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What Happened to Permanence? Case Studies of Four United States Museums and How They Document Ephemeral Artworks

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What happened to permanence?

Case studies of four United States museums and how they document ephemeral artworks

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Abstract

This thesis examines how museums and collectors are overcoming challenges presented by non-permanent or ephemeral artworks and how museums and artists can work together to ensure the proper care and documentation of artworks. Ephemeral artworks can be loosely grouped into three categories: artworks that can be recreated an infinite amount of times, artworks that can only be created once, and artworks that cannot be preserved because the materials are too unstable. Another portion of this thesis examines four United States museums and how they have adapted their collecting policies to include non-permanent pieces of art. The Getty Center in Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University are four museums that actively collect and exhibit non-permanent works of art. The final section looks at a new project headed by the Guggenheim Museum in New York City entitled Variable Media Initiative. The Initiative is trying to create standards for documenting ephemeral and other types of non-traditional artworks.
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I.

Introduction

“Although art in traditional media is still created, we now also see art made of mixed media components, art of assemblage, installation, and art that is ephemeral—even disposable and repeatable.”

Mildred Constantine¹

In the summer of 2002, Marc Quinn’s Self (1991), melted when workers inadvertently unplugged the freezer in the flat of British art collector Charles Saatchi.² Self (Fig.1) was created using nine pints of the artist’s (frozen) blood and was to be kept frozen at all times. The work was very fragile and estimated to be worth close to $2.3 million. Needless to say, Mr. Saatchi was furious when he heard the news and declined to comment on the loss.³

Charles Saatchi’s story of loss is one of many in today’s changing and increasingly ephemeral art world. Throughout the last several decades, artists have been expanding the definition of art and pushing the boundaries outward. Not long ago an artist making something using blood would have been laughed at but today it is a hot commodity. Ever since Sensation opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York, all eyes have turned to contemporary art and the ever-expanding medium choices artists are using to express themselves.

This paper will examine how museums and collectors are overcoming challenges presented by non-permanent or ephemeral artworks and how museums and artists can work together to ensure their proper care and documentation of artworks.
Contemporary art museums can no longer expect to purchase an artwork and tuck it away for generations to come. Conservators are key to maintaining a collection and play a crucial role in determining proper care for works. I will demonstrate how museums are adapting to the ephemeral artworks by examining documentation practices at four United States museums.

Ephemeral art can be loosely grouped into three categories: artworks that can be recreated an infinite amount of times, artworks that can only be created once, and artworks that cannot be preserved because the materials are too unstable. In each category, several artists will be discussed as examples. Another portion of this paper will focus on how museums are adapting their collecting policies to include non-permanent pieces of art. The Getty Center in Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University are four museums that collect and exhibit non-permanent works of art. The final portion will examine a new project headed by the Guggenheim Museum in New York City entitled Variable Media Initiative. The Variable Media Initiative is trying to create standards for documenting ephemeral and other types of non-traditional artworks.
II.

The use of non-traditional materials when creating artworks and caring for them

In March of 1998, the Getty Center held a three-day conference entitled: "Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art?" The speakers included artists, conservators, registrars, curators, museum directors, educators, philosophers, art historians, collectors, dealers, and scientists. "Mortality Immortality" was significant because it was the first conference to which speakers from many disciplines were invited in order to address the issue of contemporary art preservation. Because today's art is often made of many parts and multiple mediums, it is important to understand vulnerability of the pieces and the intent of the artist. Alternative meanings, intent of artists, care of single works, installations and environments are some of the issues raised for art historians and curators.

During the last half of the twentieth century artists have pushed the boundaries of art making to the edge by using non-traditional materials. These materials include found objects, food, dirt, excrement, resin, wax, and many others. Some artists choose to create works they know will eventually disappear. These works are inherently ephemeral and are created to last for a specific amount of time. Sometimes the artist knows how long a piece will last and other times it is left to the elements.

Artists like Marc Quinn and Damien Hirst create works they expect to have an indefinite lifespan by using non-traditional materials, such as, blood and animal remains. Works are meant to be destroyed, others are simply too complex to conserve. Damien Hirst has created a work by suspending a shark in formaldehyde. Presently, the shark is shriveling and will most likely not be exhibited much longer. Marc Quinn created a sculpture using frozen blood and it was
accidentally unplugged. Quinn’s piece could have lasted an indefinite amount of time as long as it was kept frozen but its existence was dependent on electricity. Hirst’s works using animal parts are much more likely to break down and disintegrate no matter what kind of conservation is put into place.

With new mediums come many questions regarding long-term care of the objects. Some artists are working with materials that have not been studied and no one knows the effects time will have on them. Others choose to work with materials they know will deteriorate over time. This poses many questions for museums and collectors: should they collect objects meant to deteriorate? If they do collect ephemeral objects what happens to the piece after it is gone? How is the museum to dispose of it, or should the museum keep the “remains” as part of its documentation.

There is a third group of artists who choose to give parts of their works away or have them duplicated. Duplication creates the potential for works to be owned or exhibited simultaneously in different museums. Museums are essentially collecting an idea with instructions for creating a piece of art. The late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres was known for this type of art making and gave specific instructions for each piece.

Artists and museums are beginning to have conversations about conservation issues regarding ephemeral pieces. Andrea Rosen manages the late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work and works with museums and individuals to interpret his artworks in the correct manner. New York’s Guggenheim Museum is implementing a program called The Variable Media Initiative, which allows artists to fill out a questionnaire regarding conservation issues, because some artists do not wish to have their works conserved once they begin to deteriorate. Instead, they may opt to re-make the work or let it deteriorate completely.
Other agencies around the world have been working for several years to address conservation issues in contemporary artworks. In 1999, the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art in Holland and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage began an interdisciplinary project on the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The project used ten case studies to focus on issues of copyright, registration methods, and communication between artists and museums. Each case study was presented to conservators to analyze and determine the best method of conservation for each piece.

