Introduction:
Conserving Active Matter and the Conservator

Soon Kai Poh

Abstract

The notion of active matter is inscribed into conservation on multiple levels: from its processes and procedures to its conventions and normative structures, including its organization as a profession. Indeed, the practice of conservation is, at its core, about providing context to the activity of matter. Yet the underlying assumptions surrounding active matter that are manifest through the relationships that conservators share with activity are less often examined. How might an interdisciplinary group of materials scientists, historians, philosophers, Indigenous scholars, scholars of Indigeneity, and, not least, conservators provide insight into the fundamental questions of conservation? From the perspective of a conservator at the beginning of his career, Conserving Active Matter is a pertinent reminder that things are active, materially, temporally, and in relation to people. Might we envision a future in which conservation plays a central role at the nexus of intellectual inquiry? Conservation presents opportunities to reconsider how all of us—not just conservators—participate in and contribute to the relationships between people and things that sustain and keep us.

I write as a conservator, and one at the beginning of his career. On first encounter, the notion of “active matter” seemed unproblematic and requiring no further elaboration. After all, the role of a conservator is conventionally associated with addressing the implications of activity in matter, especially those related to material changes, whether realized in the form of restorative or preventive measures.
In fact, it is hardly controversial to suggest that a view of matter as “active” is central to the discipline and moreover that it is operative on multiple levels. The processes of conservation as they have been established in the present, writ large, are exactly about responding to the expression of such activity as it unfolds in time, doing so through examination and documentation procedures, condition assessments, and preventive or interventive actions. By examining and documenting items, conservators observe and describe their activity in textual or photographic terms, or through other forms of imaging, isolating them at a discrete moment in time. Condition assessments are moreover performed against certain preconceived expectations of activity, largely associated with a scientific understanding of materials and their potential for change. Put differently, the work of conservation provides context to identified activity. Deciding to intervene in various ways may be viewed as a manipulation of said activity, through actions taken to alter its course. In real terms, conservation represents a direct and ongoing interaction with the activity of matter.

As a profession, conservation (at least in the Euro-American context) remains largely organized in materials-based specializations. As mentioned earlier, the scientific knowledge of the activity of materials remains a core paradigm of conservation and is foundational to the way it is structured. Today, conservators are educated on the basis of such classifications and continue to largely identify as specialists on the basis of their understanding of and facility with specific materials (such as wood, metals, stone, paper, textiles, etc.) or their commonly associated composites, such as painted surfaces. Indeed, conservators are generally acknowledged for their acute sensibility toward the material nature of things—one of the factors that make their contributions to material culture studies particularly valuable. In what follows, I use my recent training as a conservator, and my subsequent immersion in an interdisciplinary humanities institute, as a lens through which to look at the essays in this volume—and through them, the practice of conservation more broadly.

Material

Activity, for conservators, if it isn’t already clear, has a distinct material bias. Among the most prominent narratives about activity that conservators can relate to are those that conceive of it in material terms, particularly as described through scientific analysis and empirical
inquiry and as addressed by the conservator’s intervention. Over the past decades, conservators and scientists who work with cultural heritage have gained an ever better grasp of materials and their mechanisms of change over time, and new technological developments continue to enable questions to be asked and answered with increasing accuracy and precision or, at the very least, resolved to more satisfactory ends for the purposes of conservation. These center on the identification and greater understanding of materials found in things at various stages of their transformation through time and changing environmental conditions. This type of research will likely continue to account for the work of the conservation community into the future, but its intellectual foundation presupposes a static and unchanged, core material interpretation of activity. This research is cumulative. A survey of current conservation literature will readily show that notwithstanding the research into the (accelerating) profusion of newly developed materials used for the making of things in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, conservators continue to grapple with the questions raised by the activity of “old” materials from centuries past, as the contributions by cultural heritage scientists in this volume attest.

