with equanimity, nature absorbs and erases the graves, including fragments of material culture. Each site is a monumental work of art and a mini museum, an ephemeral monument not plagued by the obligation to permanence and continuity. Moving between culture and nature, these sites occupy an ambiguous space-time, a liminality between commemoration and forgetting. But unlike museum collections, they transcend their material significance into a different kind of permanence – the permanence of decay, a temporality of passing by, ageing and entropy. In other words, they emphasise change as inherent quality of all things material – one that does not necessarily lead to the evacuation of meaning. Unlike western museums, these conglomerations of artefacts are allowed to pass by ('to pass by' in German means '*ver-gehen*' and endows the word's meaning with certain form of movement = '*gehen*' [going], and '*ver*' a prefix which means to bring an action to an end). The disintegrating graves teach us that change can be a release into a different state, open and unpredictable,[32] that remembrance can be performed through transience, and that material erasure, although never traceless, can, in fact, be productive and constitutive.

Traditional museums incubate their artworks as immobile objects in a slowed-down temporal flux that distinguishes itself from time 'lived' outside their walls. Alternately, museums also become places where certain experiences of such time are possible. The museum creates and maintains a unique temporality that affects the objects by separating them from the world with a wall of policies and regulations. In collections that 'house' performance and multimedia works, however, such incubated time of the museum seems necessarily more open. However strong their link to the initial event and to the material repository that bears witness to the past, performances require new

Figure 3 Gauri Gill, Untitled (4). *Notes from the Desert: Traces*. 1999–ongoing. Archival pigment print, 58 × 86 inches © Gauri Gill.

Figure 4 Gauri Gill, Untitled (3). *Notes from the Desert: Traces*. 1999–ongoing. Archival pigment print, 58 × 86 inches © Gauri Gill.

scenarios, activations and iterations. Due to obsolescence and the resulting cycles of emulation, migration and reinterpretation, media collections, too, appear to act against institutional limitations designed to protect the museum against any incursion by outer time that might result in change.

Linearity of time in western (museum) culture

The western museum culture follows a conception of time consistent with linear time, a chronological succession of events on a timeline. History, as understood in museums, is static and does not permeate the present. Museum time is a pluperfect time, a closed period in which history is fixed, a period that rejects anything other than a monochronous narration. In the desire to connect viewers with the past, in the urge to memorialise, objects are often obscured, withdrawn from the outside world, and reinserted into it with a different set of meanings.

Conservation, a pillar of western museum culture, abets, albeit implicitly (at least in its traditional form), a similar model of temporal linearity. It does so, among others, through its concepts (and paradoxes) of 'authenticity' (an instance of there being one moment or a single 'condition' in the artwork's past worth recovering) and 'reversibility' (a belief that processes and applications can be reversed which aligns with, and simultaneously subverts, the linear progress of time). Moreover, the very notion of 'restoration' – the conservation's older sibling – confirms once again conservation's deep-rooted belief in sequentially and a recoverable past. Conservation's time is a ready-made temporality expressed in linear structures – the inheritance of the clock-time discipline of capitalist modernity.

The museum as a time capsule of sorts encloses artworks otherwise inhabited by different temporalities. Redin moreover suggests: '[The museum is an institution] that mixes static time with dynamic in analogy with the relation between memory and forgetting. It is at the same time inclusive and exclusive … the heart of the museum is not its exhibition but its depository'.[33] But in the long term the repository might become a death sentence for performance and multimedia works. Unless awoken from the incubation of the vault and exposed to a confrontation with the new – new systems, carriers, apparatuses and interpretations – these works move away from actuality at a pace inversely proportional to that of technological and aesthetic development.[34]

The French philosopher Michael Foucault describes museums as heterotopias, oriented toward the eternal, divorced from flowing and transitory time and thus protected from its ravages; they are projects of the perpetual

and an indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place.[35] Examples of heterotopias include a playground, graveyard, ship, or a zoo – spaces that bring together species and objects which usually do not belong together. Although heterotopias are central to culture, Foucault's thought seems to leave us with a somewhat negative impression: heterotopia emerges as a space of difference, in which the common relations are reversed, suspended or in the best case neutralised.

Traditional museums can also be seen as loci that impose an artificial concept of the extreme prolongation of the life of objects in what is envisioned as a mock eternity. Museums and conservators confront finitude in their work, acting against the frangibility and obsolescence of mediums in an almost impossible act of salvage. This is the greatest paradox, the dilemma, of conservation.

Presencing artworks as alternative futures

But with the Adornian death and rebirth of objects in mind and divorcing the museum from its exclusive 'pastness', one might conceive of the museum as a cultural archive where conservators and curators undertake the process of the de- and re-activation of artworks according to the episteme of a particular historical moment. In order for the museums to shed the associations with a time capsule (the analogy to the Voyager from the beginning of this article), we could establish a different kind of metaphor through a meaningful practice. The idea of presencing of artworks on the basis of the archive,[36] which is a form of a revival or perhaps even a rejuvenation, might help shift the meaning of musealisation to an initiation of another form of life or *enliving*.