One work that was studied was Pierre Gilardi’s 1967 installation *Still Life of Watermelons* that was acquired by the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in 1972. The watermelons began to dry out and crumble very shortly after they arrived at the museum. Gilardi belongs to a generation of Turin artists who reacted against traditional painting and sculpture and began to use newly developed plastics and foams. The foam used on the watermelons was completely dried out some thirty years later and was in danger of breaking apart completely.

The installation was brought to the attention of the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and a working group was formed to analyze the possible conservation methods. The group analyzed the foam rubber and discovered that Gilardi had used expensive foam and glue for this work causing it to last longer than normal. Unfortunately, the overall consensus of the group was that the work was not destined to have a long lifespan. The conservators chose to clean the work up by fixing broken stems and rearranging the leaves. Nothing could be done to stop the foam from crumbling and Gilardi did not want the installation sealed in a case to protect it from visitors, so the installation will be discarded once the foam crumbles completely.
III.

**Duplicate and repeatable artworks**

There are many artists today who create works of art that can be duplicated and are often repeatable. Duplicate works of art are works that can be remade once they deteriorate because the artist has given permission or has intended for the work to be remade. Repeatable works of art have been designed to be recreated an infinite number of times with the same set of instructions. Sometimes this means that a museum or collector does not get a ‘finished’ piece of art, but instead receives a certificate giving permission for the artwork to be created. The same certificate may be bought or borrowed by multiple people, and in the case of Felix Gonzalez-Torres the same work may be on exhibit at the same time in different institutions. Oftentimes, a museum will receive a repeatable work of art and it will contact the artist each time it is recreated. There is never any one piece because each recreation will be slightly different. Museums rely on artists’ instructions, participation, and documentation of previous installations to insure proper display of the piece.

Sometimes contemporary artists don’t anticipate buyers and aren’t prepared to sell an ephemeral piece. Such is the case with Nayland Blake’s *Feeder 2*, 1998, (Fig.2) a house constructed from oversized gingerbread cookies. Blake was shocked when collectors Peter and Eileen Norton were interested in purchasing the work. He hadn’t considered someone wanting to own such a fragile and awkward piece of art. Blake’s first consideration was what would the buyer get? His offer to the Nortons was a steel armature, recipes for baking the gingerbread cookies, and instructions how to put the piece together. To his surprise they accepted. So, now when someone wishes to purchase the piece they get instructions and the name of the bakery in
Chelsea where the cookies were originally baked. *Feeder 2* is just one example of how artists are rewriting the rules of purchasing and owning a piece of art.

The artworks of the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres exemplify a duplicable type of art; they were some of the first ephemeral pieces to be actively collected and respected. Gonzalez-Torres created works using stacks of paper, strings of light bulbs, and candy. Each piece was designed to be depleted by the public and then replenished by the museum. Gonzalez-Torres would often only write down a short set of instructions for each piece giving the approximate weight and type of candy to be used. Each time an artwork is recreated it is up to the borrower to interpret his works of art. The only variation from work to work is in how they are installed and that is up to the curator. Each piece is based on a set of heights and weights determined by Gonzalez-Torres and each time the piece begins to shrink the institution must add more candy or paper to keep the ideal dimensions. Gonzalez-Torres described his works as democratic because anyone can decide how they should look.

When a museum or collector purchases or borrows a work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, they are not purchasing something physical, but a set of instructions with specifications how the object should look. Unfortunately, when the artist died in 1996, most of his candy spills only had an "ideal weight" assigned to them and nothing else. "His specifications for a 1991 work entitled Untitled (Revenge) were “light blue candies, individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply; dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 325 lbs.” These directions leave plenty of room for interpretation, so this means the curator and the conservator have to decide how the piece should be re-created. Andrea Rosen, Gonzalez’s dealer and friend, is the executor for his estate, and she is in charge of making sure the artist’s pieces are displayed according to his wishes.
Due to the many considerations, such candy quantity and placement. The candy spills are Gonzalez-Torres's most challenging works to mount. One of the most difficult tasks is deciding how much candy to purchase. The museum has to guesstimate how many people will attend the exhibit and take a piece of candy. This must be calculated very carefully because the museum does not want to run out of candy before the exhibit is over and it doesn't want to be stuck with boxes of candy that will attract bugs, plus take up much needed space. Another challenge that can arise is finding the correct brand of candy for the piece. Each piece has a specific type and color of candy, and if a museum is unable to purchase the correct brand then curators must try and interpret how Gonzalez-Torres would deal with the problem.

In a 1991 work entitled "Untitled"(Throat), (Fig. 3) Gonzalez originally used Luden's Honey Lemon Cough Drops, which were wrapped in yellow and blue wrappers. Today, the same brand of cough drops is packaged in clear cellophane with yellow lettering. Since the artist left no clear explanation of what to do if a brand of candy becomes unavailable or changes occur in the packaging, it is left up to the curators and conservators to decide how to best exhibit the work, while maintaining a level of consistency.

Museums may choose from a couple of options depending on how they wish to interpret the work. When the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art borrowed the rights to recreate the piece for an exhibit they chose to emulate the candies. This means the museum chose two different candies, one with a blue wrapper and one with a yellow wrapper, to emulate the visual appearance of the original work. Even though the brand of candy used was not Luden's the effect was similar to the original installation, because of the color.

