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# Food as Media in Contemporary Art and the Role of the Conservator

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**Food as Media in Contemporary Art  
and  
the Role of the Conservator**

**By**

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**Submitted as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of the Arts in Museum Professions**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis discusses the use of food in contemporary art and the effects on museum administration. More specifically, it charts the increasingly collaborative role of the conservator and the expansion of responsibilities for this position. Artists are continually including diverse and new materials in their art. Museums are adapting to the collection of this new media by creating and editing policies that allow for artist input and documentation of those queries and by discussing conservation concerns that are presented by new media with other professionals. Examining the administration and policies of two different conservation departments illuminates the importance of teamwork and creative problem solving in the face of difficult and ambiguous conservation concerns.

The extent to which the conservator and curator collaborate in the area of conservation and context has increased due to the use of food as media in contemporary art. To emphasize this trend, I discuss the administration of two institutions, the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, both in New York, especially focusing on their treatment of works with food in their respective collections. Although the administrative structure is different in these two institutions, in both collaboration and dialogue are the key elements to the successful conservation and interpretation of collections with new media.

To discover how conservation concerns with food as media are reconciled at MoMA, I spoke with Lynda Zyberman about general policies at this institution. This discussion is further focused through the presentation of two pieces from the MoMa collection that include food as a medium. Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled Placebo* both have an edible nature and involve a performance aspect that is integral to the realization of the piece. MoMA reconciles unique conservation concerns by documenting artist input fully and by communicating interdepartmentally. The conservator extends beyond the duties of simply examining and applying treatments in a scientific capacity.

At the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, I take the same approach, speaking to conservator Nathan Otterson and focusing this conversation through the discussion of another Felix Gonzalez-Torres piece, *Untitled Public Opinion*, along with *Terremoto* by Joseph Beuys. The administration at the Guggenheim has a fluid nature that emphasizes an expansive dialogue about conservation issues, especially those issues associated with new media such as food. This open-minded discussion has led to the creation of the Variable Media Network, which serves as a database for artist input about new media and offers specific case studies as well as tools to aid the professional in using the site.

Finally, I compare the two institutions' techniques for conservation as well as offer my own insight on the subject. The future will certainly bring new media and the museum must continue to adapt through continual and complete dialogue.

## Acknowledgments

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To my family, who has always encouraged me to work hard and do my best. And especially to Dad, who tirelessly and patiently edits my papers and corrects my verbal grammar discrepancies. To Dave, the love of my life, who endured my several almost nervous break downs during the writing of this text and supports all of my endeavors. To my mother, who always believes I am the best, even if I am the worst.

I dedicate this thesis to my world trekking brother Colin, who always looks on the bright side, who always has a kind word, and can always make me laugh even when things are grim. You give me confidence when I need it most with your support.

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## Foreword

As a future museum professional and as a hobby artist, I have an interest in the conservation of art in general. I have always found the conservation of paintings a unique and interesting combination of artistic ability and the methods of science. I knew from the beginning that I would write my thesis on some aspect of conservation. However, painting conservation, especially Renaissance era painting conservation, demands knowledge of Italian and chemistry and availability of travel funds, and I, a lowly M.A. student without those skills or grants could not hope to add to that body of work. Thus the dilemma of my thesis topic began. Through many conversations with Janet Marstine, I came to the idea of discussing the concerns of food as a media in contemporary art. The use of this media strikes me as humorous as well as interesting. And for any who knows me personally, appropriate, as I am always either hungry or cooking or both.

This topic has been interesting to research because food has many varied forms and serves as an effective symbol for infinite themes. It was enjoyable and educational to speak to conservators. They are the most interesting people. I think their unique personalities stem from a love of both the scientific and the beautiful. Art is a perfect combination of theory and creativity. The conservator is both scientist and artist and is well suited to navigating the thin line between the abstract and analytical realms.

In general, I have been afforded insight into the challenges which museums take up through collecting. All the professionals in an institution collaborate to the end of preserving and interpreting their collections. Using food as media is another creative thing that artists do to keep us guessing and to keep things interesting for museum staff.



## **Good to Eat or Food for Thought:**

### **The Challenges of Art Made with Food and the Changing Nature of Conservation in Museums of Modern and Contemporary Art**

Food and our interaction with food are defining elements of human existence. Serial dieters are constantly ruminating on how to avoid calories and fat while avid exercisers obsess on how to burn off the excess that food can put on. Senior citizens begrudgingly cut out foods high in cholesterol and sodium. Toddlers are always scheming for that next sweet treat, in the cookie jar on a counter just out of their reach. We feed our dogs food from our tables and our gardens food waste in the form of compost heaps. We wait weeks to experience a hot chef's unique and usually overpriced specials, while in developing countries people wait days for their next morsel.

The ways in which food touches our lives is seemingly endless and, because we are so involved with our own nourishment, certain types of food can trigger emotions in us. For example, when I eat waffles and ice cream, I always remember the coziness of my mother's kitchen on chilly Sunday evenings and being spoiled with her sweetness while eating dessert for dinner.

Food even enters the rituals involved with many faiths and is integral to worship. In Catholicism, the believer eats wafers as the body of Christ and drinks wine symbolizing the blood of Christ. Judaism includes doctrines that forbid the faithful to mix meat and dairy together in one meal. In Shinto, a Japanese faith, families leave offerings, such as produce and meat, to Kami, deities that embody either great ancestors

or natural spirits, as a sign of respect and gratefulness. Buddhist monks are bound to a life of poverty and humility and live solely on what is collected through donation or begging.

Food defines us, you, me and them. I envy the eclectic yet very particular flavors that traditional Spanish families weave into gigantic dishes of paella and my mouth waters for the all-American fried chicken with yams and lemonade. Every family has secret recipes that are passed down from mother to daughter or father to son and every family also has its unique flavor, at least in terms of what dishes their memories are made round.

Lack of food defines us too. Not just in the rumbling stomach of a paper pusher approaching the strike of noon but in the relentless hunger pangs of those who live on a subsistence level. For example, in Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth, the patriarch of a deprived Chinese family encourages his family to fill their aching and empty bellies by consuming dirt because he has not the money to provide them even the most meager means of nourishment. Hunger is an all-encompassing drive in humanity.

As food allows us to connect to the many facets of our life, it is completely predictable that motifs stemming from food would be a significant subject matter for artistic expression. And because people have been eating for as long as there have been people, artists have been depicting that nourishment since prehistoric times. Paleolithic people drew symbols of the animals they hunted on the rocky walls of their dwellings. In Western painting, still lifes of fruit and meat become popular, allegorical motifs in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Even such an avante garde movement as cubism conformed to the practice of painting still life as a vehicle to explore abstraction. In contemporary times we find that the use of food as a subject continues. For example, the artist John Currin paints

putridly realistic spreads of edibles. His *Thanksgiving* 2003 depicts three women with a raw turkey that will undeniably be the center of their family feast; his *Homemade Pasta* 1999 shows two men bonding through the creation of spaghetti.

Contemporary artists not only include depictions of food objects in their work, they also employ the real deal, the edibles themselves, into the physicality of their conceptions. The type of food used varies with each artist and with each individual piece; the use of media traditionally consumed for human nourishment poses special concerns. Food that is organic or even processed is meant solely for human consumption and not for use as artistic media, but instead to be broken down and disposed of by the human digestive track for the purpose of nourishment and enhancement of physical health. Thus food as media has an inherent flaw, namely it rots, molds, festers and in short goes bad in a variety of smelly, ugly and messy ways. This allows artists to express ideas and emotions more strongly perhaps than they could with traditional media.

With food as a medium, the artist can convey emotions and opinions associated with death, as food certainly has a life; the decay of food mirrors the natural decomposition of the body, whether with disease or time. Food is also a strong symbol for the idea of consumption. Consumption can be considered in a plethora of ways: to be consumed by emotion, disease or madness, to consume and be satisfied such as by the warm embrace of a requited love or by the fullness a hearty meal provides. Food, because it is not a permanent material, also conveys ideas of transience, change and variety. Food relates to spirituality in that its natural growth, ripening and decay mirror the same birth, maturity and waning of life we all experience and thus can be a powerful symbol as we

reconcile our life in a grander scheme. In addition, food can be a powerful symbol to express a sense of longing, an emotional hunger or sense of not being fulfilled.

Food allows the artist to include other sensations besides the visual into the experience of their works so that audiences can relate to memories of smell, taste, and texture. Instead of just seeing a piece of cake represented in a painting, the viewer can smell the cake, and then will call to mind the moistness of the dessert and perhaps the warmth of the kitchen it was prepared in. Experiencing art with food that has a smell, texture, or taste affects more of the viewers' modalities than just sight and offers those viewers a deep sensual connection to the work and the artist's point of view. Yet, food as media in contemporary art creates larger concerns, particularly for the museum, which is responsible not only for the physical protection of the work and/or the artist's intent, but also for interpretation of such pieces.

Contemporary art that includes food as a medium can be problematic for an institution to collect, exhibit and maintain due to its inherent inclination to decay. Thus we must consider how the conservator interacts with the collection by researching, taking action, or not taking actions; all of these potential decisions affect the physicality of the works and the interpretation thereof. The conservator must work within the museum setting and with its specified policies to preserve the concepts and aesthetics as they apply to each work specifically. This is a complex task, especially with the advent of ephemeral materials being used to create artwork. A conservator or team of conservators work to prevent and in some cases repair damage and decay to the objects that an institution owns.

The museum conservator deals directly with the concerns that works of art incorporating food as media create. These include the obvious issues that implanting food as a media cause such as decay, damage, and infestation with pests. However, there are deeper issues involved with this media. It is important for conservators to compile and follow information about the artist's intent. This seems straightforward but problems arise when the artist is deceased, unavailable, or without clear opinions about the conservation of his or her art. In the case of an artist's death, sometimes the artist's estate is mired in bureaucracy. . A great deal of contradiction arises when the artist's intent is for his/her work to decay until it is no longer viable as a work of art. Reconciling these complex issues requires the conservator to assume the perspective of other professionals in the museum.

