

11 Intermedial translations

Storytelling Fluxus

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Greek painting, though largely lost to time, lives on through a tapestry of secondary sources: pottery paintings, Roman copies and creative work rendered in an entirely different format—namely, written texts. Ancient sources like the writings of the Greek traveler Pausanias (c. 110–180 CE) provide crucial documentation of Greek art and artists, preserving knowledge of notable works and the lives of their creators. In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias meticulously depicts two paintings by Polygnotos (c. 500–440 BCE) that once adorned the walls of the sanctuary at Delphi.¹ The first, titled *Iliupersis*, represented the aftermath of the Trojan War, while the second, *Nekyia*, portrayed Odysseus’s descent into Hades.² Today, our understanding of Polygnotos’s works comes solely through Pausanias’s account and subsequent interpretations based on his descriptions.

By the time Pausanias documented these paintings, they had weathered approximately six centuries of display and most certainly showed signs of deterioration.³ Despite this, his account delivers detailed descriptions of each figure and element, likely filling gaps with his imagination, while commenting on Polygnotos’s skill in capturing the figures’ character. However, Pausanias’s report has notable omissions—he rarely mentions colors. The medium itself remains uncertain—whether fresco or wood panels. While evidence suggests that Polygnotos worked on wooden supports elsewhere—Pliny describes one such panel transported to Rome—the only indication of the use of a wooden support at Delphi is a single drill hole that might have anchored a panel to the wall.⁴ These omissions affect efforts to recreate the works, even those undertaken in the imagination. This limitation of available evidence perhaps explains art historian Susan Woodford’s observation that none of our sources on Greek painting is “entirely satisfactory.”⁵

Although Pausanias’s description is invaluable, the gaps in his account nonetheless provoke speculative questions about his perspective. Had he been a painter or a caretaker of the temple—or an ancient conservator, for that matter—his account might have included crucial information about painting techniques, pigment choices, surface preparation and the paintings’ state of preservation. Would such a description then be better and more satisfactory for future understandings of what these works were, beyond what they depicted? Would such a description be a better trigger for our imagination to recreate these lost representations? And finally,

would it be a better gateway to experiencing these pieces and perhaps a means to preserve them?

Another challenge with Pausanias's transmission of Polygnotos's paintings concerns the reliability of his accounts, which have remained contentious for centuries. While often labeled a geographer, Pausanias was primarily a writer and creative interpreter. His descriptions—identified by Donald Preziosi as the first surviving example of European art criticism—inevitably reveal subjective judgments.⁶ Before twentieth-century archaeological excavations validated many of Pausanias's accounts, classicists typically dismissed his writings as literary constructions, viewing him as a compiler of second-hand narratives rather than a first-hand observer.⁷ This uncertainty speaks to a broader challenge in art history and heritage studies: the limitations of verbal narrative as a method of cultural heritage conservation, which UNESCO describes as “extending the life of cultural heritage while strengthening transmission of its messages and values.”⁸

Conservation, as a field of study and practice, is broadly understood as the effort to perpetuate material culture by prolonging the physical characteristics of cultural heritage. Unlike the preservation of performing arts like music and theater, visual arts conservation has traditionally focused on preserving tangible objects that serve as conduits for engagement with art. Only recently has art conservation, especially in the context of contemporary art, started addressing the intangible aspects of artworks and begun to develop methods that go beyond its traditionally material-focused tools.⁹ Whether addressing the material or immaterial, conservation inherently involves decisions about what and how to preserve, with the endurance of physical objects historically being paramount. The subjective choices, perspectives and creativity inherent in conservation inevitably shape the future of objects of conservation. Yet, this subjectivity—and the framing of conservation as a creative act—remains contentious in a field long self-identified as “scientific.”¹⁰

Within this context, the afterlife of Greek painting raises compelling questions: Can verbal narrative serve as a method of collecting and preserving art, especially for intermedial works where physical artifacts often yield primacy to the work's functionality or experientiality? What limits of media translation and creative interpretation can one meaningfully negotiate in such a transformative process? Drawing from *Radio Fluxus*, a podcast series produced by the author within the research project *Activating Fluxus* (2022–26),¹¹ this chapter investigates the potential of narrative—particularly oral storytelling—as a medium of engaging with intermedial art. Each episode of *Radio Fluxus* features a narrative by a scholar, artist, curator or conservator centered on a specific Fluxus artwork. In this series, artworks are regarded as the protagonists—nonhuman entities given a voice through their human representatives.

This discussion explores the theoretical foundations of *Radio Fluxus*, where subjectivity and creativity—manifested throughout podcast production—serve as guiding principles. Beginning with an analysis of intermedial works' translatability across media formats, it explores narration as a tool for conveying experience. Within the framework of intersemiotic translation between images and words, it assesses ekphrasis—its strengths and limitations—as a tool for transmitting

intermedial works. Expanding on this foundation, the essay introduces the “conservator’s lens”—an approach that enhances ekphrasis by incorporating a work’s technical, material and sensorial dimensions. From here, it turns to storytelling’s distinct characteristics and, through oral history theory, compares podcast production with the creation of oral history sources. By investigating podcasting as a tool for sustaining Fluxus works, the chapter suggests activation as a potential method and identifies collective creativity as essential to this process.