When Jon Ippolito and Nancy Specter, both of the Guggenheim, organized a retrospective abroad, they chose to migrate to a different medium. They purchased the same
Luden's cough drops as in the original but at that time they were packaged in clear cellophane with white lettering. By choosing to use the updated cough drops, Specter and Ippolito completely altered the look of the piece, citing the significance of the Luden's brand. Evidently, Ippolito had heard that Gonzalez's father had died of throat cancer and that the Luden's honey lemon cough drops were the only ones that helped him feel better. The choice to migrate to a newer version of the Luden's was based on a story that seemed critically relevant to the meaning of the piece.

In the end, it does not matter how the work is interpreted because it will be consumed. Gonzalez meant for his works to change and eventually disappear at the end of the exhibit. He wanted everyone to take part in the installation and take a piece of 'art' home. Gonzalez-Torres is able to take a static work of art and change it into something temporal by allowing his paper stacks and candy spills to shrink and change shape as viewers interact with the works. It is up to museums to work out the logistics of each piece and not to try and interpret the meaning of the work. They can decide which is more important, the flavor or the coloring, and perpetually change the decision. Gonzalez-Torres purposely left few instructions so the museum and audience would be forced to make their own decisions.

Sol LeWitt is another artist who creates duplicable works of art. In 1967, he began to produce Wall Drawings that could be created by someone else using his instructions. A "wall drawing" (Fig. 4) is created using ink that is directly applied to the wall, a "wall painting" (Fig. 5), by applying paint; together they are known as "wall pieces." The pieces are created using water-soluble ink with three applications of color and finally a coat of varnish. Each piece is in the possession of the buyer once LeWitt has a signed certificate permitting the work to be
obliterated at any time and redrawn according to the owner’s wishes. LeWitt employs a crew of artists to execute the work and perform all repairs and touch-ups.

In 1991, Jörg Schellmann became the first art dealer to offer editions of LeWitt’s installations under the term “Wall Works.” To date over forty pieces have been sold. With the purchase the buyer receives a certificate and everything needed for installation. For a small fee, the gallery helps potential clients to visualize the piece with computer-simulated images that show how it will look in the collector’s home. Some of the pieces require hiring electrical professionals to assist with the installation, but only two editions require the artist’s participation. Once the work is installed, the owner must write the words “wall drawing” in any size and medium on the wall, photograph the installation and send it to LeWitt, who will sign the photo and return it to the owner.

LeWitt likens the wall pieces to a musical composition, because many people can interpret the composition, and just like a composer setting the parameters for a musical score, LeWitt has set the parameters for each wall piece. “His instructions are the constant, conservable, core of the work.”

Unlike Gonzalez-Torres and LeWitt, Meg Webster takes an active role each time her work is recreated. She uses natural materials, such as branches, plants, moss, mud, stones, and water to create her pieces. Her intent is not merely to create a sensory experience but she delves deeper to reconnect viewers with good earth, clean water, and healthy plants.

Stick Spiral (Fig. 6) was created for the first time in 1986. It was a spiraling arrangement of branches that had been collected from an estate after pruning. The installation consists of tree branches and sticks formed into a spiral on the floor. The branches must be already cut for purposes other than the exhibition because it is against her ecological mandate to destroy
nature.\textsuperscript{25} This means the dimensions will vary due to the number of sticks found in the area where the work is to be installed.

In 1995, when she recreated the piece for the Guggenheim in SoHo, Webster used branches collected from the neighborhood after a storm. The Guggenheim felt installing the piece would be tricky because Webster stipulated the branches must come from the surrounding area recently enough to bear foliage, fruit, and still have a natural odor.\textsuperscript{26} The Guggenheim was in luck because a storm hit and Webster was able to collect enough downed branches to create the work.

The best choice for documentation is photography, so the next time the piece is recreated there is a visual record. The Guggenheim has photographs from the 1986 installation and the 1995 installation documenting the work. The end product looked very different from the original installation but Webster felt it turned out to be a better piece because it was larger and less constrained.\textsuperscript{27} The 1986 piece had branches that were woven tighter to give the work a more streamlined appearance. When questioned about future recreations, Webster expects to be consulted but does not feel it is necessary for the work to look the same each time it is recreated.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Stick Spiral} seems straightforward and not too difficult to recreate but there is more to it than meets the eye. For example, what happens when there is an infestation of bugs? The Guggenheim may suggest spraying the branches with a pesticide to prevent the bugs from spreading to other works, but Webster does not approve of using pesticides to treat her works. The museum is faced with abiding by the artist’s ecological standpoint and not using chemicals, or the Guggenheim can spray the bugs and lose its relationship with artist. Hopefully, the museum would contact Webster to inquire about her ideas for treatment.
IV.

Artworks created once

This category features artists who create ephemeral works of art that are dismantled or fade away so that in the end only the documentation remains. Christo, the most famous artist working with ephemeral materials, has also been at it the longest. In his projects a multitude of people work together to create something only meant to last a few days. Richard Long is an environmental artist, who creates artwork using natural materials he finds while taking long walks. He sometimes brings natural objects found on the walk into the gallery space and creates an installation. Another artist in this group is Andy Goldsworthy. He works mainly with nature and creates works that possess a quiet beauty. Sometimes the only way to view the artist’s works is by looking at photographs.