Marc Walton and his coauthors address the complexity underlying the preservation of holograms, which were first developed in the early 1960s. While it may seem that one could address the underlying material interface in the form of silver halide emulsions, in order to preserve these otherwise immaterial “sculptures” of light, Walton et al. demonstrate that the key challenge here is documentation, to capture the specific spatial geometry of their light sources that may now be lost, as, for example, is the case for Stephen Benton’s Engine no. 9 series. The caveat with such an approach is, of course, that the generation of such metadata presents its own problems of storage and preservation. Moreover, there is perhaps no better argument against a material-centric view of activity than the act of documenting light with light-dependent techniques: the tools of preservation themselves may no longer be strictly material in nature.

In her discussion of metal soaps found in centuries-old oil paint, Francesca Casadio offers an alternative intellectual framework for activity that challenges the centrality of “materials.” Notwithstanding the attention expended on this research and the significant unresolved questions that remain, Casadio suggests that what is really at stake here extends beyond these established lines of inquiry: that the study of metal soaps offers an opportunity not just to examine activity at various temporal and physical scales but also to contextualize meaning across spectra of values.
What about other ephemeral, performative, and virtual “materials” that conservators are increasingly called upon to preserve? Furthermore, will preexisting frameworks for thinking about what constitutes deterioration, loss, function, and existence continue to be useful tools with which conservators evaluate their activity? As Walton et al. and Casadio have demonstrated, perhaps material-centric approaches to activity deserve reexamination. Might expanding how we conceive of material activity to include its contextualization, for example, through processes of documentation, augment the conservator’s toolbox of the future? As a result, in addition to being concerned with materials, might we more deliberately frame our actions as participatory in time?

**Time**

A prevailing narrative of conservation has been that of activity as phenomena to be “remedied.” Present in the popular imagination as providers of remedial care to largely, if not exclusively, artifactual things, conservators and their work are often tied to such physical actions as polishing silver, washing garments, mending documents, removing dust and stains, consolidating paint, rebinding book manuscripts, joining ceramic fragments—the list goes on and on. Conservators take these actions on the “front lines” of activity, in pursuit of a reversion to a perceived former or original state insofar as it has been desirable to do so, even while the impossibility of such a goal is clear: at least for the moment, humans are not capable of manipulating time itself. The shift in language toward the acceptance of “retreatability” in lieu of “reversibility” as a desirable outcome in conservation reflects the significance of communicating how conservation may be less about “turning back time” than it is about the process and implications of attempting and purporting to do so.¹

Yuriko Saito writes about activities of repair, or remedying activity, in precisely this mode. Saito describes what it means to live in a world where repairing is constant, where repair actions mediate the way in which we aesthetically, personally, and emotionally relate to the material world. It may be tempting to interpret the examples of textile mending and ceramic repair that Saito describes as vernacular or colloquial and set apart from what has become codified as professional conservation practice, but I suggest that doing so is a lost opportunity for recognizing conservation as a form of reparative activity: labor that
is similarly concerned with issues of (im)permanence, (im)perfection, and (in)visibility. Taking inspiration from Saito, how might conservators redescribe their work in new ways, in a world characterized by repair?

Arguably, the paradigm of reversibility itself arose in part out of the observation of residues and vestiges of past efforts to conserve items, prohibiting later interventions or causing further change or damage. Moreover, all conservation in practice operates with the acknowledgment that there is no substitute for acting upon the actual item; in spite of rigorous testing on suitable material substitutes, there is nothing quite like conserving the item itself.