Intermedial, notation-based and exemplativist art

The concept of “intermedia” emerged in 1966 through the writings of Dick Higgins, a founding member of Fluxus and the visionary behind Something Else Press, a publishing house dedicated to avant-garde literature and artist’s books. Higgins appropriated the term to articulate a new artistic frontier: works that deliberately occupied the space between established categories of art.¹²

Intermedia emerged from Fluxus’s development of an allographic model of iterative production¹³—a system in which artworks, whether images, objects or performances, were repeatedly created based on a score, with each iteration producing distinct results. Fluxus’s notation-based practice facilitated the translation of works across different media, where, as art historian Natilee Harren suggests, medium functions as a set of operations independent of specific materials.¹⁴ This capacity to flux between media has been expressed through the notion of “trans-media,” introduced by Mieko Shiomi to articulate a work’s ability to shift across different forms of expression.¹⁵

In the Cagean tradition, from which Fluxus scores emerged, the score was conceived as a generator of actions, allowing as many unique and unpredictable realizations as respondents could devise.¹⁶ Fluxus scores were predominantly textual or, as Julia Robinson suggests, linguistic in nature,¹⁷ and characterized by their clarity of language, modest scale, minimal formatting and simplicity.¹⁸ However, other types of scores also exist, such as those described by Hanna B. Hölling as “three-dimensional scores” and by Natilee Harren as “notational objects”—“objects that suggested score-like qualities of enaction,” as Harren puts it.¹⁹ This implies that the medium of a score is not fixed and does not necessarily rely on graphic notation or written instructions. In fact, some performances that began as interpretations of textual scores eventually became scores themselves, whether intentionally or not. One example of such a work is Nam June Paik’s notorious *Zen for Head* (1961).

Paik’s interpretation of La Monte Young’s *Composition 1960 #10 to Bob Morris* (“Draw a straight line and follow it”) evolved into a new work when it premiered in Cologne.²⁰ In *Zen for Head*, Paik, using his hair as a brush, crawled along paper spread on the floor, translating his bodily gestures into a calligraphed line. A later performance of the piece in Wiesbaden (1962) was captured on film and widely distributed, becoming a reference point for subsequent interpretations.²¹ *Zen for Head* gained new dimensions in 1964 when fellow Fluxus artist Ben Vautier performed it in Nice, presenting it as *Opera de Nam June Paik*.²² Rather than

following a straight line, Vautier created organic, quasi-circular shapes with his head on paper stretched across the floor and a wall mounted on the stage. Although preceding Higgins's formulation of the concept of intermedia, Paik's realization of La Monte Young's score serves as an example of a work born from a score that became a (nontextual) score itself, an intermedial artwork, occupying a space between theater and calligraphy.

Just as the works transitioned over time, the concept of intermedia was also in flux and was expanded by Higgins in his 1976 "An Exemplativist Manifesto."²³ Higgins suggests here that the notation-based creative process transcends singular outcomes, instead revealing a spectrum of possibilities. The work is not the single realization but the dialectic between that realization and its alternatives.²⁴ Through notation and a single instance of realization, the audience constructs mental images of the artwork's potential manifestations. When these possibilities are realized in any particular way, the result is inherently arbitrary, serving as an example rather than a definitive version. In such "exemplative art," understanding what the realization exemplifies matters more than focusing on the precise structure of any single outcome.

The distinctive qualities of Fluxus intermedial art—its score-based nature, interpretive openness, cross-media adaptability and emphasis on process, where outcomes serve merely as instances or examples—suggest broader possibilities for dissemination and alternative modes of perpetuation than conventional cultural heritage practices. Institutions, particularly museums, tend to reduce the display of these complex works to their material outcomes, privileging static objects that represent only their selected and predominantly visual aspects. This reductive tendency extends to collecting and conservation practices, which similarly struggle to encompass the works' experiential dimensions.²⁵

Consider, for instance, Ken Friedman's *Open and Shut Case* (1965), featured in episode four of *Radio Fluxus*.²⁶ The work's score instructs the creation of a box inscribed with two imperative sentences: "open me," on the lid, and "shut quick," on the inside. George Maciunas's 1966 iteration ingeniously incorporates a subpoena—a court summons—as the box's label, summoning the viewer to a hearing of the "open and shut case" (a playful nod to the legal term for a straightforward, easily resolved matter), with Friedman listed as the plaintiff. Following the score's instructions, the interior contains the directive "shut quick." One can stipulate that the work's experience lies in the gesture of opening the box and encountering the instruction within. However, this element is typically lost in common display practices, where Fluxus boxes are predominantly exhibited in vitrines.²⁷ While it might be possible to simultaneously display both the box's interior and exterior, such presentation would sacrifice the element of surprise that follows the act of opening. When it comes to collecting, this is limited to the one selected example of the work, without the inclusion of the score or any other existing or potential realizations. Conservation practices typically prioritize preserving the box's material authenticity—its plastic structure and printed label—over its interactive function. This approach assumes that, as a collection piece, the work will rarely if ever be handled, with access restricted to authorized personnel and researchers.