Christo began his prolific career in the 1950s by wrapping small objects but by the early 1960s he was wrapping buildings, and later he surrounded islands in Miami, Fl (Fig. 7). He is well known in both the arts and non-arts community, because his large-scale projects require permission from local agencies, environmental groups, and many others before he is allowed to put the work together. His temporary public projects typically cost well over a million dollars to execute, and are funded solely through the selling of his preparatory drawings, studies, collages, scale models, and early works.\(^\text{29}\) Thanks to the tireless effort and business savvy of his wife and partner, Jeanne-Claude, the temporary projects come to fruition. She is responsible for the organization of each project and her business skills match her husband’s creativity.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude plan a project years before it is executed, and once the project is installed it will only exist for a few days or weeks until it is dismantled. After dismantling, the
only way to access the work will be through the memories of the individuals who worked on the project or happened to see it, or by looking at photographs and videos.

Christo’s installations are as much performance pieces as they are site specific. The works are orchestrated to the last detail and involve hundreds of people. Since so much time and money is invested that the works are usually documented very well with video and photographs.

Performance art fits into this category but can also be a category unto itself. Most performance artists perform a piece one time and if it is not documented then it can never be studied and is only remembered by the artist and people who watched it. Many performance artists today document their performances using a video recorder. This helps researchers gain a better insight into what the artist is saying and how people reacted to the performance. Early performance artists who did not videotape their performances do not have any visual documentation and it is difficult for art historians to research and write about their works because of the lack of documentation.

Video documentation captures the performance but not the energy or mood created by the audience. The feel of the performance can never be re-created and if it is re-created it will be with an entirely new audience, which brings in different emotions and expectations causing the piece to be something completely different.

Performance videos must be stored very carefully because video is very sensitive to changes in temperature and humidity. It does not take long before a tape will wear out if it is handled frequently and once the tape is gone it cannot be replaced.

A third artist who creates ephemeral one-time pieces is Richard Long. Long is a British artist who produced land art in Britain by barely altering the earth. He is a sculptor known for taking long walks in the woods where he will occasionally alter the landscape in ways that are
hardly discernable. As a student in the late 1960s, Long arranged groups of stones in the outline of a square at Somerset beach. In 1969, he created a sculpture by walking four squares into the Wiltshire countryside from the twelfth to the fifteenth of October. Each square was drawn on a map and the time created noted. This served as the visual record for the piece.

Like the artist Robert Smithson, Long began bringing parts of his works indoors. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago owns a Mud Circle, 1996, (Fig. 8) created by Long specifically for the space. It is exactly what the title implies: a circle of mud twenty-four feet in diameter painted on a wall. Long stipulated the piece be created only once, so when the museum needs the space for another work it simply builds a false wall to cover the piece.

The British artist Andy Goldsworthy creates artworks in a style similar to the British artist Richard Long because both artist use nature as their medium, but Goldsworthy collects plants and stones to create beautiful sculptures in nature using the found materials. Most people never get the opportunity to see the original Goldsworthy piece because he leaves them in nature to decompose and return to the earth. He documents his works with photography and exhibits the photographs. Photography allows Goldsworthy the freedom to play with scale so viewers will never know the true size of his sculptures.

During the night of June 21, 2000, Andy Goldsworthy and his team placed fourteen snowballs throughout the streets of London to better understand the dialogue between the time flows of the snowballs and people going about their daily routines. Goldsworthy explains the interaction of people and snowballs, “Set against all this activity, the snowballs may appear almost permanent as they very slowly disappear.” They will become markers to the passing of time – slow and deliberate like the hour hand of a clock – appearing hardly to move.” (Fig. 9)
Goldsworthy wanted to add natural materials to the snowballs so that, as they melted, the objects would become visible. Each snowball contained a different material found in the English countryside. Pinecones, elderberries, Beech tree branches, and barbed wire were some of the fourteen materials used in the snowballs. Goldsworthy created the fourteenth snowball to be installed in a London gallery to coincide with the opening of his exhibition Time. Due to safety considerations Goldsworthy was required to have the snowball melt before the opening of the exhibit and allow guests to get a sense of what had been there previously. Goldsworthy filled the gallery snowball with red stone so guests would see a red stain on the floor. Goldsworthy has incorporated red in many projects since his first snowball drawing with seal blood.36

Obviously, the snowballs were created to melt but some of Goldsworthy’s other works are excellent examples of what conservators are now faced with because they are integrally connected with the effects of time, change, and destructions when the artist conceives of them.37 The next chapter explores current museum documentation using recent museum exhibitions as examples. The first case study is a 1997 Andy Goldsworthy site-specific sculpture commissioned by the Getty.
V.

Case Study 1: The Getty Center

Earthen Spiral by Andy Goldsworthy

In 1997, the Getty Research Institute installed a “new ruins” sculpture by Andy Goldsworthy entitled Earthen Spiral (Fig. 10), to celebrate the opening of the Getty Center. The piece was composed of clay from the surrounding area shaped into a spiral, which was left to harden, crack, and eventually return to the earth. Thomas Reese, Deputy Director of the Getty Research Institute, likened the work to performance art because it not only occurred at a precise moment in time but also achieved a life of its own once Goldsworthy had finished it.

Before the piece could be executed, many questions and concerns had to be addressed by all parties involved. Two years prior to the creation of the Research Institute, Thomas Reese began meeting with Goldsworthy to discuss a commission and later to go over proposals. One of the major questions early on in the process was whether the sculpture should rise up or stay low to the ground. Goldsworthy felt the sculpture should have some verticality to it but the chief architect did not agree.