As a result, best practices in conservation have evolved to privilege materials and techniques that grant a certain degree of control over their application and (future) removal. While attributes such as “stable” or “archival” are more often invoked to describe materials used in conservation including (but not limited to) cleaning agents, adhesives, fillers, and paint, I suggest that it is in fact “control” that guides their use and selection, insofar as they interact with the item being conserved through the conservator’s hand in an expected manner. An aspiration for stability or permanence in reality lurks within the sense of control. After all, conservators are intimately familiar with false promises of stability, being expert witnesses to the contrary. Preventive conservation practices are often thought of by conservators to be indirect, even though managing environmental parameters such as temperature, relative humidity, and light levels can have a significant impact on their physical condition. The conservator’s hand may be invisible but is still acting in an item’s history. While often posited as strategies that minimize future deterioration and loss—that is, instances that may require remedial action in the future—arguably these same measures can be also be characterized as forms of systemic control. In other words, conservation balances our expectations of activity and our ability to manage different materials as they interact over time.

Jennifer L. Mass elaborates on this further, noting that activity is inseparable from time. The expected lifetimes that we ascribe to items of cultural heritage and that we seek to define for modern high-performance materials stem from the same underlying motivation to find this balance. As Mass points out, this balance has conventionally been tipped in favor of permanence, particularly for items that have been preserved beyond their presumed intentions—a notion that has increasingly become untenable today. Even the ways in which it has been pathologized for certain inorganic materials through their description belies a bias toward permanence. It would seem that our
expectations of activity outlast these items and materials themselves, to which Mass adds that they may now extend beyond material boundaries to include their narrative potential.

Sherri Irvin’s description of Zoe Leonard’s preference that Strange Fruit exemplify decay through actively deteriorating fruit peels, rather than having the work’s conservator, Christian Scheidemann, masterfully preserve the mere appearance of decay in these items, speaks to a similar predilection. Irvin explicates our expectations of decay by considering two other case studies, Kara Walker’s A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant and Marc Quinn’s Self, proposing that the expressive import of decay is that of the potential for psychosomatic response. Notably, “activity” has been selected for its neutrality in the framework of this discussion. But much as decay may be construed as a negative form of activity, might completeness, perfection, and the manner in which they are produced be considered a positive kind? After all, conservation with regard to material activity operates between these poles. Here, we are reminded of Saito’s caution: an unchanging world without repair (and decay) is one where we lose the possibility of reckoning with our own mortality. Perhaps we might consider the expressive import of conservation to be, in fact, an active reminder of this possibility, and of the human accomplishment born of trying to overcome it. By conserving, we reassure ourselves of our own activity in this world.

Chris McGlinchey narrates the collaborative efforts of scientists, conservators, and exhibition staff at the Museum of Modern Art to negotiate control over activity in the reperformance of Tania Bruguera’s Untitled (Havana 2000), as its matter, sugarcane bagasse, rots and decays. As McGlinchey relates, the significant lengths to which the team endeavored to upend conventional expectations of a rotting material by its desiccation ultimately required a manufactured scent to be added, among other accommodations, for the work to be presented according to Bruguera’s vision. Moreover, instituting such control necessarily grew to involve the performers and the gallery space within its orbit. Together, these conservation actions to simulate decay further highlight the significance of Irvin’s contribution above and receive greater context in Carolyn Korsmeyer’s essay discussed in the following pages.

How might conservators conceive of time? The determination of an item’s history remains a productive area of interdisciplinary inquiry in conservation, and conveniently, the oft-described tripartite
relationship between scientific analysis, (art) historical research, and the conservator’s intuition and connoisseurship come together in writing an item’s biography. Conservators understand each conservation action to be fundamentally additive and the conserved item to be an accumulation of all actions performed by it or on it—not just conservation actions. Obviously, this further complicates their task. Can an item perpetually be in a combination of “states” at any given time? What are the metaphysical boundaries of any historical state of an item or its constituent parts? The possibilities are endless, and the trajectory of each item is largely unique. It is this reality that conservators are responding to. While there have been some recent attempts to apply philosophical ideas to sharpen these distinctions via discrete case studies, conservators recognize that much as philosophers have long thought about these issues, they may be less concerned with the specific circumstances that conservators are confronted with: a gap that the contributions from philosophers in this volume have sought to bridge.