This emphasis on material form at the cost of experience exemplifies how institutional collecting and conservation practices inevitably select which aspects of an artwork will be presented and preserved. While the physical object endures, its experiential dimension transforms from lived reality into mere conjecture.

Since collecting and conservation inevitably involve selection, why not critically reconsider which aspects of works we choose to collect and preserve? What if, instead of prioritizing physical artifacts, we focused on their performative and experiential qualities? Following Higgins's "An Exemplativist Manifesto," an alternative approach to collecting could emphasize gathering multiple examples of a work—both physical and documented—to represent its broader possibilities. Similarly, in the spirit of Shiomi's notion of transmedia, we might explore different media that could better transmit these nonmaterial features. This approach guided Radio Fluxus's exploration of storytelling and podcasting as a means of enabling such transitions.

Prospects and perils of thinking in terms of stories

Hannah B Higgins positions Fluxus experiences as synonymous with the works themselves, asserting that Fluxus forms fundamentally "argue ontologically for the value of primary experiences over secondary experiences."²⁸ Her core claim is that this prioritization challenges attempts to assign fixed, permanent meanings to artworks.²⁹ Contemporary modes of displaying Fluxus art often fail to create space for primary experiences, instead prioritizing static, visually focused displays. This approach constrains interpretation and risks ossifying meaning. Potential remedies include using exhibition devices that emulate primary experiences, introducing participatory approaches and employing strategies of enactment. As showcased in this book, these approaches are often effective and indeed allow this primary experience and therefore the aesthetic experience of the work to take place (see Brooks, Chapter 7 in this volume). These strategies are, however, inherently situational, being produced for particular occasions and contexts (in museums, galleries, et cetera). This temporal and contextual nature raises questions: How can we ensure continuity of experiential engagement beyond single events? Which strategies might help transmit the primary experience effectively through secondary sources without calcifying their meaning? Pausanias's account of Polygnotos's painting suggests a compelling direction: storytelling—with its unique ability to transform lived experience into shared knowledge while preserving ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretation.

Narrative, whether written or oral, is a fundamental human strategy for understanding core elements of our experience, such as time, process and change. Walter Fisher, who introduced the narrative paradigm to communication theory and coined the term "Homo narrans," positions humans as natural storytellers whose narrative instinct precedes their capacity for language or logical reasoning.³⁰ Stories are told for myriad reasons and serve diverse purposes. Among these, cultural continuation emerges as a powerful yet often unintended consequence.³¹ As a performative practice, storytelling is often classified as intangible cultural heritage, while it

simultaneously acts as a vessel for transmitting other heritage forms such as rituals, traditions and ancestral knowledge. Yet this transmission is far from straightforward. Stories shimmer with ambiguity, inviting multiple interpretations and evolving with each retelling, particularly in oral traditions. They bear the imprint of every storyteller's lived experience while being reshaped by each audience's response. This very malleability—this capacity to shift and adapt—enables stories to resonate across diverse publics, cultures and generations.

Walter Benjamin observed that the storyteller “takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”³² Storytelling thus is “the ability to exchange experiences.”³³ Benjamin's observation finds poignant illustration in episode three of *Radio Fluxus*, which presents Mieko Shiomi's *Mirror Piece* (1963).³⁴ The story follows the narrator, art historian Sally Kawamura, to a windswept Welsh beach, where she transforms into a performer, bringing Shiomi's instructions to life. Her detailed narration—“The sensations of performing the event, the feel of the water, the wobbliness of walking backwards, and the surprise of finding just myself in the sea”—becomes a conduit for collective experience. By meticulously describing sensory details—her long skirt floating, welly boots filling with water—Kawamura converts her individual artistic exploration into a shared imaginative journey, where experience is not merely observed but co-experienced.

Storytelling organizes disconnected experiences into meaningful, interconnected parts of a larger narrative, such as a biography or history.³⁵ Though typically applied to human lives, the concept of biography can equally describe artworks, capturing their development, recontextualization and reinterpretation across different phases and pivotal transitions.³⁶ Notably, recent conservation scholarship suggests that writing an artwork's biography may itself be an act of conservation.³⁷ In making this claim, scholars also point to the subjective nature of this act, which inevitably incorporates the standpoint of the narrator. This subjectivity becomes particularly pronounced when the artist himself assumes the role of storyteller—the biography of the work and that of the narrator may become deeply intertwined.

Individuals construct their identities and make sense of their experiences through the continuous process of telling and retelling narratives about themselves in relation to others.³⁸ When considering storytelling as a potential means for the continuation of an artwork, this narrator bias merits examination from two distinct perspectives that illuminate the complexity of this transmission process. On the one hand, an artwork's biography risks fixing variable meanings and potentials in much the same way that a static exhibition of physical remnants from past realizations can constrain interpretation. On the other hand, since these biographies are shaped by individual narrators, they inevitably tend to amplify stories that align with the narrator's self-image. In both cases, once a particular perspective becomes embedded within the story, it tends to persist through repeated retellings, even as the narrative evolves over time.