Richard Meier, the chief architect for the Getty Institute wanted to retain a pure atmosphere and keep the focus on the building. Meier designed a building with offices, collections, and meeting rooms around a cylindrical core.38 The patio rises through four stories, lighting a glass-enclosed ramped core and a formal circular space beneath the patio.39 Thomas Reese describes the building by saying it resembles a “doughnut with a quarter-sector cut away.”40 Friction began to grow between Meier and Goldsworthy because the Goldsworthy sculpture would sit in the center of the building under the skylight, and would be a major focus.
Before the sculpture design issue could be resolved another problem sprang up and changed all previous designs. The architects miscalculated the solar alignment of the summer solstice and the sun would not strike the center of the cavity as was intended, but instead would hit a point on the edge. The original concept had been to have the sun hit the center of circle on the summer solstice, and Goldsworthy had designed his works accordingly. Goldsworthy was notified and he immediately came up with a new proposal allowing the sun to strike the sculpture. He increased the size of the spiral until it came into contact with the sun’s rays. This meant the sculpture would have to be over five feet tall, and Meier did not want the sculpture to be that large so the idea was rejected and Goldsworthy was sent back to the drawing board.

When Goldsworthy returned, the new idea was to mold coils of the spiral up from the point the sun strikes the base of the hold. He adjusted the upper rim of the cavity that was centered in the space and announced that he had realigned the hole so the building was brought back to center, so to speak. The proposal passed and in May of 1997 Goldsworthy began to work. The dimensions of the piece were five feet across, twelve inches above ground and three feet below ground in concentric circles.

Before Goldsworthy could work with the clay it had to be removed from the Getty site, tested by Getty scientist Neville Agnew, and mixed by Peter Klowe of the Haines Gallery. Originally, Goldsworthy wanted Getty employees to assist with the kneading of the clay, but the Getty Trust attorneys decided it might not be in the museum’s best interest for fear of liability. Instead, Kathy Conley, operations manager of the Research Institute and Elaine Nesbit, former project manager of the Getty Trust Building Program coordinated the process.

On May 19, 1997, Andy Goldsworthy arrived at the Getty Research Institute after two years of planning to commence Farthen Spiral. For six days, he worked, uninterrupted, for
twelve hours a day to shape the moist clay into a spiral. At the end of the sixth day, the Getty held a ceremony to thank everyone who had participated and to celebrate the new addition to the space. The completion of the spiral marked the end of Goldsworthy’s control and the beginning of the spiral’s next stage.

One month after completion, *Earthen Spiral* began to perform as was hoped by everyone involved with the project. On the summer solstice of June 1997, the Getty used time-lapse photography to capture the sun’s rays as they moved across the piece and lit up the center of the spiral. After two years of planning and waiting Goldsworthy’s sculpture proved to be a success. The photographic material is now housed in the Special Collections department of the Research Library.

As the artist had anticipated, the clay began to dry and form cracks throughout the sculpture. Goldsworthy had anticipated real cracks but not cracks as large as the ones forming on the spiral.\(^4^4\) In his drawings he showed the cracks as modest, but in reality huge fissures began to appear all over the piece. Miguel Angel Corzo, Director of the Getty Conservation Institute, authorized and set up time-lapse video monitoring at fifteen minute intervals to map the cracking and study the drying process.\(^4^3\)

Another factor the artist and museum did not consider was the difference in drying times between the portions above ground and those below ground. Part of the piece was submerged three feet into the ground below the Getty, because the artist wanted a direct connection with the earth. He speculated that the entire piece would be dry by March 1998 and what remained would remain.\(^4^6\) Goldsworthy stated, “there won’t be a kind of disintegration of returning to dust, which is what people think. Once the piece has staged its performance, it faces only the threat of forces outside itself.”\(^4^7\)
Goldsworthy's words proved prophetic because the piece returned to the ground due to an accident in June of 1999. A water main broke at the Getty and the piece returned to its original state of wet clay. The piece was removed at a ceremony, requested by the staff, held at 4 p.m. on the Winter Solstice of 1999. During the dismantling of the work, employees were invited to take a piece as a keepsake. Evidently, the piece was very popular with the employees of the Research Institute, because one of the Reference Librarians I spoke with said she had taken a piece of the sculpture for her desk. (This was a bold and generous move made by the museum.)

The Getty Center has documentation of Goldsworthy's Earthen Spiral in the Special Collections department of the Reference Library, which includes three inches of material relating to the installation and can be accessed on-line. The materials are currently being processed and are housed in the archives. The material consists of photographs and negatives, one folder of documentation, three drawings by Goldsworthy, and two models. The models are made from clay taken from the Getty site and are mounted on plywood bases. The models are the only three dimensional material left documenting the work.
Case Study 2: The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

The Waterfall by Franz Ackermann

In October of 2002, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago celebrated the completion of a new site-specific painting by artist Franz Ackermann entitled The Waterfall (Fig. 11). Ackermann, a German artist, is known for his large bright and playful paintings and this one is no different. The painting covers an entire twenty-four foot high wall inside the lobby of the museum and can be seen from Michigan Avenue, a block away. It’s an exciting work with dynamic colors and motion, making viewers feel dizzy and disoriented.50

The work will be on display from October of 2002 until November 2003 and once the exhibit is over the wall will be repainted. This sounds similar to a Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing but it differs because the Museum is not allowed to reinstall the work. The Waterfall is a commissioned piece funded through support from Sara Albrecht and the Goethe-Institut Inter Nationes Chicago. Having a work commissioned means that the museum has ownership of it. All the specifics for the work are addressed in detail in the Agreement for Commissioned Artworks

The Agreement for Commissioned Artworks lays the groundwork for the commissioned piece and keeps both the artist and the museum on track. The process started in June of 2002 and was completed by October 2002. According to Associate Curator, Staci Boris, the exhibit was put together quickly. In the case of Ackermann’s wall painting, the museum needed to set a specific timeframe for the painting of the piece and the time it would be left on the wall. The paint was another factor to be considered because Ackermann was forced to mix his paint in
Chicago due to travel restrictions. This obstacle meant Ackermann had to travel to Chicago a bit earlier than planned to make sure the paint was correct.