How do these special problems affect the conservator in the museum environment? In the traditional museum, the conservator takes on the technical role of researching materials and implementing treatment. The traditional conservator offers input about the materials and structure of an artwork, leaving the interpretation to curators and documentation to the registration department. The art conservator involved with ephemeral materials such as food is challenged by the complexities of museum interpretation. How does the museum interpret a work of art that requires recognition of more senses than the traditional visually based contemplation? Furthermore, how does the conservator preserve intangible senses or reminiscences of those senses such as taste, smell, sound, and touch? The traditional conservator's main duty is to preserve the aesthetic integrity of objects but with the introduction of food as an accepted media in art, the contemporary conservator is pressured not only expand her role to include

responsibilities traditionally attributed to curators, registrars, and artists but also to interpret and maintain the more intangible modalities that food as media invokes.<sup>1</sup> Should a conservator apply preservation processes to a work which the artist desires to decay? The two case studies of this thesis both answer no. They show that the conservator must interpret the meaning of the piece including, most importantly, the perspective of the artist. The contemporary is bound more to conserve the artist's intent rather than to conserve the physicality of works in perpetuity. Artists working with food challenge conservators to define authenticity through the concept and performance of the artists as well as through the physicality of the objects.

In this thesis I will prove that the conservator is particularly affected by the use of food in art by examining how the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum reconcile the conservation concerns of several such ephemeral works in their collections. These institutions make compelling case studies because of their expertise in collecting, exhibiting and interpreting works realized with ephemeral materials. I will explore how each institution deals with conservation issues by looking at policies and the treatment of individual works in their collection which include food as a medium.

At the Museum of Modern Art, two pieces exemplify the issues at hand: Janine Antoni's *Gnaw*, 1992 and Felix Gonzalez Torres' *Placebo*, 1991. *Gnaw*, a multi-part installation comprised of a 600 pound block of chocolate and a 600 block of lard juxtaposed with a display case arranged with objects formed with lard and chocolate

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<sup>1</sup>Rachel Barker and Patricia Smithen, "New Art, New Challenges: The Changing Face of Conservation in the Twenty-First Century" in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Intro*, Ed. Janet Marstine, (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 85-95.

gnawed from the larger blocks, is, without saying, difficult to transport and install. It requires both the artist and an assistant from her studio to be properly installed. The block of chocolate is gnawed by the artist before the opening of the exhibition and the lard, being gelatinous, must be molded by her assistant. The components of the display case, glass, lights, chocolate trays and lipsticks, must be arranged to specifications and are very fragile. Also, it is important for the conservator not to treat the object in any way that limits the relevant texture or smell of the chocolate and the lard. In addition to inherent conservation concerns; *Gnaw* presents risks for other objects in surrounding areas of the museum because visitors cannot be prevented from touching the lard and then smudging their fingers on other objects in the surrounding galleries. Nonetheless, MOMA accepts these risks because the piece is powerful. With *Gnaw*, Antoni explores body image issues by intimately destroying the perfection of the chocolate cube as she chews at its surface.<sup>2</sup> This personal interaction with the chocolate is juxtaposed against the self-destruction of the chocolate and the pristine environment in which the smaller components are displayed. The issues raised by this piece force the conservator to act as curator/scholar in understanding the meaning of the piece as related to its installation, as registrar in gathering and preserving information on how to administer the piece, and even as maintenance personnel in that the piece can potentially affect safety of the public and of other objects in the museum.

On the contrary, Gonzalez-Torres' piece, *Placebo*, is, in intention, completely disposable. *Placebo* is a candy spill that is laid directly on the museum floor to specified dimensions. Gonzalez-Torres asks the viewer to consume one piece of candy, each

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<sup>2</sup> Clare Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (New York: Routledge. 2005): 113-115.

depleting the pile. With this depletion, he explores the whittling away of life and the consumption of time which eventually results in nothing or disappearance.<sup>3</sup> The piece does not engage traditional conservation issues because the individual components, the candies, are not conserved and can be replaced in the event that the original manufacturer ceases to produce it, according to interviews with the artist. Therefore, preserving the physicality of the piece is inconsequential but safeguarding the conception for perpetuity gains emphasis. With *Placebo*, since the museum owns only the right to reproduce the piece to the artist's specifications, the conservation, in a sense, becomes good registration.

MOMA is quite progressive in its conservation policy. The institution places emphasis on creative conservation solutions. For example, black electrical tape becomes the low-tech fix for the cracking vinyl on Claes Oldenburg's humorous piece, *Giant Soft Fan*, 1966-67. The black shiny tape preserves the aesthetic quality of the piece so that it can be exhibited until a more permanent solution for the disintegrating vinyl can be devised. MOMA also interviews artists to discern their desired outcomes for their work so that the actions the institution employs to conserve the works are not in contradiction with the artists' conceptions.

The Guggenheim has several works in its collection that have food as media and is more open than the Museum of Modern Art about sharing conservation issues with scholars and a wider public. While MOMA required me to sign confidentiality agreements that prohibit me from sharing information about actual damage or decay to any of the objects I chose to research, the Guggenheim did not. Also the Guggenheim discusses conservation issues and resolutions via its Variable Media Network. The

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Boulanger, "Marking Time." *Art New England*, December/January 2004, 14-15 and 55.



Variable Media Network is a site operated by the Guggenheim which serves as a database for artist input and the discussion of conservation issues related to pieces with ephemeral material for use by professionals that subscribe to the network. I have examined two works in the Guggenheim collection. The first is another work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a candy spill similar to the piece aforementioned, dubbed *Public Opinion* 1991. I have chosen to include two pieces by the same artist because I believe it provides an interesting view of how two institutions handle the conservation concerns of similar pieces in unique ways. *Public Opinion* is one of twenty or so contemporary mixed media objects on the VMN.

*Terremoto*, 1981, by Joseph Beuys consists of a printing press, several sketched upon chalk boards and a bucket of fat that resides underneath the chalk board. The piece is the artist's expression of Action Third Way, a theory of political activism Beuys helped create.<sup>4</sup> This theory emphasizes the importance ecology which he alludes to by juxtaposing technology and organic elements, in this case the fat which renders the type keys useless. *Terremoto* provides an excellent example of how conservators are working with artists or an artist's estate to comply with the artist's wishes about conservation of the piece to the best of the facility's ability. However, it is important to keep in mind that artists do not always desire the eternal preservation of their work and, in some cases, desire the opposite, decay or disintegration.

There is some literature about the conservation of new media as a general topic. The literature can be categorized into two facets. The first considers the history, theory, and ethics involved with conservation in general and specifically how this effects the

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<sup>4</sup>Artist biography and *Terremoto* object information,[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_work\\_md\\_17\\_2.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_17_2.html)

conservation of new media.<sup>5</sup> The second facet is a technical discussion including information about materials, artists' intent and new conservation techniques.<sup>6</sup> Although there are several case studies on specific works that include food as a media, there is a lack of examination of the effects on museum professionals, particularly the overlapping of roles and the resolution of complex issues surrounding the conservation as well as the interpretation of such pieces. My thesis aims to address this issue. Most art museums include in their mission the rote aim to preserve the content of their collection and to make that collection accessible. Presently the need to further develop their policy to include passages about reconciling the use of new media, such as food, in contemporary art is becoming more prevalent. Well-developed policy is crucial to denote procedures for documentation, interpretation, and preservation and how they overlap in terms of departments of the museums. With the lines of job titles becoming blurred, the need for clear cut procedure that addresses these concerns becomes more prevalent.

Beyond the overlapping of the responsibilities of museum professionals, museums are forced to collaborate with other institutions to determine the appropriate strategies for dealing with the complex issues that new media forces to the surface. While major museums of collect contemporary art are setting precedents, many smaller institutions are collecting such material and are having to struggle with similar questions without the

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<sup>5</sup> Important texts include:

Janet Marstine, ed., New Museum Theory and Practice: an Introduction , (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

. Bruce Altshuler, ed., Museums and Contemporary Art: Collecting the New (Princeton University Press, 2005).

Miguel Angel Corzo, ed., Immortality, Mortality: The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Important databases include: International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), The Variable Media Network

benefit of conservation resources. Therefore these case studies become models for smaller museums to imitate strategy.

## **The Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Art with Food**

### **A Strong Administration Prevails**

The Museum of Modern collects contemporary art that incorporates new media such as food. The collection of this type of media has certainly informed the policies through which the museum administers its care. MoMA is both progressive and conservative in its policies. As a result of the new challenges that ephemeral and new media present, the institution has adapted its policies to allow fluid teamwork and thoughtful resolution to conservation issues. However, this broad-minded approach does not negate a well-defined hierarchy within the museum. The position of conservator is clearly delineated. Nonetheless, new media, like food, requires that the conservator must have expertise outside traditional conservation science. The conservator must be well-versed in areas of interpretation which have been traditionally attributed to the curator such as historical context and artistic intent, in order to make appropriate and informed decisions about conservation of objects with ephemeral material. At MoMA, conservators are well-rounded and successful at diagnosing and resolving the complex conservation issues that derive from impermanent media such as food.

I spoke at length with Lynda Zycherman, Conservator of Sculpture at MoMA for the last fifteen years. Through several conversations with Zycherman, it became clear that the unique dynamic between curators and conservators creates a progressive

and effective dialogue through which the comprehensive care of the collection is achieved.<sup>1</sup>

Conservators at MoMA are on a par, in terms of power, with curators. To illustrate this, consider that the salaries for both positions are equal for corresponding positions.<sup>2</sup> Although both positions are integral to the successful care and interpretation of the collection, the curator and the conservator collaborate from different sides of the same issues. This is best understood through Lynda Zycherman's metaphorical explanation: "Conservators are like doctors and curators are like therapists in that conservators diagnose the technical and propose the *cure* and curators work through the abstract by analyzing emotional and intellectual interpretations and solutions."<sup>3</sup> Despite this divide of technical versus intellectual, the two museum entities cannot be effective without collaborating. What is the conservation process?