The first risk—fixing meaning in experiential works—can be mitigated by storytelling's inherent ambiguity. Unlike static information delivery, such as museum wall labels, storytelling suggests associations rather than prescribing meaning.

Benjamin argued that modern communication diminished storytelling, replacing it with information delivery, which aims to convey “the pure essence of the thing.”³⁹ By contrast, storytelling “sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again,” embracing ambiguity and inviting personal interpretation.⁴⁰ Significantly, throughout the episodes of *Radio Fluxus*, narrators avoid imposing their interpretations, instead offering connections and suggestions that encourage audiences to form their own readings. Perhaps this is also a consequence of Fluxus works’ inherent resistance to unidimensional reading.

This gesture of suggesting connections while avoiding interpretations is exemplified in episode seven, where Alice Centamore shares her engagement with Alison Knowles’s score *Performance Piece #8* (1965) and its graphic manifestation *The “T” Dictionary* (1965). In her account, Centamore explores the relationship between the score and its graphic interpretation by indicating which parts correspond to each other, rather than attempting to decode the score’s meaning or how the translation between media directly relates to it.⁴¹

To examine the second meaning of storytelling as a vehicle for an artwork’s continuation—specifically the narrator’s bias in crafting stories that support their personal narrative—let us revisit episode four, which considers Friedman’s *Open and Shut Case* (1965), narrated by the artist himself. His story of the work’s conception intertwines with his first encounters with the Fluxus network. As a young man, he learned about a book recently published by Something Else Press and requested a review copy. This triggered a letter exchange with Higgins, who invited Friedman to stay with him during his next visit to New York. During this stay, Friedman created a version of *Open and Shut Case* for Higgins, who suggested showing it to his artist friend George Maciunas, Fluxus’s organizer. Maciunas, impressed by the work, declared Friedman a “concept artist” and invited him to join Fluxus. This story is repeated in Friedman’s writings and those about him.⁴² It also circulates in Fluxus historiography.⁴³ Although this account is foundational for Friedman as a core member of Fluxus—he was only sixteen at the time he joined the network—it does not undermine the reliability of the artwork’s biography. Instead, it adds a personal dimension to the account of the work’s development, narrated from the creator’s perspective. The story situates the work within Fluxus mythology—and, ultimately, it’s such a good story.

Ekphrastic narration and the power of rhetorical devices

Classicist Don Paul Fowler states that “narrative is about people, description deals with things.”⁴⁴ While narratives excel at conveying the experiential aspects of Fluxus art, they may struggle when addressing its outcomes. To describe Polygnotos’s paintings, Pausanias employed a rhetorical device known as “ekphrasis.” Broadly, ekphrasis involves the description of a person, place or thing, but its scope extends beyond mere description. Aelius Theon’s *Progymnasmata* defines it as “descriptive language that brings what is portrayed vividly before the mind’s eye of the audience.”⁴⁵ By detailing physical aspects and sensory perceptions—not only visual but also acoustic and tactile—ekphrasis allows audiences to virtually

witness the scene, invoking both bodily and emotional engagement. Quintilian, a Roman teacher of rhetoric, compared ekphrasis to a journey (*periēgēsis*), where the speaker or writer guides the audience through the described scene.⁴⁶ This analogy underscores how, by directing the audience's attention, ekphrasis organizes and assigns meaning. Quintilian also highlights the emotional power of mental images created through ekphrasis, which captivate the audience and persuade them by immersing them in the speaker's perspective.⁴⁷

In a narrower sense related to the subject of this chapter, ekphrasis is a literary device in which words attempt to represent an object from the visual arts. James Heffernan succinctly defines it as “a verbal representation of visual representation.”⁴⁸ Within this framework, the potential and limitations of ekphrasis have been widely debated in both literary studies and art history, notably by W.J.T. Mitchell. His concept of “ekphrastic indifference” suggests that a verbal representation cannot replicate the visual presence of its object in the same way that a visual representation can. It may refer to, describe or invoke an object, but it can never convey its visual presence as pictures do.⁴⁹ This notion is exemplified by Umberto Eco's observation that while ekphrasis allows an image to be described in words, no description of Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1504) could fully capture the sense of perspective, the fluidity of lines or the harmony of colors as perceived by the viewer.⁵⁰

The method employed in Radio Fluxus follows what Mitchell terms “ekphrastic hope,” which, when realized, allows the listener or reader to “see” the object through the narrator's voice.⁵¹ This approach assumes that intermedial works are not confined to physical objects or their aesthetic qualities. In this sense, ekphrasis transcends mimesis, that is, imitation of nature. It goes beyond merely describing what is visible to the human eye. The mental images evoked do not need to be exact replicas of the described objects or events. Instead, ekphrasis expresses associations between elements, reflecting the principles of exemplative art and notation-based interpretive practices by showing how particular creative outcomes can stand in for or represent a broader concept and the layered meanings that emerge from multiple interpretations.