Two weeks before the scheduled opening, Ackermann's two assistants flew to Chicago to begin the process of transferring his preliminary drawing to the wall. This process was achieved by using weighted ropes to create a grid and a slide projector to project the drawing on the wall. Once the drawing was projected onto the wall the assistants were able to apply the background colors. Ackermann arrived a week before the deadline and at once decided to extend the painting to the second floor. He adjusted the colors and applied the finishing touches.

During the installation of the painting, visitors were able to see the artist at work and even sometimes engage him in conversation about the piece, because the painting is located in the main entrance to the museum. The museum roped off the work area and let visitors talk with Ackermann and watch the painting fill the space.

Waterfall was not given an accession number because it is not going to be part of the museum's permanent collection. If the museum formally accessioned Waterfall, it would have to deaccession the work before it could be painted over. This would create unnecessary work for the museum staff and the board so it is better to commission the piece and have a contract stating the exact start and end dates.

No one at the museum officially documented the process of the creation of Waterfall for the curatorial file. Staci Boris thought someone in Public Relations took digital photos for publicity releases but she was not positive. The lack of documentation seems odd because the work will only be accessible for a short period of time. I was surprised that such a large well-respected museum would not have everything documented for record keeping. Future researchers will have a difficult time understanding the correct process when no one remembers
the painting. The curator was planning to have transparencies made of the finished painting so the museum will have a quality reproduction of the piece to put in its curatorial file as a record.

In the past, the Museum of Contemporary Art has frequently commissioned artists to create site-specific works for its main lobby. All of these works were meant to last only a few months. In November, once *Waterfall* is repainted, another artist will, funds permitting, be commissioned to create a new piece to replace it. It is to be hoped that the museum will get into the habit of documenting these pieces better, by photographing, videotaping, or filming not only the work itself but also its creation. Not to do so would seem to be a huge missed opportunity in the documentation of twenty-first century art.
Case Study 3: The Philadelphia Museum of Art

Strange Fruit (for David) by Zoe Leonard

The next case study focuses on Strange Fruit (for David) (Fig. 12) by Zoe Leonard. This case study differs from the previous one in two important ways. For one, the work was not commissioned by a museum, but acquired by it after the work’s creation. For another, the work is not on a set time table to be destroyed. Instead, the work is self-destructing and there is an agreement that the museum and the artist will judge together when the piece is no longer fit for exhibition.

Zoe Leonard’s installation Strange Fruit (for David) (1993-1998) began as an accident and now resides in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it is slowly decomposing. The work consists of 302 peels of avocados, bananas, grapefruits, lemons, and oranges that have been eaten and sewn back up with zippers, wires, thread, and buttons. The museum did not acquire the work without giving serious thought to the lifespan of the work, and every time Strange Fruit is installed photographs are taken to monitor the deterioration.

One morning in 1993, after eating two oranges, New York based artist, Zoe Leonard, absent-mindedly sewed them back up. This was the beginning of Strange Fruit (For David) and it existed for quite some time before Zoe realized it was a work of art. Sometime in 1997, she decided to keep this group of sewn fruit together and let it slowly decompose over time. She continued to work on it for over two years and finally exhibited it in her New York apartment. It was shown in the spring of 1997 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami and at the Kunsthalle Basel during the summer.
Early on, Leonard was faced with the idea of preservative intervention for the work. Leonard worked with German conservator Christian Scheidemann for over two years developing a plan to treat the fruit and cease the decay. Scheidemann came up with a solution that consisted of shock-freezing the pieces and then soaking them with the consolidant Paraloid B72 under a vacuum. Using Scheidemann's method would ensure a long life for Strange Fruit, but undermine the purpose of the piece.

After seeing the effects of the conservation treatment Leonard decided against treating the piece, because she realized the appearance of disappearance was not enough and felt the piece should fully decompose. Of course, this did not bode well with her dealer, Paula Cooper, who had originally proposed the idea of intervention. Leonard's idea of decay can be traced back to the vanitas paintings of the seventeenth century, except her work will actually decompose as time goes on.

When the Philadelphia Museum approached Leonard about purchasing Strange Fruit (for David) she was thrilled but soon developed concerns about how the museum would treat the piece. The museum was well aware of Leonard's decision to let the piece decompose, and agreed to collaborate with her about the future of the work.

Collecting a work knowing that it will decompose and no longer be on exhibit is something most museums do not do. Buying Strange Fruit (for David) was a big step for the Philadelphia Museum of Art and it was not taken lightly. Everyone felt enthusiastic about exhibiting the work but acquiring it for the permanent collection was troublesome for some people. This was due mainly to storage and conservation issues and also assigning the piece an accession number. The fear of assigning the work a number was unfounded because works in every museum collection end up broken, sold, or lost and the inventory reflects all of those
incidences. It would be no different for Leonard's work once it was past the point of exhibiting. The museum's conservators were made aware of the situation and decided that thoroughly condition-checking every piece would be ridiculous. They did come up with a storage system to impose as little as possible on its life span.

When the museum finally acquired the piece they came up with an agreement to collaborate with the artist as long as the piece is able to go on exhibit. Once the work becomes too fragile to be shown it will be up to both the artist and the museum to decide its future. Leonard had originally wanted the work to remain installed in the museum on a permanent basis but the museum was afraid of damage and theft. A schedule was worked out and the work is installed with a certain amount of regularity to mark time. Every time the work is installed the artist takes part in installing the work and then photographs the installation to show how it is changing. There is talk of an eventual publication documenting the entire experience once the work is no longer able to exhibit.