As Zycherman explains it, a work of art may pass through the conservation lab for several reasons: 1) it is requested by another institution as a loan, 2) it is being considered for sale or barter, 3) a staff member has noticed damage/change in an object or 4) it is slated to be installed for an exhibition. When a loan is requested, the conservator analyzes the piece and makes suggestions such as: the work is too fragile for travel, needs a new crate to be safely transported, should have supports installed before it is moved or can be transferred with minimal cleaning. A report is made to the curator but the conservator must provide concrete reasons why a work is able or unable to travel. The curator almost always abides by the advice given in the conservator's

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<sup>1</sup> Lynda Zycherman, interviews with author, New York City 5 October 2006 and 10 March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Lynda Zycherman, interview with author, New York City, 10 March 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

report at this institution, but does have the power to *veto* the conservator's decisions regarding the work in question. It is also important to note that conservation of a work does not usually result in treatment such as cleaning or stabilizing. Instead, any changes are documented and/or adjustments are made to the environment. Still it is important to note examination and environmental conservation as opposed to treatment conservation is progressive even if this is a somewhat traditional interaction between the conservation and curatorial departments. However, the conservator aids the curator in interpreting the context that conservation history can lend to works in the collection.

The conservator's role overlaps with that of the curators through the conservator's contribution to catalogues, among other research projects. Conservators are obligated to research techniques, processes and concepts as they apply to the collection and, in general, to the modern/contemporary genre of art even though this is typically something for which curators are solely responsible. It is important to consider how conservation treatments applied to new media (such as food that is predisposed to decay) might change the original aesthetic and/or alter the intent of the artist. Conservation history must be included in the context of the piece. Curators rely on the conservators to provide a full explanation of the processes used to create the piece and why the piece may be inherently unstable while the curators themselves focus on style, iconography and historical context.

The conservators at MoMA must be extremely knowledgeable in art history, especially about concepts and processes within the last century. Lack of context would cripple the conservator. Again, Lynda Zycherman's metaphor serves to clarify. A doctor would not be able to diagnose and treat you with the utmost efficiency and

success when not informed of your medical history and, of equal relevance, your family history. Likewise, with art, knowing the artist's background and influences better equips the conservator to make educated decisions about the meaning of the piece and the potential impact of conservation on the authenticity of the artist's expression. The overlap of knowledge in areas of art history and artist intent allows those working with the collection-- registrars, curators, and conservators-- to be well-informed about the collection and to make informed decisions regarding it.

Although functions within MoMA are compartmentalized, as is the norm for large institutions, positions are not without overlap and this collaboration helps to provide comprehensive research and documentation of the collection. As an example of the collaboration between departments, the registration, curatorial and conservation departments teamed up to develop the artist questionnaire. This questionnaire is administered to every artist who has a work acquired in the MoMA collection. Policy also allows for the questionnaire to be retroactively administered to artists whose works were acquired before its inception. If the artist is not available, then MoMA will pursue an interview with the artist's estate and/or family. The questions serve to resolve possible conundrums from the perspective of each department by asking the artist to disclose detailed information about the work. Copies of completed questionnaires are kept in each respective department. The questionnaire is integral to both the preservation and interpretation of the collection.

With new media, the symbolism of a piece, as well as the artist's intent, is often complex. Artist input is needed to understand the intent, the purpose of using ephemeral materials and the desired outcome for the piece. The artist is the glue that

adheres the conservator's analysis and light touch to the curator's diligent research.

That being said, the conservator is not without tools.

MoMA has a newly renovated and well-equipped conservation lab. This updated lab is equipped with a full set of optical and standard laboratory equipment, microscopy, UV, infrared, and X-ray examination, FTIR, GC Mass Spectrometer, light measurement, UV measurement, spectroscopy, accelerated fading tester, hot table, digital cameras, lenses, and filters. With high tech equipment, conservators are able to determine the chemical make-up and stability of art materials. The team of conservators at MoMA uses this equipment to diagnose any problems a work of art may have and also to determine appropriate actions to stabilize work. In addition to having many scientific tools at their disposal, the conservators have ample space in which to diagnose, apply treatments and document conservation. Moreover, each conservator at MoMA has twenty or more years of experience in the field as well as a solid background in art history.

Collaboration within a defined hierarchy along with respect for artist input allow MoMA to be successful in dealing with works that have food as media. Policies enable staff to work towards preserving the original intent of these works, even if that intent results in the destruction of the piece.

Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* includes both chocolate and lard as media and is a case study in this chapter. Her intent for the piece is independent of the vulnerability of the media. For example Janine Antoni intends the lard component of *Gnaw* to collapse shortly after the exhibition of the installation opens. Other artists may require that components of their work or the work in full are destroyed by force or with time as a



way of constructing meaning. Museums, specifically, conservators within the museum setting, must respect the wishes of the artist. If an artist wants his/her work eventually to decay or to be destroyed, then the museum must judge if it is ethical to collect that particular piece, given mode and timeline for destruction and its possible effects on the conservation of other works and policies within the institution.

Below I discuss the conservation issues involved with Janine Antoni's *Gnaw*, 1992, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Placebo*, 1991. This discussion serves to further illuminate policy in relation to the role of the conservator at MoMA. Performance aspects as well as the edible media of each pieces requires a different mode of preservation yet policy allows the conservator to reach beyond scientific analysis to discover a deeper understanding of authenticity that prioritizes concept as well as physicality .

### **Janine Antoni's *GNAW***

Artists are constantly expanding to new media as contemporary means of expression. One such artist is Janine Antoni. In her own words, she describes her artistic process:

I'm interested in everyday body rituals and converting the most basic sort of activities – eating, bathing, mopping – into sculptural process. Even in doing this, I imitate basic fine art rituals such as chiseling (with my teeth), painting (with my hair and eyelashes), modeling and molding (with my own body).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson, Eds. "Bodies of Evidence: Jenny SAville, Faith Ringgold, and Janine Antoni Weigh In," *Interfaces: Women Autobiography Image Performance*. (University of Michigan, 2002) 132-159.

Antoni has been known to use varied media such as limestone, soap, chocolate, lard, and hair dye in the creation of her works. The media is intimate, being materials found in everyday life, and not necessarily in the traditional artist's studio, and the method of creation is also very intimate and can even be considered performance art. For example, with *Loving Care* (1992), the act of using her hair-dye be-smudged mane as a paintbrush eclipses the swirling pattern left by the rolling of her neck. The artist's body becomes the brush.

One piece that illuminates the conservation issues related to works with non-traditional media is Antoni's *Gnaw* (1992). This work consists of three parts: a six hundred pound cube of chocolate, gnawed by the artist, on a marble base; a six hundred pound cube of lard, also gnawed by the artist, on a marble base; and a complex display case. The display case houses thirty-one gnawed chocolate heart-shaped packages meant to imitate those that contain chocolate, removed from the larger cube of chocolate, and one hundred thirty-five lipsticks made with lard (from cube), pigment and wax. The display case is constructed with glass and mirrors around a chrome framework and lighted with tube-shaped fluorescent bulbs. A decal declaring "Janine Antoni Lipsticks" labels the display case.<sup>5</sup> So how does this work, seemingly cold and sterile, composed of a display case and two cubes of now inedible food, prove intimate? The artist actually gnawed the edges of the cubes until they were rounded and then spat the chocolate and greasy lard out, making trays and lipsticks out of the "waste." Not only is the artist involved in the creation but also the installation of the piece. "During the course of the installation, but only when it was closed to the public,

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<sup>5</sup> MoMA object files for Janine Antoni.  
Lynda Zycherman, interview with author, New York City, 5 October 2006.

Antoni entered the gallery to consume the cube”.<sup>6</sup> Her nose and teeth marks become a sort of autograph on the cubes and her saliva in the sculpted items can be considered her constant presence in the installation. *Gnaw* is the artist’s exploration of a preconceived notion of beauty, specifically how ideals create pressure to conform to a certain aesthetic. With the gnawed chocolate and lard, Antoni forms candy trays and lipsticks, symbolizing how the regurgitation of nourishment, like with the disease bulimia, can create an absurd and cookie-cutter definition of beauty.<sup>7</sup> Antoni is working through her own body issues and relationships with food. The object is strong as the body can be tough, but also fragile and susceptible to disease and disorder. The materials symbolize this contradiction which is also mirrored in the conservation concerns that surround the work. *Gnaw* is heavy and large but the materials that make it such are vulnerable.

This aspect of performance or interaction that the artist engages in with her works, including *Gnaw*, poses a unique challenge for the conservator. How does the conservator preserve this kind of “performance”? It would seem that a work like *Gnaw*, due to its performance component, has a definite life span, one that ceases when the artist no longer wishes or is able to interact with the work. In this case, videotaping the artist’s interaction with the piece would not be a solution. The artist is not seen manipulating the piece by the audience and so the privacy of her involvement with the piece would be shattered upon its being visually recorded.<sup>8</sup> So the conservator can only preserve, for any length of time, the inanimate aspects of the piece, the materials

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Interfaces*, 149.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> David D. J. Rau, “Janine Antoni: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,” *New Art Examiner*.28, no. 7. (2001): 57-8.

used to create it but not the actions themselves that allow the piece to be *complete*, such as the performance aspect that is integral to the work as a whole.

*Gnaw* poses many conservation issues because it is comprised mostly of ephemeral materials: chocolate and lard. How do you preserve for posterity materials that are inherently predisposed to decay? Zycherman of the Museum of Modern Art Conservation Lab is realistic in admitting that organic materials like chocolate and lard cannot be preserved forever. In fact, Zycherman admits that the only materials that have proven endurance are perhaps stone and metal, and even they can decay, due to de-calcification, and are vulnerable to damage. Chocolate, being an edible and organic material, is sensitive to problems that may alter its appearance and structural integrity.

First of all, chocolate is soft and can be gouged out with even the slightest pressure. When on display at the Museum of Modern Art, the cubes are only barricaded from the public by a one inch thick and approximately three quarters of an inch high wood strip forming a square around the cube that does not prevent any bold visitor who is daring enough to reach out and touch. Although gouging can change the chocolate cube, it can be easily repaired. The MoMA conservators interviewed Janine Antoni and asked what she would do to repair the piece if any such gouging did occur. Antoni left some of the original chocolate, about two ounces or so to be used in the event of any loss due to gouging or otherwise. The conservator was instructed to melt chocolate to fill in any area where loss occurred and with a scraper provided by the artist to even the area and then use his/her fingers to blend original and added chocolate.<sup>9</sup> The artist admits that the finger is an excellent tool for chocolate in that it

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<sup>9</sup> MoMA object files for Janine Antoni.