Ivan Gaskell and A. W. Eaton investigate the concept of active matter itself, laying the philosophical groundwork for conceiving of activity, change, and the nature of (conservation) interventions that influence them. If conservation is a way of providing a context to activity, then Gaskell and Eaton’s considerations are more than theoretical: they are a road map for doing so and a reminder that the occasion for conserving any item fundamentally entails inquiry into the nature of its activity.

Carolyn Korsmeyer explicates the differences in the aesthetic processes belying the construction of age—in real things, in replicas, and in referential shams. As Korsmeyer points out, one sees how these categories are blurred when one considers items that have been conserved. This complex territory is familiar to conservators who balance aesthetic options so that the conserved item remains, perceptibly, a real thing. Yet the ways in which conservators have described and thought about these decisions have been less precise, which, I suggest, hampers a deeper public appreciation for the performance of conservation. A clarification of these processes not only lets conservators more astutely engage with this ongoing debate within their discipline but also allows them to more effectively convey their work to the public. Might doing so lead to more active public engagement with what Alois Riegl termed “age-value” and, in turn, allow conservators to work with greater latitude? All of us—not just conservators and philosophers—participate in these processes.
If conservators are fundamentally working *in* time, how might we learn from historians—as a group trained to think *in* time—whose work is concerned with the interplay of events and material evidence? As Ittai Weinryb writes, the motivation to conserve may be understood from the ur-moment of creation; for as long as people have created things, they have preserved them. Defining and contextualizing the role of the maker’s intent articulated at the point of creation remains an active area of debate in conservation. Weinryb aptly captures the spaces within which historians and conservators alike work, described as dissonances between temporal, epistemological, perceptual, and perspectival binaries. What emerges are convincing parallels between the work of the historian and conservator, both contextualizing activity within these spaces.

This is exemplified by the hermeneutic challenge of historical inquiry that André Laks identifies in his essay exploring how we might find historical precursors of active matter in the work of Presocratic thinkers. One might consider conservation as the transposition of Laks’s project into spatial terms insofar as the accumulations of the past inevitably characterize and shape a conservator’s understanding of a specific item.

The recent turn by conservators to preserve time-based media that are ephemeral, performative, and/or virtual, such as those described earlier, has led them to consider new frontiers of activity. If the goal of historical research is to preserve the accumulations of the past, and the goal of conservation to preserve things, does the challenge of conserving these “things” that are in fact events not lead conservators back into the province of the historians? Moreover, as Hanna Hölling and Peter N. Miller suggest, can we not think of all things as events, unfolding over relatively longer or shorter timescales?

**People**

Conspicuously absent in this discussion thus far has been significant mention of the role of people in contextualizing activity—not just conservators, but all the others present within the orbit of the items being conserved. Even as conservation continues to be preoccupied with issues of materials and time, over the past decades there has been increasing interest in the recentering of the discipline on people and communities. This turn raises important questions: Whose expectations of activity do conservators respond to? Who performs
conservation, and for whom do conservators conserve? Here we ask not just what is active, but who. Notably, these questions are complex and rarely the preserve of individuals or even a single group of people; more often they concern pluralities who may or may not agree in their perspectives. As a result, we have seen the development of values-based decision-making models and significance-based assessments that seek to identify appropriate conservation action by taking into account the voices of relevant stakeholders. These conversations have most prominently been sparked by the challenges to preexisting assumptions about material activity that are routinely faced by conservators working with Indigenous materials and with modern and contemporary works. As the authors below point out, these efforts largely remain siloed in their normative specializations within conservation. A broader shift in emphasis within the discipline has not happened yet. The question is: Why not? or perhaps, Why should it not?

Kelly McHugh describes some of these challenges in the context of her role as a conservator at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. She focuses on Always Becoming, made in 2007 by Nora Naranjo-Morse, an ephemeral, site-specific, and ever-changing contemporary sculptural installation. McHugh’s reflections on the care and stewardship of Indigenous items at the museum leads her to suggest that these conservation treatments were “inspired by and conducted for people, not materials”: a significant shift in the conservator’s worldview.