Consider, for instance, episode five of Radio Fluxus, which explores *Orange Event No. 3* (1963) by Bengt af Klintberg.⁵² This narrative, as told by art historian Magdalena Holdar, guides the listener through various realizations of the work—textual, objectual, sensory and performative. It begins with the creation of the score, followed by its first published version in Swedish and its English translation. It further examines the work's visual and objectual representations, which, in the tradition of Fluxus boxes, invite user participation. As the story unfolds, the enactments of the score are discussed, including performances by af Klintberg himself and other artists. It concludes with a personal reflection from Holdar, who recounts her use of the score in teaching and describes her students' engagement with the work. Holdar's account reveals how all realizations are deeply intertwined, with the images of each iteration complementing one another to build a more complete vision of the work.

Mitchell suggests that the central aim of “ekphrastic hope” can be described as “the overcoming of otherness,” where the art of words engages with “alien” modes of representation—its “semiotic others,” such as visual art forms.⁵³ For intermedial works, however, the opposition between distinct art genres and media is already illusory, as these works inherently exist between mediums, transcending the supposed discord between them. A key aspect here is the translatability of intermedial works across the languages of art and their capacity to simultaneously inhabit various mediums. Radio Fluxus embraces this multiplicity by collecting and displaying instances and interpretations of *Orange Event No. 3*, demonstrating the diverse ways in which the work can be approached. It explores the piece as a poem, a magical formula, a formal exercise in geometry, a score for enactment, a printed word, a participatory art object, a print and an event. By bringing together these varied iterations, Radio Fluxus seeks to convey the work’s complexity and its myriad possibilities, while simultaneously acknowledging the inherent limitations of fully capturing it, as future realizations are yet to come.

The other dimensions of Mitchell’s discourse on ekphrasis are covered by the concept of “ekphrastic fear,” which emerges from the recognition that this rhetorical device can potentially misrepresent a work. This dimension poses ethical questions about the boundaries of ekphrasis, arising from the risk of transforming its object by diminishing it through oversimplification or overinterpretation. This “fear” parallels discussions in art conservation, where representational fidelity and the interpretive subjectivity of mediators are key concerns. Ekphrasis pushes the limits of the traditional notion of authenticity, which prioritizes material integrity—a concept that, despite being increasingly scrutinized and deconstructed within the field of heritage preservation, continues to function as a point of reference for conservation practice.

The final intriguing aspect of ekphrasis as a method for art perpetuation lies in its inherent uncertainty of authorship. Ekphrasis, Mitchell writes, creates a “specific image that is to be found nowhere else,” which demands consideration not merely as a description, but as an independent, authored creation.⁵⁴ As argued, ekphrasis is a complex (inter)relational process involving the speaking subject, the described object or event and the listener. This entanglement of human and nonhuman actors reveals the inherently subjective nature of representation. It also challenges traditional notions of authorship that assume a single, identifiable creator as the primary source of artistic work, something already complicated by the character of art designated as intermedial or exemplary. However, this complication, which may potentially frame the work as a complex network of interactions and an ongoing collective endeavor, aligns with the spirit of Fluxus—one that, at least in Maciunas’s vision, sought to eliminate the concept of authorship altogether.

The “conservator’s lens”: an approach

The initial suggestion that Pausanias’s descriptive accuracy might have been enhanced had he possessed the technical expertise of an artist or conservator reveals

another approach central to Radio Fluxus: practitioners with intimate hands-on experience develop unique ways of understanding art. Artist-researcher Émilie Parendeau's detailed examination of Robert Filliou's *The Futile Box*, presented in this book, exemplifies this principle (see Chapter 8). Building on this foundation and focusing on conservation, I present the concept of the "conservator's lens" as a professional perspective and analytical framework emerging from practice. In the following analysis, I argue that this distinctive mode of observation, deployed as an interpretive strategy, can potentially enhance ekphrasis and perhaps also its capacity for preservation.

The catalyst for this argument is a story circulating in the field about a conservator at a contemporary art institution who was engaged by her museum's mediation department to create tours for visually impaired visitors. Their conservation training—with its emphasis on meticulous technical analysis and systematic description—proved remarkably effective for crafting narratives that enabled nonsighted visitors to construct mental images of the artworks. Significantly, the conservator's detailed technical descriptions offered more than merely conveying the artworks' visual appearance; they provided access to the artworks' conceptual, structural and material complexities. This experience suggests that the conservator's approach to describing artworks could offer enriched modes of understanding that transcend purely visual engagement.

A foundational tenet of conservation is that any heritage item—be it a cultural artifact or an artwork—must undergo detailed analysis before any intervention begins. This detailed examination serves multiple purposes: it underpins decision-making, documents materials and techniques, reveals any physical alterations and assesses the item's current condition.⁵⁵ This analysis typically relies on visual and haptic examination, at times supplemented by scientific analytical techniques. For functional objects, such as mechanical devices, and artworks with technological components, the focus extends to understanding their operation and intended use. In art conservation, this framework also considers the work's conceptual foundations and its intended and unintended meanings. Conservators are trained in this comprehensive mode of analysis to systematically deconstruct the object of conservation across material, technical, functional and conceptual dimensions—a method I term the "conservator's lens."