Lynda Zycherman, interview with author, New York City, 5 October 2006.

has just enough warmth to make the chocolate pliable.<sup>10</sup> This technique seems to be appropriate for any small losses but would not be acceptable if the cube cracked and lost a large chunk or melted resulting in the loss of shape. The artist allows for new chocolate in the event that the cube cannot be repaired with the allotted two or three ounces of chocolate given to the lab. Damage to this extent can easily be avoided with carefully planned transportation and storage. Preventative measures are the best measures.

Another conservation concern with chocolate is an effect called blooming (whitening). This looks like a white dust that coats the outside shell of the chocolate. Blooming is the natural crystallization of sugar out of the chocolate and cannot be prevented. There is no treatment to remedy this surface change, short of melting chocolate and re-creating the cube to return the surface to a glossy finish. Just as the sugar eventually rises to the surface, fat also migrates out of the chocolate and congeals into white spheres on the surface called white exudates. Fourier Transformed Infrared Reflectology analysis proves the obvious fact that there is fat in chocolate. FTIR is conservation technology that allows conservators to examine bonds between atoms and molecules and helps them to understand the nature of organic bonds. It is almost always used for determining the composition and strength of adhesives. MoMA conservators used FTIR to verify the fat content in Antoni's chocolate cube. Although they can prove the fat content, they cannot stop it or the sugar from rising to the surface. Thus, despite all preservation efforts, the chocolate will inevitably disintegrate. What the conservator can do is keep the cube in steady temperatures and

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<sup>10</sup> Janine Antoni has been very cooperative and complete in terms of working with MoMA to preserve *Gnaw*. MoMA has worked closely with her studio, specifically her assistant, each time the work has been installed.

levels of humidity which does seem to slow the process somewhat. The spheres of fat are gently scraped off the surface of the chocolate to maintain the aesthetic integrity of the exterior.

The lard cube, being gelatinous, does not hold the cube shape, and is actually intended by the artist to self-destruct. Despite its collapsible nature, the lard still presents conservation concerns. Six hundred pounds of “fresh” lard is ordered for each re-installation because the lard, being sticky and gelatinous, collects dust, which cannot be removed. For each installation, the artist’s assistant with the aid of conservators pack the fresh lard into a cube-shaped mold with the artist’s original gnaw marks. Layer by layer the lard is built up; each layer frozen with dry ice, until the cube is complete so the lard initially maintains some shape and dry ice is packed around it. The lard is the last part of the installation to be prepared and remains packed in dry ice until the opening. Once the dry ice is removed and the lard thaws, it will collapse onto itself within a few hours and remain a shapeless white pile, resembling snow, on the floor for the duration of the exhibition. Since the lard is discarded after each exhibition, it is not a conservation concern but the collapsed lard pile seems to be a tactile draw for visitors, who, in turn, touch other things in the museum, leaving a tell tale slime trail on other objects. There is no real way to prevent other objects being smudged with the white goop and so objects in adjoining galleries must be inspected for the residue and cleaned.

In general, major conservation concerns surrounding Antoni’s work arise mostly with the installation and de-installation of the piece. Lynda Zycherman admits that the work can be kept for a relative “forever” in climate controlled storage where

there are no fingers to touch, pests to infest, or travels to crack the somewhat fragile chocolate elements. The chocolate cube and display case elements are kept in specially lined and compartmentalized boxes so they are left pristinely undisturbed in storage and much protected while in transit. The challenge is truly in the installation. The display case is set up first. The heart packages are fragile and must be gingerly placed according to the artist's specifications. All components in the display case must be wiped by a conservator to erase all traces of fingerprint grease. In order to prevent the bright red of the lipsticks from fading, UV filters are used in the display case. The chocolate cube is next to be installed and must be carefully moved so as not to crack off large chunks or indent the surface of the chocolate. As described above, the lard must be molded by the artist's assistant in layers using dry ice to keep it solid until the opening. All these complicated steps are to be monitored by one or more conservators who take painstakingly detailed notes. The installation notes have become an essential part of conservation and objects files for *Gnaw* at MoMA.

So how do conservators preserve this work in the face of conservation issues? All conservators can really do is treat the components with the technology available, encourage conversation with artists, and delay deterioration by creating a static and suitable environment during storage and exhibition.<sup>11</sup> In the event of fat rising to the surface, they can scrape it off. If the chocolate becomes infested with pests they can deprive it of oxygen for more than ten days to fix the problem. Beyond the technical treatment of the piece, the conservator must collaborate with other professionals in the museum as well as rely on their own knowledge to interpret the most appropriate mode of conservation in the context of the work's meaning and destiny as designated by the

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<sup>11</sup> Jordan Essoe, "Viewpoint," *Artweek* 36, no. 10 (2005); 5-8.

artist. Ephemeral media including food has helped conservators at MoMA to recognize that authenticity lies in the idea of the work as well as the physical nature of the work itself. The piece will disintegrate eventually despite the best efforts at preservation. But perhaps the most interesting conservation concern tied up with Antoni's *Gnaw* is her and her studio's continued involvement with the work during each and every reinstallation.

If Antoni gnaws the piece even as it is being exhibited, how can the piece be interpreted without her interaction with it? Who then will continue the performance of intimate involvement with the piece? Certainly the artist is integral to the authentic installation of the piece. If the artist no longer is able to perform the piece, is the meaning the same? Can the work be interpreted in the same way? There are no clear answers to these questions. Conservators, curators, and registrars at MoMA work to document the installation process and to understand and comply with the artist's wishes in varied hypothetical loss situations. However, the institution's willingness to work with artists does not guarantee that artists will be willing to divulge their thoughts. Although the institution has information, it does not ensure that any conservation effort will maintain the integrity or authenticity of the work. For example, if any of the heart-shaped packages are damaged or destroyed, they can be recast with melted chocolate in aluminum molds created by the artist's studio, but the new packages will not be chewed by the artist, no longer contain her saliva and her artistic touch. Even though they look identical can they really be considered authentic when lacking the touch of the artist?



This is not to say that documenting the artist's thoughts in relation to the future of their works and conservation concerns is not constructive. For example, with *Gnaw*, it is useful to know that if one of the marble bases should break another one can be created and that the decals on the display case should not be cleaned with solvents, as this will dissolve the lettering. Despite such careful documentation of the artist's intent and suggestions regarding conservation, the fate of *Gnaw* fifty years from now is still uncertain. The chocolate will definitely disintegrate but not on a timeline of the museum's choosing. The artist will expire and as well the ability of *Gnaw*'s keepers to create an authentic installation that maintains the integrity of Antoni's conception. This is why Lynda Zycherman believes that the only appropriate thing to do is to exhibit the piece now, as much as possible, while the artist lives and the work is still relevant and authentic. Nonetheless, since the work was acquired in 1994, it has only been exhibited twice (during the 1990's) and has been in storage since.

Media studies scholar Johanna Drucker discusses the importance of Antoni's interaction with the work. If Antoni's "gnawed blocks of chocolate are sculptural extensions of (a) kind of somatically authentic 'artistic production'", then it seems that the installation can only be true to its nature if (1) the artist can interact with the piece mysteriously while the exhibition is closed to the public and (2) has input into every installation of the work.<sup>12</sup> Without this interaction of the artist with the work, *Gnaw* loses its meaning. So the conclusion can only be that even if the piece's ephemeral materials could be conserved forever, the authenticity of the piece can only be maintained while the artist is living. The conservator must accept the conceptual and

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<sup>12</sup> Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams Contemporary Art and Complicity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 201.

performed nature of the piece in order to preserve the authenticity of the physicality. The interaction of the artist with the piece is as important to the concept as the physical components are to the realization of the work. Thus the conservator is responsible to preserving the concept which is only facilitated by the physicality of the piece.

If this is so, then it would seem contradictory for museums to collect works that are inclined to expiration. However, the life span, whether planned or otherwise, does not upstage the meaning. More and more artists are experimenting with varied, vulnerable and ephemeral material to deepen their symbolic lexicon. Rather than turn away these new expressions, museums must adapt to new media. Museum staff must evolve to accommodate the new relationship between art that dies and the institution which basks in the forever. Museums invest in collections which are expected to be cared for into perpetuity. These expectations are defined by the assumption that art is something that can be held on, i.e. art as treasure. New media and contemporary genres are challenging to this traditional hierarchy of the accepted modes of expressions. Museums of modern and contemporary art must now navigate the line between being a repository for so-called artistic treasures while still remaining fresh and collect to reflect the nature of what artists are creating. The only way to achieve this seems to be dialogue with artists about their work, the varied media, and their desires for the work. Conservators are integral to that balance being struck because they view preservation of the collection from several perspectives.

## **Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Placebo)***

Akin to many pieces by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Placebo)*, 1991, explores ideas of transience and loss. With *Untitled (Placebo)*, Gonzalez-Torres expresses these concepts by allowing the audience to consume the piece. Audience participation thus erodes the installation over time. Because *Placebo* is interactive and its material taken, eaten, digested by visitors, the work has complex implications for conservators. The artist's intent is that the media be disposable while the overall concept of the piece is preserved. Thus the conservator must emphasize maintaining the artist's concept through documenting Gonzalez-Torres's thoughts on how *Untitled (Placebo)* can best be perpetuated. The work consists of an endless supply of pineapple-flavored candies wrapped in silver cellophane, which are spread out on the floor.<sup>13</sup> The dimensions of the floor space vary with each installation but the ideal weight is denoted as between 1, 000 – 1, 200 pounds (454 – 544 kilograms). The Museum of Modern Art pours the candies directly onto the gallery floor using a depth of 2 inches, a width of 12 feet, 4 inches and a length of 20 feet, four inches, creating a large rectangle on the floor. Ideal installation calls for three edges of the aforementioned rectangle to be flush against the walls of the gallery and should carpet at least one third of the room so that the floor is not visible through the layering of candies. The candies are from the Peerless Confection Company and named simply pineapple #2017. The oval-shaped candies measure 2 ½ inches by ¾ inch by ½ inch. If these particular candies become unavailable, they can be replaced by another brand as long as they have a similar size, shape, flavor and color with no writing or designs

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<sup>13</sup> MoMA objects files for Felix Gonzalez-Torres.  
Linda Zycherman, interview with author, New York City, 5 October 2006.

on the wrappers. *Untitled (Placebo)* is installed by the MoMA installation team under the supervision of both conservators and registrars with the aid of ideal measurements. For example, the ideal installation is laid out in the shape of a rectangle where the candy in total weighs approximately 1,000-1,200 pounds. Visitors to the exhibition are asked to take one candy from the installation until there are no more candies left. Thus the installation is constantly changing and being depleted. This aspect of the piece is more important than its measurements and the specific kind of candy.<sup>14</sup> However, there are a few more constraints upon the installation of this piece.