When not on view, Strange Fruit (for David) is in storage with the rest of the collection and it is monitored regularly by the conservator for pest and mold infestation. The work has not been treated with any chemical repellents because the artist does not want to interfere with the decomposition of the piece. There is a risk of insect infestation, which, if not taken care of immediately, could pose a threat to the other works in the collection.

Strange Fruit (for David) has raised many questions for the Philadelphia Museum of Art and for art museums in general. The museum board, director, and curators of the museum have taken a calculated risk by acquiring a work that will eventually disappear. In so doing, they are revisiting the role of art museums, which, from their inception, was based on the premise that artworks are meant to last forever and the museum must go to any length to conserve them. The
Philadelphia Museum of Art has opened the gates to a future in which art museums will be less focused on conservation and more on display and documentation.
Case Study 4: Harvard’s Busch-Reisinger Museum

**Eat Art** Exhibit

This case study focuses on the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Art at Harvard University. The Busch-Reisinger is a museum dedicated to collecting and exhibiting German art. In the fall of 2001, it opened an exhibit entitled *Eat Art*. *Eat Art* focused on the use of food as an artistic medium and presented the work of three German artists; Joseph Beuys, Dieter Roth, and Sonja Alhäsuer. All three artists used food to explore ways in which it functions as art.

A central theme and connection between the three artists was the process of decay and ephemerality. Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) used edible and organic materials to convey a message of radical social change. Dieter Roth (1930-1998) was fascinated with making time visible by allowing his works to decompose. One example of Roth’s interest in time and chance was a group of works titled *Small Sunset*. He began the works in 1968 using two sheets of different colored paper and a slice of salami. The fat from each piece of salami soaked into the paper and thus altered the appearance of each piece.

Unlike Beuys and Roth, Sonja Alhäsuer focuses on consumption as an aspect of everyday life by using edible materials for her audience to consume. She uses chocolate, gingerbread, caramel, and cake to create delicious sculptures. She wants her audience to have a pleasurable experience, so she always uses the highest-quality ingredients and gives each piece an expiration date to prevent spoilage. Alhäsuer also chooses to have nothing leftover at the close of an exhibit, because she does not want her works to be collected but enjoyed and savored. Everything is to be consumed so there is nothing left to keep.
The exhibition *Eat Art* lasted slightly longer than two months, opening on October 5th and ending December 15th. During the time of the exhibition, visitors were invited to become active participants and eat the artworks created by Sonja Alhäsuer. Due to the nature of the works on view, the conservators and curator felt it was best to have the show in the fall or winter to minimize the risk of insect infestation.69 Alhäsuer was invited by the Busch-Reisinger in Cambridge, MA to take up residence two weeks before the opening of the exhibit to create the artworks (Fig. 13).

For the exhibition Alhäsuer created display cases using chocolate and popcorn and figurines of Beuys, Roth, and herself from marzipan. The cases were cast in three layers with the first layer consisting of semi-sweet chocolate mixed with popcorn.70 (Fig. 14) The second layer was white chocolate and the third outer layer was white chocolate tinted green with food coloring.71 Inside the cases, she placed figurines of the artists molded out of marzipan and enclosed them with caramelized sugar to simulate Plexiglas.72 (Fig. 15)

At the opening, guests were invited to eat the artwork created by Alhäsuer. (Fig. 16) In an e-mail interview to Tanja Maka, the curator of the exhibit, I asked how visitors responded to the work. She replied that most people were intrigued by the work and wanted to take part in the consumption, but there were a few people who felt it was unhygienic to touch or eat the chocolate because of finger and teeth marks.73 Most people were unsure about eating the artworks so they approached the guard for permission.74

The Busch-Reisinger documented the opening with a digital camera and put the photographs on-line. The museum also took digital photographs of Alhäsuer creating the display cases and marzipan figurines and placed them on-line. This helps viewers to understand Alhäsuer’s process and serves as the visual record for the show, since she specifically stated she
does not believe in saving any of her pieces. The museum commissioned the works from Alhăuser and after the three-month exhibition the leftovers were to be destroyed. This stipulation was part of the contract signed by Alhăuser and the Busch-Reisinger. The exhibit was recorded with digital photography and is permanently housed in the exhibition file on compact discs.

Alhăuser’s pieces were given temporary loan numbers because the works only existed for three months, which is unusual because the museum purchased the works to later have them destroyed. It makes sense that the Busch-Reisinger did not formally accession the works because of the complications with deaccessioning. Deaccessioning is a very complicated and long process, involving recommendations from the curator and museum board, and it would not have been beneficial for Alhăuser’s pieces. Oftentimes, deaccessioned objects are traded to another museum or sold at auction, and this would not have worked because Alhăuser’s objects were to be completely consumed.
Chapter VI

The Variable Media Initiative and beyond

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the Guggenheim Museum’s Variable Media Initiative—an initiative that is intended to eventually create paradigms for the preservation/destruction and documentation of various kinds of ephemeral art works. As today’s artists explore ever new creative strategies and mediums, museums must find ways to standardize methods of preservation (or not), documentation, and registration. Above all, they have to communicate better with artists. To this end, the Variable Media Initiative has developed a questionnaire designed to assist artists and museum staff in writing variable media guidelines. The VMI also maintains a website, on which organizations can post case studies, and a database, which can be consulted and downloaded free of charge.

The VMI developed out of an initiative of the Guggenheim Museum’s Film and Media Arts, which, in the late 1990s, became interested in developing a program to standardize documentation of works created with non-traditional materials. According to John Hanhardt, Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts and one of the initiators of the VMI, “the program’s goal is to engage the museum as a critical and intellectual space able to embrace diverse histories of the moving image while responding to new developments within artistic practice globally.”

