

Conserving Active Matter—Activating Conservation?

Peter N. Miller and Soon Kai Poh (eds.),
Conserving Active Matter

New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022
(distributed by the University of Chicago Press),
400 pages, 56 color plates, \$ 65.00,
ISBN 978-1-941792-32-2 (PDF and
EPUB \$ 45.00, ISBN 978-1-941792-33-9)

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“... We have to conserve because conservation is innate to human nature. We’re pack rats. We pile things up. We collect. We save. We hoard. Why do we do this? Because we’ve learned that we need to save in order to survive. We store up food and clothing and other goods to survive physically. We store up skills and habits and memories to survive socially,” contended the cultural geographer and heritage scholar David Lowenthal in his Harvard Baxter lecture in 2014.¹ He subsequently countered, “... nothing survives forever, the notion of keeping anything forever is a counter-productive delusion. We need instead to focus on how things change over their finite life-spans.”² I was fortunate to share a few moments with the late Lowenthal in his London apartment, when he, his wife and I mused over dinner about the notions of permanence and change. His books, like his thoughts, resonated with me again and again while I was reading *Conserving Active Matter*, a considerable volume edited by Peter Miller and Soon Kai Poh within the Bard Graduate Center’s *Cultural Histories of the Material World* series.³

This is a book about the titular activity of matter in all its forms, dimensions and complexities, which, instead of asking, “why,” “what” and/or “for whom” we conserve, lets changeable matter—as seen through the lens of conservation—take center stage. Conservation as conceived on this book’s pages is an intentional human activity

that has been present throughout human history. Put in the simplest possible terms, most historic artefacts, performances, practices and behaviors have reached our present moment because someone decided to pass them on. My reading of the book, however, activates conservation as a socio-technological formation and positions it as a human practice rooted in changing ideas and shifting cultures. Whether read from the chapters or from between the lines, the volume reveals the vastness of conservation, its plural cultures of practice and ways of thinking and being in the world, including the mindsets and affects, ethics and aesthetics, and not least the variety of conservation specialties. And conservation so understood is disclosed in relation to its subject—changing and active, at times non-identical with its former self. Importantly, the book allows other actors—that is, individuals different from those wearing white gowns and wielding cotton swabs who commonly perform conservation—to take a stance and to become co-conservators through practical-theoretical entanglements.

The book builds on the premise that the continuous activity of matter requires a context that, as the editors assert, is provided by conservation. In other words, it frames conservation as an intellectual-practical activity and a realm of conventions and normative structures in which the activity of matter unfolds and through which it is critically captured and assessed. This book pursues conservation as an interdisciplinary endeavor, bringing together scholars of material culture, history, philosophy, Indigeneity, material scientists and conservators to take a stake in conservation, “together-apart,” borrowing from Karen Barad, in a mindful way and on a scale that is unprecedented to date.⁴

Peter Miller and the Bard Graduate Center, a research and teaching institute focusing on

decorative arts, design history and material culture and located on the Upper West in New York's Manhattan (hereon abbreviated to BGC) have a considerable history of thinking through—and with—conservation questions. Thus the book is a part of a tripartite structure which begun with the BGC's research projects *Cultures of Conservation* and its derivate *Conserving Active Matter* (both Mellon-funded 2012–2022) accompanied by an extensive program of scholarly exchanges evidenced in the book's appendix (382–386).⁵ A five-part symposium *Conserving Active Matter* followed, together with an eponymously titled exhibition (May 25—July 10, 2022) with its own digital publication.⁶ There is a perceived need for multidisciplinary thinking in, about and through conservation⁷ and the BGC's *Cultures of Conservation* initiative remains one of the few sustained inter- and cross-disciplinary endeavors which brought humanities scholars together with conservators to meet at eye level. Conservators and conservation scientists immersed themselves in the questions posed by scholars of the material culture-oriented human sciences (represented at the BGC by art historians, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and philosophers) and vice versa. The results of the nuanced program of research and a concluding exhibition, which formed an interwoven and reciprocal whole with the book, have been captured in the audio-visual archive on the BGC's website.⁸ This crossdisciplinary immersion ultimately also gave rise to thinking about the activity of matter and to this volume.