What might also be helpful is a rethinking of the temporal concept underpinning the museum culture. Following Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, I believe that the past is not behind the present on a timeline but coexists with it (as illustrated by the Bergsonian cone). In other words, if the present did not contain the past, and the past, the present, the present would not have become the past. From a different perspective, the actualisation of the archive might be seen as a driving force behind what the film theorist Mary Ann Doane calls the '"presencing" of the past moment through the expansion of its length to present'.[37] *Presencing*, in other words, is the process of actualising the past as an experience of the present. This definition of presencing has two implications: first, archiving might be seen as equivalent to being deactivated from the present, the loss of an actual state; and second, actualising is, of necessity, always something new, something that emerges by *creation* (as it implicates us, the conservators and custodians, in in the trajectory of an artefact). To put it differently yet, presencing is a form of *mattering*, a transfer state from deactivation to actualisation, a post-preservation and an act of identity construction, which is discursive and performative.[38]

Media works and new media, performance and the legacy of conceptualism instigate us 'to uncouple the work of memory from the burden of material stasis', as aptly formulated by Caitlin DeSilvey in the context of heritage.[39] They allow us to step away from the obligation of material preservation and to cross over to these unmarked territories where surviving works possibly have 'no gravity at all'.[40] Because, according to Bruce Sterling, 'the future is a kind of past that hasn't happened yet. And obsolescence is innovation in reverse',[41] a recurring thought which, I think, he took from Robert Smithson, who in turn borrowed it from Vladimir Nabakov, but this would make another subject.

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Notes

1. See https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/ (accessed 14 May 2020).
2. Made to last, Golden Record is an old-style phonograph recording on gold-plated copper. The record contains 90 minutes of music and 30 minutes of the Earth's natural sounds, spoken greetings and photographs recorded half speed.
3. Redin 2011.
4. Aspects of this essay appear in Hölling 2017.
5. Gurian 2001: 25.
6. The disturbing narrative behind Donald Trump's threat to target Iranian monuments (reported by the *New York Times*, in January 2020) lies in his aiming at the basis of cultural identity and history of Iran's people.
7. Jordanova 1989: 23.
8. Malraux 1974.
9. On this topic, see Roger Cardinal and John Elsner, Introduction to *Cultures of Collecting* (1994) and Jean Baudrillard, 'The system of collecting' in the *Cultures of Collecting* volume.
10. Wyss 2017: 63. In spite of a common origin in European Enlightenment and the often cited link to the cabinet of curiosities, museums developed a diversified typology ranging from imperial Encyclopaedism (exemplified by the British Museum), museums housing diverse types of collection within the Western paradigm to the tribal museums and institutions reflecting postcolonial realities – or what Ivan Gaskell names hegemonic museums and subaltern museums (Gaskell 2012, 2-3)
11. Wyss 2017: 66–7.

12. Lubar et al. 2016: 1.
13. American Alliance of Museums, 'Code of Ethics for Museums'. Available at: https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/ (accessed 14 May 2020).
14. Wyss 2017: 67.
15. Bishop 2017: 77; Krauss 1990: 14; Colomina 2017: 117.
16. Decron 2015.
17. Azoulay 2019. See also Hicks, 2020.
18. Van Mensch 2004.
19. Adorno 1967.
20. Dewey [1934] 2005.
21. Ledd 2020.
22. Cramer 1995: 19-25.
23. Lowenthal 2019: 24–5.
24. An interesting attempt of comparing the preservation of nature with art preservation as made by David Western in the anthology *Copying with the Past* (2002). In it, he argues that art conservation needs to invite a different appreciation of authenticity that links with change and reproduction.
25. Western 2010: 85.
26. Lippid 2018.
27. This motif has famously been taken on by Douglas Crimp in his essay 'On the museum's ruins' in which he establishes a view of the museum as an enclosure of decaying and dead objects (Crimp 2013).
28. Adorno 1967: 175.
29. Heidegger 1975: 39.
30. Hegel 1998: 11.
31. Cherry 2013: 1–14.
32. DeSilvey 2017: 3.
33. Redin and Jackson 2011.
34. With its intrinsic world of enclosure, concealment, withdrawal from spectatorial gaze, and not seldom forgetting, the museum storage reveals a fascinating, under-researched facette of a museum. See Brusius and Singh 2017.
35. Foucault 1967.
36. An archive is both physical and conceptual – a space of potentialities and actualisations. See Hölling 2017: 141–66. In the traditional sense of this word, museums create archives but are not equivalent with archives. Archives of museums form a part of cultural memory, a larger knowledge infrastructure that has to be ordered into systems.
37. Doane 2002: 83.
38. Associated with the feminist materialist philosophy of Karen Barad, 'mattering' signifies a form of realisation of different agential possibilities of human and non-human subjects in which materiality, rather than being subjected to the effect of human agency, becomes an active factor in the process of materialisation, or, in this case, actualisation (Barad 2003). For a more extensive discussion of performativity and the virtual and actual, see Hölling 2017: 156–7.
39. DeSilvey 2017: 4.
40. Paik 1980.
41. Sterling 2003: 11.

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Biography

Hanna B. Hölling teaches material culture, theory of conservation, and postwar art history at the Department of History of Art, University College London. She is also Research Professor at Bern University of the Arts. Supported by prestigious foundations internationally, her research materialised, among others, in two monographs and three edited volumes.