Lee Palmer Wandel guides us through the changing ontological relationships between bread and wine, and the body and blood of Christ, over time, as practiced and accepted by various churches. Wandel discusses the process of transubstantiation and the significant lengths to which early modern theologians went in order to account for errors, defects, and accidents that could thwart the transformation of inanimate, not just to animate, but to holy and sacred. Here, the active negotiation of the significance of transubstantiation is a keen reminder that such ontological determinations are not parenthetical, but fundamental to the conservation of religious relics, inspired objects, deities, and other living beings who may persist in material items. Furthermore, these efforts remind us that their conservation may similarly hinge upon sustaining processes that enable animation and life, whether doing so occurs materially through the circumstances of their housing and presence at institutions or through requisite mental, emotional, or physical preparation prior to any interaction.
For Aaron Glass, what is operative in these conversations is the acknowledgment of Indigenous ontologies about activity and how they may necessitate new approaches to the care of their belongings. From my own perspective, and as Glass suggests, to marginalize these concerns as solely relevant to Indigenous items is to relinquish the potential that lies in learning from the broader relational significance of framing the conservation of things alongside that of people and communities. Certainly, there is need for caution so as not to extrapolate, functionalize, or worse, fetishize these perspectives. It is important, and urgently so, for us to seek broader representation of underrepresented communities and peoples within the field of conservation (see Rose Evans’s contribution). In fact, that the means by which one acquires the skills, knowledge, and sensitivity to conserve are not equitably accessible to all has created problems of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field that continue to bear reckoning. But the present reality is that conservators will continue to find themselves at the forefront of bridging gaps of identity between Self and Other in their work and in the experiences of other people. Conservation in the future may well benefit, as is the aspiration of the project underpinning this volume, not just from a broader array of tools with which to address activity, but from a richer array of concepts and more flexibility in wielding them.

Rose Evans describes these opportunities, reflecting on her career over the past three decades as a conservator of Māori descent trained within a Western or Euro-American scientific framework. As Evans points out, the embedding of Māori values within the dominant Pākehā (Western) system is crucial to the care of Māori taonga, underscoring the importance of institutional commitments to cultivating conservators of Māori descent that are generally absent in Aotearoa (New Zealand) today.

As Evans demonstrates, however much one may consider the “activity” of matter, the personhood of the conservator is equally relevant. Within a paradigm of people-centric activity, neither conservators nor their labor should remain invisible or stripped of subjectivity, recalling themes that Saito introduces in her essay. That is, one might consider conservators as participants, if not “activators,” in the conservation of things. Their putatively necessary critical distance from the item being conserved, until now veiled in objectivity or described in normalized codes of ethics, has recently come under scrutiny. The apparatus of conservation, its conventions and procedures, has itself become the site of inquiry. Put together, these impulses implicate the conservation of things within a broader network of relationships that is concerned with the sustenance of meaning(s).

Spike Bucklow contextualizes the activity of rood screens in medieval churches in this manner, seamlessly weaving the material and social histories of oak, oil, chalk, and flint into an ecological framework that considers the interactions of the inanimate with animate beings and of the numerous human participants to whom modern conservators confronted with the preservation of these items necessarily trace their interactions back. Further, Bucklow reminds us that such material and social ecologies may well take on different forms over time and that the differences between premodern and modern frameworks of navigating these relations may not be overlooked.

Marco Leona and Henry D. Smith II offer still another vision of such an approach. Their extensive study of Meiji-period Japanese woodblock prints focuses on the material identification of the changing colorants used at this time. Through their analysis, Leona and Smith contextualize what they term the semiotic activity implicated by shifts and preferences in the use of dyes and pigments for the creation of these prints. They suggest that the binary notions of cost, natural/artificial, or indigenous/imported, were relevant for observers at different times in different ways, complicating a coherent narrative. In short, the activity of these prints extends beyond their color palettes and concerns historical networks of relations revealed by their investigation.