The candies can be replenished at any point during the exhibition, but this is an important decision that should be made prior to the opening of the installation to the public. The Museum of Modern Art does not replenish the candies until they are all gone. The edges of the installation are to be straightened should a borrowing institution chose to replenish at a different level of depletion. Gonzalez-Torres did stipulate that the empty wrappers should not be tossed back onto the installation. The artist also denoted in an interview that the only signage is to be a simple plaque stating “Take One” or “One Candy per Visitor” or something along those lines; a guard to guide the consumption of the candy is also acceptable. However, this sign does not address the wrappers.

Despite the seeming simplicity in the concept and installation, *Untitled (Placebo)*, sparks many questions. How is ownership of work defined? How can you preserve something that is meant to be consumed/ depleted? How do you deal with the trash created through the consumption of the work? Well, it seems that the ownership of the piece is defined through the possession of installation instructions and the right

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Prince., “Once More with Feeling,” *Art Monthly*, no. 304 (2007): 1-4.

to install and exhibit the work. Preservation of the piece means simply to maintain the documentation of the work and to exercise the right to exhibit it.<sup>15</sup> The Museum of Modern Art places a receptacle at the exit of the gallery in which the work is installed to encourage visitors to discard wrappers and unwanted candies. Lynda Zycherman admits that the pineapple flavor is quite disgusting and that the sticky used candies do end up all over the museum but that this cannot really be avoided.

*Untitled (Placebo)* is in concept physically disposable. The transient quality of the work is realized not only by the consumption/depletion of the medium but also by the way conservators handle the candy. The candy, Gonzalez-Torres' chosen medium, is discarded at the close of each exhibition of the installation and ordered anew. . Felix Gonzalez-Torres emphasized the beauty of this conceptual work: "I'm giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else's body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many people's bodies...For just a few seconds, I have put something sweet in someone's mouth and that is very sexy."(113)<sup>16</sup> His words skirt the issue the piece obviously deals with: AIDS. The artist succumbed to the disease in 1996 and was battling it during the creation of *Untitled (Placebo)*. The candy is consumed by the audience and so allows the artist to be internalized and live through the bodies of those who devour his concept. Also, the waning of the pile symbolizes the loss of life each second of living robs from us, suggesting a morbid countdown. And because of the limitations that AIDS creates in terms of physical intimacy, the artist is exploring other ways to unite physically with people. The title further cements the concept as being related to AIDS. A placebo is defined as a

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Nickas, "Felix Gonzales-Torres: All the Time in the World," *Flash Art* 39(2006): 90-3.

<sup>16</sup> Clare Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (New York: Routledge. 2005), 113-115.

substance containing no medication that is given to reinforce a patient's expectation to get well. In light of this definition, Gonzalez-Torres perhaps alludes to his own experience with then experimental AIDS treatments. Thus *Untitled (Placebo)* can be seen as a vehicle through which the artist resolves the fear and acceptance of his imminent mortality.

With *Untitled (Placebo)* there can be no reverence for the physicality of this work which is meant to be consumed/depleted and ultimately lost, that is, until it is created anew. Therefore, conservation of the concept becomes the emphasis. The only real preservation of this piece is to allow it to be consumed over and over again so that the artist's conception can be perpetuated and experienced again and again. The reverence here is not for the physical but for that which is intangible: ideas and the individual experiences of visitors interacting with this work. At MoMA the piece is being preserved because the institution has inquired about and documented the artist's wishes for *Untitled (Placebo)*; thus, Gonzalez-Torres' concept is being perpetuated through the continuous and ideal installation of the piece. Conservators are "hands-off" in the preservation of the physicality of this work because they understand the context and respect the artist's wishes.

## Conclusions

It would seem that the only similarity between Antoni's *Gnaw* and Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Placebo)* is the sugary nature of their media, but comparisons are deeper. Both works have a performance, or interactive aspect. For *Gnaw*, the artist's intimate gnawing of the block is hidden and yet integral to the work's meaning. With *Untitled (Placebo)*, the performance is realized by the audience consuming its medium, candy, one by one. This interaction is also integral to the artist's concept. MoMA allows for the performance aspect of both pieces by adhering to the artist's wishes for exhibition, storage, and conservation. In the case of *Gnaw*, conservators rely on the artist to aid in the installation of the work, respecting Antoni's wish to gnaw on her work. Similarly, conservators comply with installation instructions for *Untitled (Placebo)* and allow patron interaction with the work. However, the disposable nature of the physicality of *Untitled (Placebo)* is in stark contrast with the carefully planned storage and preservation measures taken to conserve the physical components of *Gnaw*.

Despite *Gnaw* being preserved physically, I fear that this work is in more danger of losing relevancy than *Placebo* because the artist is so necessary to its authenticity. When Antoni no longer interacts with *Gnaw*, it will die, in a sense, because it will no longer be dynamic through the artist's dental interaction. The conservators are unable to ensure that the work will be relevant after this point, regardless of all efforts to preserve its chocolate and lard components. Thus, I think the MoMA should give priority to exhibiting *Gnaw* and other works that can be perceived as having a *shelf life*. I use shelf life to describe the period of time that an

artwork remains relevant. When a work is no longer aesthetically or conceptually the same due to intentional or unintentional change, or when artists are no longer willing and able to interact with the object as originally intended, then the piece can be considered to be at the end of its *shelf life*. However, it must be the artist that dictates when the work is so far removed from its original conception that it is no longer relevant.

On the contrary, the candies that remain after each installation of *Placebo* are discarded and, in general, are treated not as media, but more casually as candy. Instead, the concept and interaction are what Gonzalez-Torres meant to persist. MoMA certainly reiterates the artist's concept to preserve the artist's intent. It seems plausible, however, that some discussion about the disposable nature of the candy would aid patrons in realizing more fully the context and concepts explored by the artist.

At MoMA, wall texts serve to denote artist, date and medium with some information about historical context and/or subject matter. With *Placebo*, the wall text does encourage visitors to "Take One", but typical of labels within the institution, it does not delve into the complex conservation issues and goals. An explanation of how diverse media can affect the longevity of a given work would be enriching to the visitor's experience in this and in other cases where questions of conservation are multi-layered. With *Gnaw*, for example, I believe a label discussing its conservation would expose and thus extinguish Antoni's intimate involvement with the work. In some cases, labels including information about conservation concerns could be informative and enrich the visitor's understanding of a work's context. However,



when specifically applied to *Gnaw*, it would be an invasion of the artist's privacy; her secret would be exposed and the concept would have less impact. Labels including material about complex conservation issues should be developed carefully by curators and conservators to ensure that additional information is relevant to the understanding of the overall work.

In general, MoMA's traditionally structured hierarchy does not interfere with, but actually facilitates the evolution of conservation policies that are necessary to effectively deal with the acquisition and preservation of artifacts that feature non-traditional media, such as food. Conservators are given room to work freely with curators and registrars. Conservators are more than just scientists at the MoMA; they are involved with interpretation and documentation as well as conservation. For works with edible media, this means that all solutions regarding their care will be creative, researched, thoughtful and in accordance with artist input.

## **The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and its Variable Media**

### **Network**

#### **Dialogue Leads to Solutions**

Like the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum specializes in modern and contemporary art including works that incorporate new media such as food. The conservation policies of the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum are influenced both by the dynamic political environment of the institution, which is administered by the Guggenheim Foundation, and by the collection. The Museum engages in creative problem-solving regarding the conservation concerns of new and ephemeral media. As an example of the museum's progressive policies and commitment to practical solutions, the Variable Media Network, which functions as a web-based databank of artists' responses to questionnaires on the conservation of new genre and ephemeral works into perpetuity but also serves as a device to provoke artists to define their concepts independent of the original media of their works. Senior Conservator of Contemporary Art, Carol Stringari, explains that the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is the leader in creating the Variable Media Network as it facilitates case studies and works to make the network accessible to other institutions,

artists and to the general public.<sup>1</sup> Also, the professional environment can be described as having a fluid administration which is born of the relationship between the museum and its foundation and which encourages a flexible approach to the individual needs of objects.

I spoke with Nathan Otterson, Sculpture Conservator, at length about his experience as a professional in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum with the aim of learning about conservation policy at this institution.<sup>2</sup> He explained that the conservation department is currently in transition. As of spring 2007, the Guggenheim is in the process of hiring a Chief Conservator. Formerly, the conservation department of the museum was supervised by a Chief Conservator of the Guggenheim Foundation but, with the new hire, the department will have autonomy. At present, because the department temporarily lacks a senior professional to whom the conservators can report, they have been answering to both the Curator of Contemporary Art and the Director of Curatorial Affairs, though policy does not require this.

For now, it is apparent that the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum prioritizes dialogue and flexibility in decision-making over maintaining a rigid bureaucracy. For example, no standardized form is required before an object is given conservation treatment; instead, curators and conservators discuss the intended treatment thoroughly. This is unusual in that many museums rely on a paper trail to prove their prudence in these highly sensitive situations. Although the conservators are under no formal obligation, Otterson explains that conservators and curators do partake in a dynamic dialogue about object conservation though, ultimately, the curator does make the final

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Stringari, phone interview with author, 24 May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Otterson, email interviews with author, 2 and 23 February 2007. 3 April 2007 and 17 May 2007.

decision. Occasionally, a formal proposal for object treatment is written up by a conservator and approved by a curator, but this is not required by policy or by senior administrators of the museum.<sup>3</sup> I think this system is progressive, in that collaboration and dialogue are not forced, but have evolved as a natural extension of the museum operation. The conservators and curators do not cooperate because paperwork requires that they must, but because, through experience, they have realized that this is the most efficient and well informed way to reach their goals of caring for, interpreting, and exhibiting objects from the collection. .