The book has been divided into four sections extrapolated from the project's four working groups: "Philosophy," "History," "Indigenous Ontologies," and "Materials," as if reflecting the BGC's institutional formation. General introductions by Miller and Soon Kai Poh are followed by a wealth of eloquent introductions by representatives of each discipline, setting the stage for each section. Miller's concern that the book sections might be seen as preserving knowl-

edge in a siloed container of "discrete inquiries" (xiv) is simultaneously a call to the reader to actively think with the authors, in order to connect varied threads and to frame implications. The project's premise of interdisciplinarity, even if variously construed, might be seen as a flaw in such sectioned structure, despite the presence of diagonal comparisons and the possibility of seeing this book, according to Miller, as "a report from a research project" (xv). With regard to the latter, he clearly understates.

The "pervasiveness of activity" (19) not only provides the book with its *raison d'être* but also frames conservation as a backdrop to the persistent activity of matter. In a nutshell, there is no such a thing as inactive matter; the activity of matter is a desideratum and a condition of possibility for conservation to exist. And thus, the first of the book's two introductions, authored by conservator Soon Kai Poh, offers a vision of conservation as an activity that forms a larger relationship between the sustenance of people and things. Soon Kai Poh's essay concisely, and convincingly, lays out the conceptual underpinnings of the book's sections and chapters, curated here into themes such as "material," "time," and "people." His fervent intervention ends with a stirring vision of conservation playing a central role at the nexus of interdisciplinary inquiry. Peter Miller's introduction strikes an historical tone, exposing, in a long-lens perspective, the author's long-standing immersion in the history of knowledge, including, but not limited to, discourses considering ruins and ruination. Forging a critical view on the assumed normativity of what he terms Euro-American conservation, he postulates a more global, less Western-centric conservation thinking and one that is "... true to Europe's own diverse heritage" (17). Braiding in the allusions to chapters that follow, Miller offers a complex, interdisciplinary perspective on active matter and conservation that he neatly concludes with lessons from quantum theory.

Introducing “Philosophy,” the first section of the book that includes chapters by Sherri Irvin, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Yuriko Saito, and Alva Noë, philosophers A. W. Eaton and Ivan Gaskell conceptually and empirically dissect the concept of the activity of matter and its value. They later turn to a normative query: When is matter’s activity something in need of resistance and/or repair, and when should it be facilitated or simply embraced? For those interested in analytical philosophy, this is a highly engaging and dense chapter, and a welcome theoretical intervention, especially since, as the reading progresses, we soon find out that the idea of activity of matter, or its activation, is treated with various degrees of depth and directness in the distinct sections of the book. It might be argued that the chapter’s claim to being a unique attempt to bring philosophy and conservation together, reveals a surprising oversight of essential discourses in contemporary conservation that have shaped the discipline for over two decades, and that continue to animate the field.⁹

Maintaining the philosophical character closer to the real-world encounter is the project of Irvin’s chapter. It discusses the concept of exemplification to shed light on the bodily and emotional effect that ruination and decaying works evoke. Irvin is widely read in conservation for her contributions to the topics such as the artist’s sanction and the rules in contemporary art.¹⁰ In her articulately formulated intervention, Irvin skillfully examines the expressive import of decay through the works of contemporary artists, including Zoe Leonard, Kara Walker, Marc Quinn, and Ai Weiwei. In the following chapter, Korsmeyer reexamines the concept of exemplification by calling upon examples of gradual and artificial decay structures. Providing a rich elaboration of the term “aesthetic property,” she considers the notions of imitation, allusion and exemplification, instructing the reader that aesthetic apparition can never be detached from reality, nor can perception be limited to the vi-

sual surface alone (95). A good restoration treatment, for example through inpainting, imitates a historical artifact as much as it exemplifies it. The two remaining chapters in this section are by Saito on the aesthetics of repair, and by Noë as a philosophical reflection on conservation. While Saito reveals how repairs might explicate material intelligence, wisdom and a deep notion of care on the part of those who execute them, Noë argues that artworks cannot be considered outside of their world, or of the Deweyan experience. The “working” of the art-work in the world, and its nexus with a wider world, are as fundamental to it as is its material component is to traditional conservation. Just as the California condor (a species that was at the verge of extinction and that has become Noë’s often refereed-to example) might exist only in relation to its environment, so can art conservation be about “...restaging, [and] maintaining the environment, the whole contexture in which the work can afford what it affords and can score what it scores” (127).¹¹