The results of analysis are typically recorded in "examination and treatment reports,"⁵⁶ pointing to documentation as a cornerstone principle of conservation and yet another means of perpetuating artifacts and artworks through text. Significantly, technical analysis need not be directly linked to a planned conservation treatment but can be undertaken purely for research purposes. This approach has given rise to the field of technical art history, which, to paraphrase Erma Hermens, aims at a thorough understanding of the physical object in terms of original intention, choice of materials and techniques, as well as the context in and for which the work was created, its meaning and its contemporary perception.⁵⁷ The evolution from applied examination methodology into a distinctive field underscores the broader potential of the "conservator's lens" in understanding cultural heritage items.

The structural framework of conservation documentation exhibits considerable variation across conservation cultures and specialized domains within the field. Certain heritage items, particularly those characterized by their temporal and experiential nature, including media artworks, resist conventional documentation frameworks such as templates and databases, organized around the notions of “original materials and techniques,” “alterations” and “condition.” Due to their characteristics, they demand documentation in forms of linear narrative—an approach termed the “technical narrative” in conservation scholarship, and which is established as the documentation standard for time-based art.⁵⁸ This method comprises a comprehensive description of the work’s behavior, addressing its function and operational mechanisms. It incorporates detailed analysis of components, examining their individual roles and functional relationships while providing a high-level analysis of how they integrate to form a cohesive system.⁵⁹ The inspiring tool of “technical narrative,” combining description and narration, could possibly be applied to intermedial works, mediating between their physical manifestations and the “immaterial technicalities” of both the processes of making and resultant performative events. It also demonstrates that narrative is already recognized as a valuable tool in conservation.⁶⁰

Radio Fluxus established a distinctive approach by integrating detailed technical (material and sensory) descriptions of a work’s specific iteration as a starting point for each narrative. This approach honors the visual as a category in art, acknowledging its reliance on images, while engaging with mental rather than physical representations. Conservator Albrecht Gumlich demonstrates this approach in episode one, where he discusses Ben Patterson’s *Hooked* (1980), based on his experience with the piece at the Getty Research Institute.⁶¹ In episode six, Yann Chateigné Tytelman offers an experiential account of John Armleder’s *Dream Piece* (1976) by approaching the work as a performer rather than a traditional conservator.⁶² His enactment of the piece—considered by some as a method of performance perpetuation—is the basis for crafting a personal yet precise depiction, revealing the subtle nature of the performance:

The performer moves very little, he remains silent. The audience perhaps expects something exciting to happen but . . . the performer executes very few gestures and is a spectator himself of something else. . . . In that sense the action is close to fusional immersion of the performer in the environment.⁶³

However, many narrators—particularly art historians—often struggled to describe the objects in such intimate detail, likely due to their lack of direct physical experience with the pieces. Some contributors appeared to treat technical details as secondary, quickly pivoting to more familiar territory like the artist’s biography or broader oeuvre. Even among those more invested in providing details that might elicit mental images of objects or events, coherent structural presentation remained challenging, with descriptions often jumping inconsistently between different aspects of the object or event described. Ultimately, the “conservator’s lens” guiding and shaping these descriptions was perhaps that of the Radio Fluxus producer, editor and this chapter’s author—a conservator specialized in contemporary art.

The distinctive attributes of orality and the oral histories of art(works)

While our discussion has thus far examined narrative primarily as linguistic expression—both written and spoken—this chapter places special emphasis on oral storytelling. The privileging of the written word within artistic and cultural discourse can be credited to its perceived endurance, its potential for dissemination and its historical role as the code of educated elites.⁶⁴ Yet speech remains our most fundamental form of human connection, possessing qualities that writing cannot fully capture and remaining intrinsic to our epistemological frameworks of understanding. Moreover, text relies on sight, and, in a world dominated by visual media and saturation from visual stimuli, people increasingly seek refuge in non-visual ways of experiencing reality—alternatives to both looking and reading. This may explain the steady rise of podcasts since their inception in the early 2000s—a medium that exemplifies the resurgence of oral storytelling in digital culture and one that has transformed how we engage with narrative in our daily lives.

The art of storytelling depends on our ability to remember and retell stories, demanding a particular kind of mental receptivity that comes through listening. The biblical Hebrew word *dabar* (דבר) carries a dual meaning as both “word” and “event”—a linguistic fusion that points directly to the dynamic nature of spoken language.⁶⁵ Unlike written or printed text, which exists in a fixed, object-like state, the spoken word manifests as pure, immersive event—a temporal movement that emerges, resonates and dissolves in time.⁶⁶ Walter Ong observes that while sight creates distance and separation—placing us as external observers who must actively scan our environment piece by piece, sound envelops and integrates. As we listen, we become the center of a sensory experience. In Ong’s words, “You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight.”⁶⁷

Live oral storytelling is characterized by nonverbal communication, real-time audience interaction and natural malleability—creating a dynamic interplay between speaker, listener and narrative as stories evolve with each telling. While recorded oral storytelling necessarily limits these interactive features, it introduces its own distinct advantages. This technologically mediated form retains the spontaneity and fluid narrative style typical of spoken stories, along with the intimacy of the human voice, while offering unique capabilities like the ability to pause, replay and, most importantly, to transcend the temporal and spatial constraints of live performance. It achieves a balanced compromise: maintaining the essence of oral tradition while producing content that can be easily accessed and shared by a wider audience, thereby improving the chances that the stories it tells will endure through time.