The constant discourse between curators and conservators in the museum is well developed. Curators and conservators at the Guggenheim collaborate to record artist input. Artists are interviewed either when a piece is initially acquisitioned or when the museum installs a work for the first time. Nathan Otterson admits that in the past and, even presently, conservators take casual notes of these events, but the conservation department is moving towards documenting these interactions more completely and in a more standardized way. Because the museum is collecting complex pieces composed of variable media, like food, the interview process will continue to be tailored to the specific works, but the mode of documentation will be more consistent. For example, the questions may vary by artist and work but the interview in every case will be video recorded and documented with a transcript. The actual policy for documenting artist views will likely be resolved when the department hires its Chief Conservator.

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan Otterson, email interview with author, received on 23 February 2007.

I spoke with Senior Conservator of Contemporary Art, Carol Stringari, to gain insight into the Variable Media Network and its relation to conservation issues.<sup>4</sup> She tells me that the VMN is actually the brain child of curator Jon Ippolito at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum. He currently is one of three coordinators for the network. This is not surprising considering that curators and conservators in this institution continuously partake in dialogue about conservation concerns. A major function of the Variable Media Network (VMN) is to encourage artists to express the concepts of their pieces independent of the original media so that when and if that media becomes obsolete the works can still be realized through translation to more current materials.<sup>5</sup> The network ([www.variablemedia.net](http://www.variablemedia.net)) is accessible to anyone who desires to peruse it and is available in English and French. However, the Variable Media Network is a work in progress and will continue to evolve in an effort to provide explanations and conservation solutions for the ever increasing scope of materials that artists use in their expressions. To this end, VMN offers a selection of case studies featuring works created with a range of material and approaches from candy to performance art to video imaging.

The Variable Media Network is important to the conservation of works with food because it generally allows artists and institutions to question how integral a work's media is to its overall concept as the artist originally intended it. For example, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Public Opinion* is comprised of many licorice rod candies with a cellophane wrapper. If the original candy were no longer available, would another similar candy be acceptable? When artists answer these and analogous questions, they

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Stringari, phone interview with author, 24 May 2007.

<sup>5</sup> [www.variablemedianetwork.com](http://www.variablemedianetwork.com)

post, on the VMN, a framework for what is essential to the concept of the piece. Thus VMN provides a tool for artists and museums to focus questions and articulate thoughtful answers about works with ephemeral materials. This is crucial for preserving works whose media is food or other material that is inclined to decay.

The Solomon R Guggenheim Museum maintains the Variable Media Network which is continually being updated with new case studies of works that pose unique and complex conservation issues. The other institutions involved participate in a consulting capacity as well as providing funding support and absorbing the wealth of insight the network provides.<sup>6</sup> The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology is a main sponsor and acts a partner in research in addition to support from the Walker Art Center, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, Franklin Furnace, Performance Art Festival and Archives, and Rhizome.org and the advice of individual professionals from the aforementioned institutions. Institutions and artists alike are encouraged to visit the Variable Media Network and to provide feedback. These comments are mostly suggestions from conservators who have dealt with similar conservation issues or artists clarifying their intent. Presently, the network is readily available to the institutions that are involved in its maintenance, partially accessible to other institutions and artists, and little known to the general public. Carol Stringari admits, however, that the Variable Media Network is still being developed and in the future it is likely that visitors will be more aware and involved with the network. For now, the case studies are aimed towards professionals dealing with similar conservation concerns and in the interest of creative resolutions.

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Stringari, phone interview with author, 24 May 2007.

For each case study, the work is discussed in detail, including an intricate description of the processes involved and how those processes may have caused the work to be vulnerable. A series of questions about conservation of the work is posed but not answered. Some questions are actual inquiries that were put to the artist or the artist's estate. Other queries are simply hypothetical, and would be posed to an artist or his/her estate if available for interview. And some questions seem merely rhetorical and meant to provoke thought. In most cases, there are answers and solutions obtained from the artists interviewed, but that information is not available to the general public. Specific answers are accessible only to institutions involved in the network and the particular artist. Professionals are provided a password to log into the network. Even without answers to the thoughtful questions, the case studies offered on the network provoke a dynamic dialogue about conservation issues.

Often artists will request that their thoughts about the conservation of their pieces remain confidential. Artists make this request for several reasons; they may change their mind, they wish to be secretive about the decay of their work, or they may feel that the exposure of conservation concerns distracts from the meaning. Regardless of the reasoning, the Guggenheim respects artists' wishes. Thus the public sees only the case study questions of those areas of the VMN that are meant to clarify the purpose of the network while the professionals may have access to the responses to the questions in the case studies as well as the ability to contribute to the network or contact coordinators for more information.

Other sections of the Variable Media Network site include comparisons, terms, tools, events and participants. The comparison section discusses how works in very

different media, specifically in the genres of performed works and of duplicated/interactive works, can have similar conservation concerns. For example, performance works and installation works, although completely different in mode of expression, can be similar because both are executed according to a definite procedure that is decided by the artists. The terms section serves to clarify how the works chosen for each case study are categorized based on the nature of the media and what strategies are used by curators and conservators conducting the studies to generate and organize questions that will likely be posed to the artist. Works are classified by behaviors such as contained, installed, and/or interactive. For example, Jan Dibbets' *A White Wall* is considered a contained work because it is in a protective casing (a frame) while Mark Napier's piece *Net Flag* is considered to have both encoded (because part of the work is written in computer code) and networked behaviors (because it is designed to be viewed via an electronic communication system). The strategies are defined areas (storage, emulation, migration, and reinterpretation) in which the questions are posed. By defining the realms in which questions are to be asked, the VMN places focus on concise areas of conservation concern and allows for those issues to be articulated to artists who, hopefully, will offer thoughtful solutions.

The tools tab offers a questionnaire to help artists and museums articulate questions and answers to obtain a complete perspective from the artist on present and future care and the potential for translation to more current media. This is the area of the website that is interactive for members of the VMN and artists and requires a password. Here, questions are posed and answered through the network. Artist input is available to member professionals in a linked database. However, despite a link to



the publication “Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach”, which defines variable media and the goals of the VMN, this tab does not offer artist input users who do not subscribe to the network.

Obviously, the events component offers information about any events relevant to the Variable Media Network while the participants tab denotes the involvement of curators and conservators from the institutions that contribute to the network.

The Variable Media Network is certainly a progressive effort because it strives to make conservation issues transparent and accessible to other professionals. It allows artists, museum staff and users to reflect on the larger impact of transposing works through variable media. *Public Opinion*, 1991, a candy spill by Felix Gonzalez Torres, is one of the case studies offered in the network. The following section discusses this case study in depth. This case study shows how defining a work independent of the media affects the conservator’s overall approach to the piece. In this situation, the conservator realizes the disposable nature of the media is important and so works to preserve the concept which becomes liberated from the physical.

### **Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ *Public Opinion*, 1991**

*Public Opinion*, like *Untitled (Placebo)*, is a candy spill installation piece by Felix Gonzalez-Torres that illuminates both the conservation concerns associated with food as media and the discussion of such concerns on the variable media network. The work consists of many licorice rod candies arranged in a rectangle of variable dimensions but can also be installed as a corner spill. In the corner spill installation, the ideal amount of candy (determined by weight) is heaped into a corner of the gallery

instead of poured onto the floor in the rectangular carpet formation. The Guggenheim has permission from the artist's estate to install the work in either formation. With an ideal installation, the candy should weigh a total of 700 pounds before it is diminished by tasting visitors.

*Public Opinion*, like many of the artist's candy spills and paper stacks, engages ideas of transience and loss, paralleling the nature of life. The candy, whose shape is vaguely reminiscent of a missile, perhaps, alludes to the emphasis placed on "a militaristic outlook" within the politics of the United States.<sup>7</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres was expressing his opinion that the United States dominates other nations through the wielding of its military might while simultaneously censoring the radical voices of its own society. However, the work is ambiguous in terms of interpretation.

The combination of the title, *Public Opinion*, and the unusual phallic shape of the candy, critiques the homophobia that grew rampant in light of the AIDS epidemic of the late eighties and early nineties. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a self-proclaimed gay man who succumbed to the disease, was subject to adversity because of his ardent lobbying for gay rights. Thus the diminishing and replenishing of the licorice can be seen to represent the shifting media coverage of the controversies surrounding AIDS in relation to homosexuality, as well as mirroring the emotional ebbs that gay men living with AIDS would no doubt experience, especially under the burning scrutiny of the public eye. Even the flavor licorice, can be seen as symbolic, because it is a pungent and certainly acquired taste. Gonzalez-Torres perhaps chose this food to illustrate rifts in political and social opinion. Visitors have three options when facing *Public*

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<sup>7</sup> Klaus Ottman, "Spiritual Materiality: Contemporary Sculpture and the Responsibility of Forms," *Sculpture*, April 2002, 36-41.

*Opinion:* they can choose to take a piece of candy to enjoy; they can choose not to take a piece because they do not care for licorice; or they can choose to try the candy but discard it because the taste is not appealing. These three actions very much illustrate, albeit in a simplified manner, reactions that people have to controversies in general.

The interactive aspect is certainly integral to the conception of the work.<sup>8</sup> This is true of all Gonzalez-Torres' candy spills and paper stacks. Visitors facilitate the loss by taking a piece of candy which in turn creates the shifting physicality of the work and eventually results in the need for replenishment. Obviously, the Guggenheim allows for this interaction between visitor and artwork. The museum installs the piece with a label that communicates that the candy is to be taken. The candy is replenished as needed throughout the duration of the exhibition and is generally discarded when the work is removed. The only exception to this is when the piece is due to travel for an exhibition. The Guggenheim's treatment is on par with other institutions' policies towards Gonzalez-Torres' candy because the media, or physicality, of the work is meant to be disposable: only the concept persists.