As all the contributions to this volume attest, in various forms, while conservation has conventionally operated under prevailing notions of activity in largely fixed material and temporal terms, it is clear that such a path grows increasingly unsustainable as we look to the future. The refamiliarization of conservation as a human impulse—one centered on people and communities, and not least on conservators themselves, has the potential to refocus conservation on relationships as much as on things.

Where Is the Future of Conservation?

It is not by coincidence that the preceding sections address fundamental questions of conservation that form the organizational basis for the accompanying exhibition sharing the title of this volume. The exhibition was curated by a disciplinarily diverse team including the two volume editors and the four authors of the section introductions, joined by Meredith Linn, a historical archaeologist also on the faculty at Bard Graduate Center. The exhibition traces the conservator’s relationship to activity, proposing that to ask, What is conservation? is...
to consider how things are active and who acts on objects—when and why. But what of the future of conservation?

As the other contributors of this volume have also remarked to varying degrees, the norms of conservation today are, after all, products of conventions that trace their roots to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the field was formed. If we are to consider the future of conserving active matter, we might begin with reconsidering the binary oppositions of inert/active and dead/living matter that Guido Giglioni suggests have become unwieldy in the present. They will, surely, only continue to do so in a world in which such distinctions turn out to be either coincidental or fluid. Giglioni traces a history of Western perspectives on living matter from ancient Greece to the early modern period. It is a reminder that such ontological “relational interdependencies” from the long-forgotten past may yet help us in reorienting conservation—contextualizations of activity—in the future.

Jamie Jacobs, a ritual custodian of the Tonawanda Ceremonial Longhouse, shares the history and the significance of wampum to the Haudenosaunee people, where conventional Euro-American conservation definitions of “material” and “activity” are similarly incompatible. Indeed, the scientist or conservator may consider the calcium carbonate that is found in chalk, as relayed by Bucklow, to be chemically indistinct from that found in the shells from which wampum are made, but from its formation to its use, these two forms of calcium carbonate are quite different. Jacobs notes that wampum belts are essential to spiritual life and the transmission of cultural memory as mnemonic devices that aid in the preservation of stories and events. As Jacobs relates, the responsibility of caring for sacred wampum belts is a significant one, not least because they are considered living beings and ancestors. The “scientific care” that conservators may provide remains relevant to the physical preservation of things, but here it is clear that there are instances where it may be insufficient for conservators to do so. Conservators’ role of providing context to activity may nonetheless lead them to find that their very act of doing so is inappropriate. Far from implying that conservators’ material expertise will become obsolete in the future, I suggest that the manner in which it is applied must be carefully considered. It must be remembered that conservators have traditionally been among the strongest advocates for the repatriation of items, which is itself a form of conservation.

What about instances where Indigenous belongings have yet to be repatriated? Sven Haakanson, a Sugpiaq scholar, narrates his work to preserve the intangible knowledge of making Alutiiq angyaat by reviving
it through the study of historical models of these open boats presently held in museum and research collections. Haakanson offers that repatriation may take the form of returning knowledge to its living community in the interim and that doing so entails a form of active conservation that engages communities. This model of conservation contextualizes activity as a hybrid of material and people-centered concerns. More importantly, it entails the joint effort of “conservators” as presently understood, and Haakanson and his collaborators, whom we may consider conservators too. Collaboration in conservation typically brings together stakeholders representing different perspectives. I wonder whether broadening the definitions of what constitutes “conservation” and, moreover, who we might consider “conservators” could provide greater legitimacy to the overarching objective of preservation. It might also facilitate the productive intermixing of expertise and ontological perspectives and broaden out the narrow delineation of conservation that has prevailed until now. Might this be one way of finding the intersectionality that Casadio proposes in her essay?