The theoretical perspective from which recorded oral storytelling as a preservation practice can be profitably examined is that offered by oral history. As a field, oral history encompasses the collection of historical information through recorded interviews with individuals who possess firsthand knowledge of past events, the scholarly analysis of these sources and their dissemination. At its core, oral history

elevates individual memory and the spoken word, offering the speaker a space where personal narratives can flourish.⁶⁸ Throughout its evolution as both method and field of study, it has come to embrace the concept of memory stories—those fluid, ever-shifting narratives that emerge from our remembrances.⁶⁹ Although oral histories are products of interviews or guided conversations, they often involve storytelling, especially when narrators are empowered to “take control” and to guide the narrative direction. Radio Fluxus adopted the philosophy of “offering space,” weaving it into the very fabric of its methodology. While each narrative originated as a dialogue between a host and a guest, the editorial process deliberately removed most questions, allowing the storytelling to flow uninterrupted. Yet, the dialogic foundation of these exchanges leaves its subtle traces in the final product.

This freedom to follow where the work leads unfolds fully in episode two, where Jules Pelta Feldman guides listeners through a playful exploration of George Brecht’s *Thursday* (1963) that meanders through cultural references from Zen Buddhism to a Terry Pratchett character’s relationship with religion. The flow of the narrative takes the audience to a magical, contemplative space that is described poetically by Pelta Feldman as “the place where my mind . . . just opens up and I start thinking about the movement of the planets, and I start thinking that every day is holy in a way, that kind of Zen light bulb flickering on.”⁷⁰

Radio Fluxus expands beyond traditional oral history in various ways as it serves a dual purpose: while it produces a historical source (as oral history does), it also offers a space to showcase art. Oral history approaches the orality of testimonies as a feature to be celebrated, as the oral utterance constitutes a communicative event that transcripts or written versions can only partially capture.⁷¹ The power of speech—the expression of thoughts and feelings through articulate sounds—lies in its rich tapestry of elements that bring narratives to life. These essential components—pace, rhythm, accent, intonation, vocal expression, emphasis and nuance—create an immediacy that captures the fleeting, present nature of the spoken word. Yet speech can also present barriers to accessibility through its natural imperfections: false starts, cut-off words, repeated phrases, fillers, mispronunciations and semi-articulate utterances. Oral storytelling, when viewed as a performance, is a skill or art form that requires training and experience. Consider the Jiao community of Liberia, where those who mastered the art of narrating complex histories earned recognition as oral artists.⁷² This professional distinction highlights a crucial reality: effective oral communication is a skill, not a universal talent. In the contemporary media landscape, where audiences expect polished, professional content, speech that falls short of these elevated standards often struggles to maintain engagement.

Like photographs, sound recordings capture reality through direct imprints—in this case, of the spoken voice—offering listeners immediate contact with the source.⁷³ Both media can now be edited through digital technology. While in the production of Radio Fluxus the question of editing’s necessity was left open, it ultimately proved essential—not only to remove speech intricacies that disrupted the story’s coherence but also to enhance the narrative flow. Editing also enabled the integration of the work’s sonic elements, for instance, Lotte Lehmann’s interpretation of Beethoven’s *Ich Liebe Dich* (1936), which serves as Armleder’s *Dream*

Piece soundscape.⁷⁴ The process of editing added yet another creative dimension to shaping and refining the work's story. Mel Gooding, discussing William Furlong's Audio Arts project, which comprised recorded interviews with artists and art workers, describes sound editing as a form of "constructive sculpture"⁷⁵—a form of creative intervention and critical artistic control. However, Gooding distinguishes this editorial creativity from that of the artist-as-inventor, likening it instead to the role of "the Ulyssean wanderer who encounters what is happening and keeps a record."⁷⁶ On this view, the editor's creativity aligns more with that of the translator or curator than with the artist as inventor, magician or philosopher-visionary.

Radio Fluxus diverges from oral history in yet another significant way: instead of placing the narrator's personal story center stage, it transforms the narrator into a spokesperson for the artwork itself, creating what could be termed an "oral history of an artwork." This act of speaking on behalf of inanimate objects echoes another classical rhetorical device of prosopopoeia—literally meaning "to make" (*poeien*) a "face" or "person" (*prosopon*) through rhetoric⁷⁷—that is, giving a voice to things to which nature has denied it.⁷⁸ Historically employed by poets and writers, in Radio Fluxus prosopopoeia introduces yet another layer of creativity and subjectivity, animating artworks and imbuing them with a narrative presence that transcends their material form.