The Guggenheim, however, differs in that it makes conservation issues accessible, at least to other professionals, through a case study of the work on the Variable Media Network website. While the case study makes clear the work's vulnerabilities relative to exhibition contexts and visitor interaction, the identified solutions are only available to the professionals at the Solomon R Guggenheim museum and the members mentioned previously. As I have mentioned above, the questions posed in the VMN case studies can be actual or hypothetical. The questions in this case study are hypothetical because Felix Gonzalez-Torres is deceased.

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Richard Janku, "Felix Gonzalez Torres," *Art US*, September/October 2004, 16.

Although *Public Opinion* is installed according to the artist's wishes, as his estate has determined, the estate did not actively participate in the case study offered on the VMN.<sup>9</sup> In this particular case, because the artist is no longer available and his estate did not participate, the VMN poses a plethora of hypothetical questions, in lieu of experience-based questions that would likely be asked if the artist were available and are meant to inspire thoughtful dialogue among professionals.<sup>10</sup> These questions are composed by the professionals who take part in coordinating the VMN but can include input from the conservators and curators in the museum that owns the piece. In this case, the Guggenheim has answered these questions by the way in which they chose to preserve, document and interpret the piece. If the artist or his estate had been available to participate then it would be his decision whether to post his input on the website for the public. Most artists, however, have chosen not to share their participation with the VMN and thus the case studies are realized by the public as a list of questions. The questions that would have been posed to the artist or his estate are hypothetical. Still, the questions do serve to illustrate a thought process that divulges the conservation concerns associated with *Public Opinion*.

*Should candies be stored before going out of production? If so, should visitors be prevented from taking candy once the remaining candies have reached a minimum amount?*

*Once candies are discontinued, should a substitute candy—most closely resembling the original—be found? If so, which aspect is the most important to imitate: the wrapper, the appearance of the confection, or the flavor?*

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<sup>9</sup> Carol Stringari, phone interview with author, 24 May 2007.

<sup>10</sup> The Variable Media Network (<http://www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html>)

*When candies become obsolete, should re-creators of the work substitute a metaphoric or functional equivalent of the original candies (e.g., inhalers for cough drops)?*

*Should museum staff never replenish the candy supply for a given exhibition, but allow the work to disappear with time?*

*Should re-creators of the work scale the dimensions and weight of the candy spill to suit the size and expected attendance of each exhibition space?*

*Should museum staff vary how frequently they replenish the candy supply based on the artist's instructions?*

These questions are intended to generate thought about how to best preserve the concept of the work as the artist originally conceived it. In general, the decisions museums make when works such as *Public Opinion* are installed address most of these questions. For example, the Guggenheim has chosen to replenish the candy when it reaches a level low enough to alter the aesthetic impact of the work. It is important to understand that when museum professionals answer these questions they are in effect interpreting the context in which the work will be realized.

The Guggenheim, through the use of the Variable Media Network, prioritizes concept over physicality. This is a radical but far-sighted vision of authenticity which requires much collaboration between conservator and artist and among conservator, artist and curator. Nonetheless, it is the conservator that is held most accountable for shaping the future of the work. The case study, although it poses hypothetical questions, serves to emphasize the unique concerns of a disposable physicality and interactive concept. Although presently the VMN is only fully available to

professionals, perhaps in the future information available through the network will be more readily accessible to visitors to the museum and its website. For this to be realized, effort will need to be directed to making visitors aware of VMN and its purpose. In the meantime, professionals can benefit from the sharing of information through VMN to the end of creative resolution of conservation concerns surrounding new and ephemeral material.

### **Joseph Beuys *Terremoto*, 1981**

Joseph Beuys' oeuvre can be defined using three categories. His works are actions, vitrines, or environments.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of his career, Beuys interacted with selected objects to create a theatrical performance referred to as an action. Later, he transferred the objects from these actions both physically and symbolically to be viewed in the contained environment of a glass box. These works are referred to as vitrines, alluding to their mode of containment. Eventually the artist's symbolic lexicon evolved to fill rooms, creating environments into which the viewer steps. *Terremoto* can certainly be considered an environment.

When installed at the Guggenheim, the work achieves the variable dimension of 85 inches in height by 116 inches in width by 170 inches in depth at its largest points. *Terremoto* is installed based on a diagram provided by the artist's assistant, Heiner Bastien. This diagram was given to the Guggenheim at the point of acquisition, but was recently approved again, by the aforementioned assistant, when the work was installed for exhibition in Berlin. Despite the use of this diagram and the added benefit

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Rosenthal et al., Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation,, 2004).

of photographs of past installations of *Terremoto*, some variation in each specific installation is unavoidable. These variations are due to the nature of the work, which is comprised of many small parts that are not permanently affixed to each other. The whole installation process involves several people, including a technician from the museum, who generally guides the installation process.

The main component of the work is a large typesetting machine around which the other aspects are arranged. *Terremoto*, in addition to the typesetting machine, includes nine blackboards written and drawn on with chalk, felt, the Italian flag, a metal container filled with fat and studded with lead type, a cassette recorder with a tape and a brochure. When installed, *Terremoto*, which literally translates as earthquake, looks like the ruins of a war-torn journalism class room. Although the fat, the only edible portion, is only a small component of the physicality of the work, it is one of the most meaningful.

Fat, in some form or another, is a reoccurring medium within Beuys' oeuvre. He has used pure fat, lard, pork drippings, beef drippings, butter, and oil. Beuys often employed felt and honey as media as well, but fat is the most prevalent. The importance of these materials stems from an imaginary experience that the artist injected into his autobiography. The story follows as such:

*Joseph Beuys was a young man at the onset of World War II. As a German citizen, he was vulnerable to being drafted, so to avoid being plunged into the front lines, he enlisted and chose to serve Nazi Germany as a pilot. After three years of service, in 1943, he was shot down over Crimea. Crimea was then a part of Russia. Although Beuys survived the crash, he was in great danger not*

*only for being alive and alone on enemy territory but because of extremely cold and unforgiving climate. Beuys claimed that he was rescued by the Tartans, a nomadic tribe living in the wilderness of then Russia. The Tartans rubbed the young man with fat and then wrapped him in felt to warm him and then anointed him with honey.*

Although Beuys admitted years later, in several interviews, that this story was a fabrication of his own making, he incorporated felt, fat and honey throughout his oeuvre and these materials have become cemented into his iconographic system.<sup>12</sup> In general, the artist recycled, not only objects from previous actions, vitrines and environments, but also symbols to communicate his personal set of philosophies. *Terremoto* is a reformation of the same thought process that drives all his other works. It is the expression of Beuys' singular views on diverse issues from Marcel Duchamp to the shattered economy of his homeland to religion to the importance of respecting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. Mark Rosenthal attempts to unravel Beuys' intense, complex and enigmatic politics and opinions. He notes that "Beuys' love of these chaotic situations suggests an alienated individual, nomadically wandering about the German economic miracle, at once estranged from it but also existing at a great distance from the Eastern roots that he so admired."<sup>13</sup> While this wordy and cryptic explanation does not shed light on the so-called deeper meaning of *Terremoto*, it does suggest that, with this, as with all of his works, Beuys was exploring conflicts within his own sense of German heritage as well as environmental issues and questions of censorship.

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<sup>12</sup> Ileana Marcollescou, "I am Transmitter, I Radiate: Joseph Beuys," *Sculpture*, May 2005, 52-57.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, *Beuys*, 38



The work is visually confusing, monochromatic, and by no means ideally beautiful. *Terremoto* makes a statement that cannot be sorted solely from the visual without the context of Beuys' political activism.

*Terremoto* can be preserved and its preservation compared to that of a fossil. A fossil is the remnant, or proof of the existence of something that once lived just as *Terremoto*, is the product of a living thought that Beuys worked through via physical expression. A fossil can be preserved through proper storage and reverent care; so too *Terremoto*. This piece has received minimal cleaning and is stored in a chilled environment appropriate to the preservation of the fat component.<sup>14</sup> Despite the careful keeping of a fossil or the artwork *Terremoto*, its conceptual importance cannot be preserved without preserving the idea of the very thing that caused it to exist. In the case of a fossil, it might be an ancient insect or mollusk, but *Terremoto* is the visual and physical process of Joseph Beuys' political actions expressed through the creation of this environment. The work cannot be separated from its context, being the philosophies of its creator, without losing most of its integrity or meaning. Without this context, *Terremoto* essentially becomes a fossil, a remnant of the entity that caused it, in this case a political statement conceptualized.

Ileana Marcolescou admits that, "Joseph Beuys does not age well" because the meanings of his artistic expressions are "literally buried in his private mythologies" and generally far removed from the present political and social culture.<sup>15</sup> So while conservators can and are employing technology to preserve the ephemeral materials (many of those elements being edible in nature) that are the components of most of his

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<sup>14</sup> Nathan Otterson, email interview with author, 2 February 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Marcolescou, *Transmitter*, 52

works, it is more of a challenge to preserve the contexts surrounding them. The fat gets dusty but can be vacuumed; likewise parts that come loose can easily, albeit carefully, be tightened. But what role does the conservator play in preserving the context that the work must be presented in to be understood? The answer to this question is far from settled, but will be resolved by both research and collaboration. Conservators must research Beuys's philosophical convictions and clarify his politics in order to discern the main point of each work. Once the conservator understands the meaning, s/he will be placed at a vantage point for preserving the appropriate context for the works. It is difficult to maintain what is not understood. Although some artists, especially contemporary artists, intend for their works to have ambiguous interpretations, Beuys' political activism is directly related to his artistic expressions, despite his inclination towards being enigmatic.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, conservators and curators must collaborate to understand the appropriate context surrounding *Terremoto*, to make that context transparent and accessible to the visitors of the Guggenheim through labels and the distribution of catalogues. Beuys' thought process so deeply informs the physical product that documentation of this mental framework is necessary to the realization of the work as the artist intended it. Preserving and presenting Beuys' intricate and unique ideology alongside the physical components of the work becomes important to the interpretation and thus a responsibility for conservators and curators to collaborate on.