Introduced by art historian Ittai Weinryb’s invitation to try to make sense in the face of “the endless complexities of cultural circumstance, communal intentionality, and ritualistic consecration” that unfold from an Ur-moment (139), the book’s second section, “History,” is the most diverse in terms of operating on a common ground. To set the tone, Weinryb chooses a sourdough starter as an example from the human/non-human frontier. He argues, “Mechanisms for generation and maintenance are found in theories of creation and of the magical efficacy of manmade objects” (139). The reader is asked to grasp the relation between humans and their materials, along with their desire to conserve these materials’ activity. From André Laks’s search for the historical precursors of active matter in the pre-Socratic philosophies, through Guido Giglioni’s useful history of the activity of matter written with an admirable attentiveness to nuances and differentiations (e.g. activity as

derived from within or activated by external forces; 169), we begin to grasp matter as inherently vital, plastic, active, retaining information and keeping the memory of things alive. The section continues with conservator Spike Bucklow's call to apply ecological rather than chemistry-based approaches to the conservation of heritage. Investigating root screens in medieval East Anglian churches, Bucklow weaves their material and social histories together, arguing that our understanding of historical matter differs markedly from those people who created and cared for premodern artefacts. A telling conclusion of the History section is offered by Lee Palmer Wandel's illustrative account of transubstantiation as an example of the activity of matter, in which she looks into the "when" of the body and the blood of Christ in the matter of wine and bread.

Cultural anthropologist Aaron Glass inaugurates the third section of this book, "Indigenous Ontologies." Activity might be concerned with materials that are particularly unstable, items that demand intentional change over time, animate objects that possess "power" and works whose activation depends on assuring their embeddedness in networks and relations to knowledge, genealogy and practice. Among the questions asked are: What if the fundamental nature of the indigenous objects (or "Subject," or "Being") is change and transformation, liveness or even disappearance? (229)—a question strikingly reminiscent of contemporary art conservation; and, What if practices of care are made intrinsic to the object? Abstaining from limiting agency and intentionality to one individual, Glass invites social groups, communities of practice and the material thing itself to be agential and intentional, across space-time. Indigenous stewards and conservators are invited onto the stage, beginning with Sugpiaq scholar and curator Sven Haakanson, who revives knowledge about a type of open boat called *angyaaq* from the Kodiak region of Alaska, previously forgotten due to the impact of colonialism. Reawakening

pieces from the past that become "active resources for cultural futures" (239), intangible knowledge becomes embodied in tangible things. The chapter is not only convincing but also emotionally moving in that it does not fall into the lamentation for the lost past (despite the fact that it opens with a lamentation song), but rather celebrates the activation of knowledge and its return to community—an act of re-embedding into a living context that will spawn the future of a new generation of this culture's bearers. Similarly personal is Jamie Jacobs's account in the following chapter of Haudenosaunee people's aquatic and marine shells beads called *wampum*. Activated by an orator and a part of the indigenous people's history and culture on the east coast of the current US, the wampum require not only scientific conservation and care for their materials but also spiritual care that involves speaking to them with an incense of sacred tobacco by "proper Native stewards" (263). Kelly McHugh, a steward of collection at the National Museum of the American Indian, calls upon the imperative of "relational conservation care and treatment" (264). To preserve the activity of matter, and its cultural signification means to get to the "essence of the work" and to implement an Indigenous practice of "active and relational conservation." The Mi'kmaw idea of *Etauptmumk*, the "two-eyed seeing," is powerful in that it allows to combine the Indigenous and the Western forms of knowing, which might be beneficially applied to the care of active heritage. This account intimately links with this section's final chapter that addresses the process of revitalization of Maori knowledge in light of the conservation of the cultural heritage of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Rose Evans, a conservator of Maori descent, looks back at her 30-year conservation career and through this autobiographic lens, tells a story of artifacts as forms of living people that carry their *mana*, their authority. The chapter is an invaluable contribution to a cultural history of conservation, in which the main protagonist participates and mediates

two world views and glimpses, from a diachronic perspective, at the preservation of tangible and intangible Maori culture.