Alva Noë leads us plainly to a remarkably profound expression of conservation: that to conserve is to “make it possible for us to care about the work of art.” In other words, that to conserve is to provide context to activity—of material things, of choreographed dance, and of ourselves. Conserving active matter collapses these preceding notions of material, time, and people into the “dynamic singularity” that Noë borrows from Susan Hurley. Indeed, Noë posits that conservation isn’t just about maintaining organizational logic—one might think of this as the sustenance of internal coherence, the balance of (visual) elements in a painting or sculpture, perhaps—but also about maintaining the ability to organize (“meanings” or “values” as they have been established in conservation), and of being organized (the possibility of plural futures embedded in the motivations for “reversibility” and “retreatability”).

And so, what of the future of conservation? The reality is that conservators hardly work in a vacuum. On the contrary, they work alongside a variety of collaborators, from cultural heritage scientists, preparators, artifact handlers, facilities and security personnel, educators, exhibition designers, curators, art historians, artists, and not least, communities of relevant stakeholders, just to name a few. Some of these interactions take place under the auspices of institutions such as the museum, a collecting, exhibiting, and researching structure, with its accompanying, and purely conventional, guidelines and requirements. The conventional discourse that describes conservation as a reactive
Conserving Active Matter

discipline (reacting to activity) has relegated conservators to a narrowly defined relationship with things—focused more on their physical properties and less on their embedded intellectual challenges—in the spaces of the conservation laboratory or studio. If we are to take seriously the implications of conserving active matter, might this organizing principle be transformed? Where will conservators find their place, physically and metaphorically, in the future?

The refamiliarization of conservation with active matter presented here impacts not just the discipline of conservation but equally the people with whom conservators collaborate. In many instances, including those described in this volume, it has been precisely such collaborations that have paved the way for this project. Recursively, then, it is perhaps crucial that shifts in the conservation of active matter receive broad support and recognition within these communities too. In some ways, this is the grand project of conservation hermeneutically writ large.

Let us end by considering how the people who work with conservators will change how they do so, into the future. Might we envision a future in which conservation plays a central role at the nexus of inquiry? This volume presents one attempt at doing just this, and I have intentionally structured my essay to reflect how the interests of all the contributors may be woven into a cross-disciplinary narrative about how one might consider conserving active matter. If the aforementioned institutions exist to ensure the preservation of items such that people may continue to experience them, could their underlying guidelines be instead led by conservation? Could we imagine conservation as Noë’s California condor, “[i]n its nexus with the wider world” and where its “activity is world involving”? Collectively, the efforts of this volume, its accompanying exhibition, and the Cultures of Conservation initiative at Bard Graduate Center show the promise of interdisciplinary discourse centered on conservation. We may well envision other models for doing so in the future that further elide disciplinary distinctions and that embrace a greater diversity of histories, cultures, and philosophies. If these projects represent the first steps toward such possibilities, I eagerly anticipate the next.

Conserving active matter is a reminder that things are active, materially, temporally, and in relation to people. The work of conservators has been one that provides context to this activity, necessarily involving themselves in this process. In its evolution thus far, the field of conservation has been shaped by the challenges posed by the expanded categories of things under conservators’ care that grows with them. But in the future, responding to this

activity may not exclusively be the province of conservators, who rely on an increasing group of constituents to do this work. What might proactive conservation look like? I suggest that there remains untapped potential for leadership in the conservator’s expertise in thinking about activity. The questions of conservation are not means to an end but present opportunities to reconsider how all of us—not just conservators—participate in and contribute to the relationships between people and things that sustain and keep us. The conservators of the future are those who will orchestrate these discussions around just how we might do so.

NOTES

1. This is compounded also by the reality that certain conservation interventions colloquially understood to be “reversible” are deemed unsuitable and disqualified because they do not provide adequate or substantive support, in which case “reversibility” becomes an ever more aspirational and idealistic goal.

2. “Preventive Conservation—ICOM-CC.”

3. Rieg, “Modern Cult of Monuments.”


BIBLIOGRAPHY