Despite the complex conservation concerns presented by *Terremoto*, it is not presently a case study featured on the VMN. Because this artist has so rigidly defined his symbolic lexicon through the repetition of media it would be difficult to approach

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah Schultz, "Joseph Beuys: Tate Modern London," *Art Monthly*, April 2005, 21-2.

the conversation or interpretation of his work in a fresh light. It would be contradictory to the intent of the artist to attempt to transpose the concept of each work that Beuys articulates to other media or even to separate the physicality of the work from the ideas it represents. This is not an indication that it lacks potential for the museum professional, only evidence that the Guggenheim has many works with varied conservation concerns to consider on the database. Perhaps, *Terromoto* will be considered as a case study in the future.

## **Conclusions**

The discussion of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (Public Opinion)* and Joseph Beuys' *Terremoto* serve to illuminate application of policy at the Guggenheim. The museum policies tend towards an individualized decision-making process. Upon the hiring of a new Chief Conservator, policy may become more standardized.

The Guggenheim is progressive in valuing input offered by artists and is placing increasing emphasis on obtaining this information through a standardized format while preserving the integrity of individual works. For example, there are several works by Joseph Beuys in the collection containing a fat media component, but only one Felix Gonzalez-Torres candy spill. Although the conservators have some notes on each piece and have been in contact with both artists' estates (the artists are both deceased), it would be beneficial to interview both estates fully. These interviews should include open-ended questions about the meanings of the works, the artists' wishes for its life span, how to reconcile aesthetic and/or structural changes or damage, and preferred interpretation/installation methods. It is important for the interview

prompts to remain tailored to each work and artist because the collection at the Guggenheim is varied. However, the method by which this information is collected and documented will, most likely, become more standardized.

The Variable Media Network is extremely progressive in its mission and organization. This database aids artists and professionals in the museum environment in sharing and understanding the complex decisions surrounding the conservation and interpretation of objects. Although the network offers a wealth of information and spurs discussion in needed areas, perhaps more detailed documentation of successful resolutions to difficult issues would be beneficial to those using the database. It would be beneficial for artists and institutions to be able to witness the thought processes that can successfully resolve conservation issues prompted by the use of ephemeral material.

In general, the Guggenheim is equipped and motivated to resolve conservation issues created through artists' continued use of new and varied media, like food. The easy collaboration between conservators and curators along with the willingness to persist with complex and open-ended dialogues between artists and museums ensures that the museum will be well-versed in solutions to varied conservation issues.

## **What is on the Menu for Today and Tomorrow?**

Both the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R the Guggenheim Museum collect works that utilize food as media and both are successful at reconciling conservation challenges presented by this especially ephemeral media. However, the two institutions differ greatly in organization of their administrations and the policies that guide the actions of the professional departments.

While the policies at both museums seem to differ greatly in terms of structured hierarchies and detailed processes for conservation, MoMA and the Guggenheim both generate substantive and dynamic dialogues between departments. This is especially important when considering that both institutions collect contemporary art with media that is difficult to interpret as well as preserve according to the wishes of the artist. This necessary collaboration, allows for understanding from all sides, and thus facilitates educated decision making. All of these aspects; storage, display, conservation, interpretation, research; meet to create a context for each object kept within the museum environment. Conservators and curators, especially, must collaborate to ensure that each object is both accessible to the visitors of the museum and cared for in accordance with its authenticity as originally laid out by its creator. To this end, both institutions endeavor to gain, document and follow artist input about his/her objects.

The importance of the artist in these museums is evidence of their willingness to understand, collect and exhibit new media. Contemporary collections, albeit relevant to today's society and perhaps the social dynamic of tomorrow, are difficult because of the ever expanding scope of materials that artists incorporate into their expressions. Using

actual food, for example, allows the artists to emphasize concepts of life, nourishment, and decay in a way that is more powerful than just painting an image of that food. However, the tangible media, which provides a wealth of strong symbolism, simultaneously is vulnerable to the same decay and death it serves to express through its use in a work of art. Electronic media, as well, is certainly susceptible to decay and death, in a sense, as the technology is rapidly replaced with new and more efficient systems that render works of art obsolete or unable to be reiterated. Without the collaboration between artists and institutions, as well as, museums and other museums, it becomes impossible to sift deeper meaning out of complex symbol structures and media in danger of extinction. Certainly then, sharing these conservation concerns becomes increasingly important both for the institution which must muddle through a plethora of unanswered and even unforeseen questions and for the visitor who is handicapped of a complete understanding of the context surrounding these works expressed through new media.

In light of the complex dialogue that surrounds the conservation of food as media, it seems necessary, or at least desirable, to include the visitor in this aspect of an object's history, a history which has an affect on the context of the piece. The conservation treatment of an object, labeling, and installation along with the many other aspects that coincide to result in its exhibition, effects the visitor's interpretation of the work.<sup>1</sup>

Neither MoMA nor the Guggenheim chose to address conservation of works of art on exhibition labels and instead opt for the more traditional art historical perspective. The complex conservation concerns and multi-faceted solutions are difficult to convey

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<sup>1</sup>Marlene Chambers, "The Bride Stripped Bare: Art Museums and the Power of Placement," *Curator*, October 2006, 398-409.

through brief labels. Despite this, I feel that a few thoughtful words to address and/or spark interest in conservation issues in labels or other exhibition literature could be beneficial to the visitor's understanding of a work's context and to realizing that *forever* is a myth. This may afford institutions more flexibility in terms of conservation because visitors will be aware of the thoughtful dialogue that is occurring too often behind closed doors and thus more accepting of conservation measures or decisions not to employ them. Some artists do wish for their work to "die" and making the audience aware of this excuses the museum from being liable for decay and/or destruction that is desired by the artist. No matter what the intended destiny of the work is, museums are forced consider whether or not the benefit of owning the work outweighs the strain on the whole collection and staff. Is it ethical to collect works that are comprised of ephemeral material? Is it ethical to collect works that are meant to decay and eventually die? Is it ok to acquisition an object, even foreseeing that it will be irrelevant in years to come?

Solutions are created through continued dialogues between the curators, conservators and registrars. It is ethical for museums to collect works with ephemeral materials because museums are the stewards set to acknowledge and document cultural treasures. It is moral, as long as thought is given about the special needs objects will ephemeral materials have. As with any new acquisition, each museum must determine how the object can complement the mission and existing collection. It must be decided if that object will place a strain on the existing dynamic within the museum. With the addition of objects that are meant to decay and be lost, museums will have to rethink and implement policies that delineate the processes for judging when objects are no longer relevant (due to decay) and are slated for de-accession. This can prove difficult for

objects that have multiple interpretations, use mixed media, or have aspects that are transferable to similar media.

No one can really foresee the new media artists of today and of the future will incorporate into their expressions. Art might be inclined towards electronic media or materials that are not as of yet imagined. Food might become pills, like those alluded to in science fiction flicks and then even that encapsulated nourishment might find its way into an artist's work. There really is no way to predict what media artists will use, but it is obvious that museums must adapt or become extinct. The accommodation of new media, especially food, is facilitated by collaboration between museum professionals, especially conservators and curators and effective policies within museum environment.

For now museums adapt to new media by placing importance on artist interviews, research and above all, an open mind. Artists will always be experimenting with new media and thus museums must find ways to collect these works responsibly. In general, museums are trusted to collect, care for and interpret works of art, which are deemed relevant by experts, institutions and visitors alike. It is important for all museums to constantly be in a process of self evaluation to the end of accommodating all the creative media that artists conjure.

Generating the policy that enables professionals to explore creative solutions for the complex conservation issues involved with new media is an involved and detailed process that is challenging for large and established institutions such as the MoMA and the Solomon R the Guggenheim Museum. These museums have many resources afforded by large professional staffs, modern and equipped facilities as well as the financial support of trusts, boards and visitors. Even with abundant resources, the



complex issues involved with collecting art with ephemeral material are difficult and time-consuming to resolve and often spur continuous controversy.

Medium and smaller institutions may have difficulty caring for art expressed in food and other ephemeral media for several reasons but that does not seem to deter them. Smaller institutions may not have the resources necessary to store, exhibit and generally care for ephemeral materials, especially when considering that conservation might be outsourced completely or conservation labs on site are not as technically sophisticated or as informed as to contemporary media as those at larger institutions. An institution can only ethically undertake what it has the resources to accomplish. Yet, an institution also has an ethical responsibility to represent a cultural moment in time and ephemeral works represent our cultural moment in a powerful way.<sup>2</sup> Consortiums of small and mid-sized museums that share resources such as conservators of contemporary art, establish protocols for care, and hold workshops for training and collaborative problem-solving can be very helpful. Clearly, so can models, such as the Variable Media Network that large museums of contemporary art, like the Guggenheim, provide. The most important component of interpreting and preserving works with ephemeral material is continuous dialogue about conservation concerns and solutions. Professionals at MoMA and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum are constantly participating in this conversation with their colleagues at their museums, fellow professionals at other institutions, and artists. Dialogue is the method chosen by MoMA and the Guggenheim for not only divulging what the exact concerns are, but also why preserving this art or any art is important and solutions for conservation that does not disrupt the artist's original aesthetic or conceptual intent. These museums are no longer just repositories for artistic masterpieces but instead

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<sup>2</sup>Carol Stringari, interview with author, New York City, 24 May 2005.

are placing more emphasis on the relevancy of the works in their collection. This is being accomplished through the examination of context, interpretation of the work in connection the artist's original intent and in general questioning the authenticity that museums tend to lend to their collections.

The question still seems to be... is it ethical to collect works that are predisposed, intentionally or otherwise, to decay? Certainly, both MoMA and the Guggenheim argue that it is ethical to collect such material. Both institutions work to authenticate these collections as relevant and important to the present and document them so that they can be realized in the future. The Variable Media Network is further evidence that professionals are working with the artist and the museum to ensure survival of contemporary art. The precedent seems to be that concept is essential and the physical only a detail. If all works with ephemeral material can be realized independent of their original media, then all those works can certainly be preserved, in some form, in perpetuity. Therefore it becomes necessary for the conservator to be well versed in the concepts underlying any work of art to ensure that the original intent of the artist is being perpetuated and not just the aesthetic *shell* of the work.

Again the solution to the solution is discussion. Museums large and small, conservators, curators, registrars, visitors and artists must be cognizant of the issues presented by works of art that use food as media and partake in a dialogue about how best to interpret and preserve (or not preserve) these works. The more these concerns are explored the greater the possibility that these works will be relevant today and tomorrow.

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