In the introduction to “Materials,” the book’s final section, conservation scientist Jennifer L. Mass astutely reminds us that even the most stable work is constituted by material interacting with its environment physically and chemically. The restiveness of materials is, in fact, the daily business of a scientist. Mass observes that, while new demands are being placed on cultural materials, the museums, whose aspiration is to become something more than warehouses for objects, ought to relax their desire to keep things intact. The section involves rich insights into conservation science. Chris McGlinchey tells the story of installing Tania Bruguera’s *Untitled (Havana, 2000)* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, accompanied by a detailed account of the rotting medium of sugar cane pulp, or bagasse, a part of Bruguera’s ambitious, politically charged work. Exploring the activity of metal soaps in paintings and disclosing misconceptions, Francesca Casadio advances an activist view of conservation collaborations and argues eloquently for a recognition of intersectionality, affirming the discomfort of not knowing. In a highly informative technical excursion into the preservation of holograms, Marc Walton, Pengxiao Hao, Marc Vermeulen, Florian Willomitzer, and Oliver Cossairt explore spectral imaging and the light-field capture as their potential documentation—an intriguing task given the ephemeral character of the image documented by a similarly ephemeral medium (the chapter is a real must-read for everyone interested in the intricacies of keeping and documenting holograms). And lastly, Marco Leona and Henry D. Smith II offer an inspiring account of another type of activity by tracing the history and genealogy of colors in Japanese woodblock prints. While they observe a “lively pattern of semiotic activity” (378) demonstrated in historical interpretations of the changing qualities of the prints,

they argue for an accounting for the changing meanings of materials alongside their changing materiality.

What remains after the reading of *Conserving Active Matter* is a rich imprint of many philosophical, historical, anthropological, and material ideas that collage in the reader’s mind to offer a profound, multilayered view on—and to the same extent instigate new queries about—the manifold entanglements of conservation and (its) matter. The book succeeds in presenting a broad range of thinking about conservation’s relation to active matter and conversely, active matter’s relationship to the various communities of care and stakeholders—makers and users, curators, conservators, beholders and museum visitors. The book can be praised for its attempt to mobilize thinking about conservation beyond what might be perceived as a hermetic environment of conservators-specialists, putting it in dialogue with other stakeholders—historians, anthropologists, philosophers, stewards of Indigenous collections and Indigenous caretakers. The authors of the various introductions and lead texts went to great efforts to ensure that the activity of matter is not construed as metaphor but that the book’s individual sections demonstrate a depth of thought intrinsic to their individual fields.

Unlike the rich picture of active matter that might be taken away from this reading, the notion of conservation seems, at times, to mean virtually any effort that makes things survive material oblivion. This status quo does not pair up well with the absence of scholarship in the theory and philosophy of conservation from the past three decades, generated, unexclusively although with a great impetus, in the realm of contemporary art (exceptions are both introductions, which briefly allude to this scholarship).¹² And therefore, the understanding of contemporary conservation as implied in the interstices of this book’s sections and chapters seems limited to a selection of media and means that ultimately either resonate, or speak to, mostly the material-

based complications. There is no arguing that in their material intelligence, astute assessments, and smart conclusions the chapters of this book are a *must read*, and specifically for those interested in their respective subject matter. I would however argue that the book's one shortcoming lies in its representation of contemporary conservation as reduced here mostly to a material and object-based science placed at the end of this notable anthology, as if in agreement with its "Western *modus operandi*," where it can (too easily) be opposed by Indigenous care systems exemplified in the book's preceding section. In that respect, the book does not give due respect to the fact that many of the ideas presented throughout its pages—of communities and networks of care, living knowledge, bodily and oral ways of transmission, environmental thinking, creative migrations/emulations, activation from ruin and reconstruction from loss—have been an intrinsic part of the scholarship of contemporary conservation.

This criticism aside, it is important to recognize this book's illustrious achievement: The coming together of the otherwise distinct fields of intellectual and empirical practice, the true effects of which might reveal themselves, as Miller predicts, only in the future (xvi). This, too,

is a form of caring, and conserving through conveying, a form of non-egoistic, anti-individualistic afterlife, perhaps even akin in some respect to the sense envisioned by Lowenthal. I agree with Soon Kai Poh's assertion, that "... by conserving, we reassure ourselves of our own activity in this world" (6). Along these lines, but changing the perspective, I would add that we also reassure ourselves of the activity of conservation, that is, the persistence of the cultural shifts and changes in *doing* and *thinking* conservation. Stepping aside from the view of conservation as merely a context for the activity of matter, what if it is not only the object and matter that change, but also conservation itself?