Despite these significant differences, examining Radio Fluxus's stories through the lens of oral history theory can enhance our understanding of how they function as vehicles for transmitting art. Oral history started as a "recovery history"—a method of documenting events and things that existed in the past through interviews when conventional historical sources fall short.⁷⁹ By capturing the perspectives and experiences of underrepresented individuals, groups and communities, this approach has played a critical role in filling gaps within historical records. This recovery function becomes especially pertinent to the Fluxus legacy, which resists traditional modes of collection. Intermedial works typically endure only as fragments or traces, or as one of many representations of far more complex experiences that often involved interaction, performance or multisensory engagement. In this context, oral histories of artworks might be seen as a way to document, preserve and transmit art that remains underrepresented or represented only partially in collections due to its distributed nature.⁸⁰

As oral historian Alessandro Portelli famously observed, "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they were doing, what they now think they did."⁸¹ The discipline extends beyond merely extracting factual information from oral sources. As Luisa Passerini notes, "the raw material of oral history consists not just of factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires."⁸² When applied to the history of artworks, this methodology yields richer outcomes than written or visual documentation alone, capturing testimonies of creation, interpretation, conservation and experience, which, while central to Fluxus's legacy, present a particular challenge for traditional conservation approaches to preserve.⁸³

The perspective of oral history also offers a fresh lens through which to reconsider the concept of collecting. While Radio Fluxus is conceived as a collection, it diverges from traditional collecting practices in the visual art world, where Fluxus's legacy indisputably belongs—practices typically associated with ownership and exclusivity. Radio Fluxus's employment of prosopopoeia transforms artworks into witnesses capable of testifying to their own presence. These testimonies function as documents meant to be archived and broadly shared, rather than precious, unique pieces to be acquired, collected and eventually displayed for the enjoyment of a select public. This raises an intriguing possibility: perhaps collecting and perpetuating art could be reimagined as precisely this—the gesture of producing narratives about artworks that weave together their tangible and intangible dimensions.

Conclusion: toward activation

Drawing inspiration from the discourses on intersemiotic translation within an interdisciplinary framework—spanning classical studies, literature, art theory and oral history—this study has sought to reveal storytelling's capacity to transmit and sustain these works over time in a manner that parallels conservation, engaging with discourses that closely resemble those of conservation itself. This perspective challenges the notion that traditional conservation is the only means of keeping and caring for visual art as heritage, pointing to the relevance of the term “activation”—the guiding notion of this book and its underlying research project. Activation implies something more than what Fernando Domínguez Rubio termed the “mimeographic work of keeping the same.”⁸⁴ This chapter suggests that the “more” encompasses a high degree of subjectivity and multiple levels of creativity— notions that, until recently, were largely contested within conservation discourses. Through this lens, activation suggests a more dynamic, open, interpretive approach to sustaining art than traditional conservation.

As conservation undergoes a radical redefinition—shifting from a discipline traditionally grounded in the hard sciences toward one increasingly aligned with the humanities—can its boundaries be stretched to include the creative gesture of activation? Salvador Muñoz Viñas aptly notes that a return to traditional conservation paradigms seems unlikely, as new forms of conservation and new kinds of conservators emerge from this epistemological shift.⁸⁵ Perhaps activation through storytelling could be regarded as such a new form of conservation. Yet, such a proposition may still seem too radical for immediate acceptance. Perhaps it is more pragmatic instead to consider activation as a concept distinct from conservation, allowing it to develop on its own terms before seeking integration, at least for now.

Applying the notion of intermedia and exemplative art to ancient Greek painting—a thought-provoking yet inherently problematic exercise, given the distinct socio-temporal dimensions—one might consider Pausanias's description of Polygnotos's work as a creative interpretation and potential realization of the artwork itself. Extending this rationale, Pausanias's description could be conceptualized as a performative score, enabling subsequent realizations that may—or may not—directly relate to Polygnotos's *Iliupersis* and *Nekyia*. Notably, Pausanias's description has not

survived in its “original” form, but primarily through later Latin translations likely replete with lacunae and omissions, with the processes of copying and translation introducing an additional layer of interpretation. The most notable attempt to reconstruct or, more accurately, recreate these paintings emerged from the German archaeologist Carl Robert in 1893, who produced a linear drawing based on pottery painting motifs.⁸⁶ While Robert, in his scientific rigor, would likely have rejected the notion of his work as a creative act, contemporary perspectives recognize it as precisely that. We can view his reconstruction as another potential realization of Pausanias’s interpretive “score”—an example of interpretation and another intermedial translation, this time from words back to image.

And perhaps that is how activation could be understood—as a generative act of transmission of a work that inherently catalyzes further creative expressions. Perhaps activation resides in this chain reaction of creativity, where one artistic work opens pathways for new interpretations and innovations, building upon or drawing inspiration from the initial work. In this context, activation embodies the potential to ignite a continuous dialogue of creative works, each responding to and expanding upon its predecessors. Through this lens, Radio Fluxus becomes more than just a channel for transmitting Fluxus works. It becomes a model and score in its own right—an open invitation that may inspire future creative interventions and reimaginings.

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