The VMI’s database was developed to assist museums with the documentation and preservation of non-traditional objects. New methods of documentation had to be more fluid and allow for multiple parts and commentary. In museums using the database, the artist has become an active participant in the preservation of his/her artworks. Artists are asked questions
regarding the long-term care and storage of their work and how they see it aging. Many museums consult with the artist when anything major needs to be done to an artwork.

The members of the Initiative believe very strongly in communication with artists regarding their artworks. The Variable Media questionnaire was developed to help curators and registrars plan a strategy for preventing losses in their collections due to technological changes. The Initiative asks curators and registrars to play a central role in developing the evolution of documentation offering choices rather than prescribing them.\textsuperscript{78}

At first the questionnaire used art historical categories, such as, photography, film, and video, but the developers soon learned this method would not work because new mediums don’t necessarily fit in traditional categories.\textsuperscript{79} A more fluid version of the questionnaire was designed with medium being independent and descriptions of artworks called behaviors.\textsuperscript{80} Artwork, such as Nam Jun Paik’s video installation Garden (1974) is located under “installed” because the installation method must be determined each time it is shown. The questionnaire prompts for lighting requirements, distribution of elements, and ideal installation space.\textsuperscript{81} A Meg Webster piece would be under performed because staff members are required to locate new materials each time her work is shown. The questionnaire also has categories for reproduced, duplicated, interactive, encoded, and networked pieces. Felix Gonzalez-Torres fits into the duplicated category because nothing is lost when it is reproduced.

Museums are invited to join the Initiative free of charge as long as they participate openly and often. Members can download the database and decide how it will best fit their institution.\textsuperscript{82} The second step is to contribute data to a central database available to all members, and the third step is to actively devise standards and tools to be used by all members.\textsuperscript{83}
The Variable Media Initiative is in its infancy but once museums see the value in joining it will be a great tool in the documentation and preservation of artworks. It allows registrars to have more freedom in documentation and addresses gray areas better. Allowing artists to play an active role in the long-term preservation of an object ensures its future and respects the desires of the artist.
VII.

Conclusion

Since the 1970's the art world has seen many changes as artists have begun to use many unprecedented materials and artistic strategies. Anything has the potential of becoming art and this has become very complicated for museum professionals and conservators who are responsible for the care of the pieces. Some artists create pieces using unstable materials that they expect to last indefinitely while other artists create works designed to last a set amount of time. In either case, museums must use proper documentation to ensure precise record keeping of the artwork. Record keeping is the specialty of the registrar and if done properly a museum can display and purchase ephemeral artworks and know there is an image and history of the piece in the accession files.

The case studies chosen demonstrate that museums are using digital photography as one of the main tools for documentation. All four examples have images available that were taken with a digital camera. This technology is wonderful because it allows museums to document artworks very quickly and easily, but the technology has not been available long enough to know how the photos age. There is also the problem of storing photos on compact discs and having them become obsolete as technology moves forward.

The Variable Media Initiative is a good example of how museum professionals are trying to expand documentation techniques to allow for unusual circumstances and artworks that do not fit the mold. Today, museums collect pieces that can be re-created multiple times and artists instructions are needed for proper display of the object. The Variable Media Initiative helps standardize and document how artists want their work to be shown.
Artists continue to stretch the definition of art by using ever new materials and processes. Anything goes, while this is great for artists, it is a challenge for the professionals in museums that exhibit and acquire their art. The role of museums vis-à-vis contemporary art is in flux. Some people speculate that they are becoming obsolete when it comes to the art of their own time. But as long as museums acquire contemporary art and document it through video, photography, description, and artist’s statements, they will continue to play a vital role in the art world. It is crucial, however, that they begin to do so as soon as possible, before they are made obsolete by alternative institutions.
Notes

1 Constantine 1999, ix.
2 Jay 2002, 32.
3 Jay 2002, 32.
4 Constantine 1999, ix.
5 Constantine 1999, ix.
6 de Jonge 1999, 137.
7 Buskirk 2000, 115.
8 Burkirk 2000, 115.
9 Specter 1995, 184.
10 Specter 1995, 95.
12 Hochfield 2002, 118.
14 Hochfield 2002, 119.
15 Specter 1995, 57.
16 Hochfield 2002, 119.
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18 Constantine 1999, xi.
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20 Buskirk 2000, 114.
21 Buskirk 2000, 114.
22 Ferry 1999, 44.
23 Hochfield 2002, 118.
27 Hochfield 2002, 118.
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31 Beardsley 1984, 42.
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Marc Quinn’s Self, 1991, melted.

Fig. 1
Marc Quinn, Self, 1991
Fig. 2
Nayland Blake, *Feeder 2*, 1998
Fig. 3
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Revenge)*, 1991

Fig. 4
Fig. 5
Sol LeWitt, Wall Painting #696, 1992

Fig. 6
Meg Webster, Stick Spiral, 1995
Fig. 7
Christo, *Surrounded Islands*, Miami, FL, 1983

Andy Goldsworthy, *Snowball with Beech branches*, 2000

Fig. 9
Fig. 10

Fig. 11
Fig. 12

Fig. 13
Sonja Alhauser creating sculpture for *Eat Art Exhibit*, 2001
Fig. 14
Sonja Alhauser making pedestal for Eat Art Exhibit, 2001

Fig. 15
Sonja Alhauser molding figures for Eat Art Exhibit, 2001

Fig. 16
Opening for Eat Art Exhibit, 2001
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