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- 1 David Lowenthal, *Conservation Past and Present*, Sylvester Baxter Lecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, November 17, 2014, 9. URL: https://issuu.com/criticalconservation-harvardgsd/docs/cc_lowenthal_transcript (last accessed March 17, 2023).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 3 *Cultural Histories of the Material World* has published this author's recent anthology. Hanna B. Hölling (ed.), *Object—Event—Performance: Art, Materiality and Continuity since the 1960s* (New York 2022). An earlier book occurred in conclusion of her inaugural professorship in the project *Cultures of Conservation*. Eadem, *Revisions—Zen for Film* (exh. cat. New York, Bard Graduate Center Gallery), New York 2015.
- 4 Borrowed from Karen Barad, the notion of "together-apart" accounts for entanglements of things that do

- not erase differences, "... entanglings entail differentiating, differentiating entails entanglings. One move—*cutting together apart*." Karen Barad, *Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart*, in: *Parallax* 20, 2014, no. 3, 176, DOI: 10.1080/13534645.2014.927623. I use the "together-apart" as to emphasize a concomitant separation of the disciplines represented in the book.
- 5 In 2012, the BGC received its first substantial funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (now known as the Mellon Foundation) for the *Cultures of Conservation* research/curricular initiative which would be further supported by the Foundation over a period of ten years and include *Conserving Active Matter*. In his Preface (xii), Miller credits the Humboldt's scholar of art history Horst Bredekamp and the research cluster

- Image. Knowledge. Gestaltung* for implicating the perspective of art, architecture and design on active matter, as well as the MIT Active Matter Summit which presented perspectives by materials scientists. “Cultures of Conservation,” Bard Graduate Center’s website, URL: <https://www.bgc.bard.edu/research-forum/projects/3/cultures-of-conservation> (last accessed April 16, 2023). For *Conserving Active Matter*, see the section “About the Second Phase (2017–22)” on the *Cultures of Conservation* website.
- 6 “Conserving Active Matter: Online Exhibition,” Bard Graduate Center website, URL: <https://www.bgc.bard.edu/exhibitions/exhibitions/130/conserving-active-matter> (last accessed April 16, 2023).
 - 7 This need is manifested in large and mid-scale interdisciplinary research projects such as the Marie Curie-Skłodowska-funded *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, the University of Vienna’s *Global Conservation* project supported by the European Research Council and the projects funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation at the Bern Academy of the Arts, *Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge and Activating Fluxus*, to name but a few.
 - 8 For a compilation of recordings from the BGC’s Conserving Active Matter initiative, see URL: <https://www.youtube.com/@bardgradcenter/videos>.
 - 9 In addition to a significant contribution by Salvador Muñoz Viñas that gets mentioned by the authors, the incorporation of philosophy into the conservation critical considerations has a long tradition in writings authored, among others, and across generations and “genres,” by Pip Laurenson, Glenn Wharton, Hiltrud Schintzel, Iwona Szmelter, Jorge Otero-Pailos, Frank Matero, Tina Fiske, Rebecca Gordon, Hélia Marçal, Brian Castriota, and Anna Schäffler, to name but a few. Philosophers, too, have picked up the topic of conservation, to name only the fine writing of Jean Pierre Commetti, Renée van de Vall or Bruno Latour. Moreover, the conservation scholarship of the recent past—too vast to be refereed to here fully—does not shy away from philosophical queries. Rather, it draws from analytic philosophy, critical theory, philosophical aestheticist and, more recently, feminist new materialisms and agential realisms.
 - 10 Sherri Irvin, *Immaterial: Rules in Contemporary Art*, Oxford 2022.
 - 11 See also Alva Noë, *Conserving Ourselves/Creating Ourselves*, in: *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, ed. by Caroline Fowler and Alexander Nagel, New Heaven and London 2023, 84–91.
 - 12 Note also the BGC’s other publications on this topic, cf. footnote 3.