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Published in:
Conservation of Contemporary Art

DOI:
[10.1007/978-3-031-42357-4_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42357-4_7)

Published: 01/01/2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Please cite the original version:
Valle Noronha, M. (2024). No Longer Artwork. In R. van de Vall, & V. van Saaze (Eds.), *Conservation of Contemporary Art* (pp. 127-143). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42357-4_7

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No Longer Artwork



Marina Valle Noronha

Abstract In this conceptual chapter I explore, from a curatorial perspective, a new approach to the lifespan of artworks in museum collections. At a time when the managing of collections is under pressure because of new theories on the conservation of contemporary art, the conventional understanding of collection management might no longer hold. I speculate on how philosopher’s Tristan Garcia’s non-linear notion of time, in which the future does not exist and time is marked by intensities of presence, makes us re-think the engagement with objects perceived as deviant in collections. I investigate further implications of recent attempts in contemporary conservation theory that account for the temporal nature of artworks and explore what it means for artworks that, despite attempts to progressive thinking, they are still perceived as no longer suitable for display because of their material degradation. Through this, I aim at offering ways of engaging with objects whose changing artwork properties have been, for different reasons, regarded as impaired by their hosting institutions. I focus on what I call a “complex object family” formed by different entities of artist Naum Gabo’s *Construction in Space: Two Cones*, 1927–1937. As part of this complex object family formation, I also discuss versions of artist Marianne Vierø’s work *Great Transformation* (2015).

Keywords Contemporary curating · Collection management · Artworks’ lifespan · Changing objects · Speculative time

1 Introduction

More than alarming, the current situation faced by many museums in terms of finance and storage opens up the ground for new approaches to conservation and curating. A shift is needed on how museum professionals think of and engage with

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R. van de Vall, V. van Saaze (eds.), *Conservation of Contemporary Art*, Studies in Art, Heritage, Law and the Market 9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42357-4_7

127

changing objects.¹ In the paradigm proposed in this chapter artworks are less and less seen as “eternal,” while also the idea of individual object is becoming obsolete. The understanding that artworks undergo constant changes challenges the characterization of museums as places where objects go to rest.² Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2020) speaks of the museum as creating “some working fiction of permanence and durability” (p. 253), which would require “that in order for some-thing to be eternal in this particular way, it would need to exist in time while being unaffected by time” (p. 157). In the storage room, the modern idea of art that is based on an illusion of stability, or on the idea that an artwork is permanent, no longer holds.

A move from preserving artworks’ initial state to incorporating artworks’ lifespan takes us to a notion of collecting that is based on presence and includes absence. A space where objects are understood as temporal entities. I believe curating can proactively learn from discussions and theories on the conservation of contemporary art that account for change, ways to re-assess the current, often conventional engagement with objects in collections. With this in mind, this exploratory chapter refers to both traditional and contemporary artworks. I expand Hanna Hölling’s account of traditional works, as long durational and subjected to change, beyond conservation and into the curatorial realm. To advance the discourse on changing objects, I present a notion of presence that collecting institutions might not be aware of. This approach, introduced by Tristan Garcia, could contribute to a progressive re-thinking of collection management and conservation practices.

In short, Garcia’s perspective introduces a reality of things that, regardless of what they are, participate in a flat-ontology system where things are equal in the world. Their temporality should be understood in terms of intensities of presence, which shifts around the conventional progression of time modalities (from left to right, see Fig. 1). In terms of presence, the timeline progresses from the future, which, contrary to conventional understanding of time, is rearranged here and comes before the past. Because the future has no presence, it comes first. It is followed by the past with its fading presence, which in turn is followed by the constantly evolving *now* (or the present, the very moment you read this chapter). The present will always lead the timeline because of its maximum presence. These two commitments—to an equality of things (in thought) and to intensities of presence—form the structural thinking in this chapter.

¹A first draft of this introduction was presented at the conference *Museums as Agents of Memory and Change* in Tartu and Tallinn, Estonia, 24–26 April 2019. I elaborate on the paths to wider access to artworks in collections in the context of the research for my doctoral dissertation at Aalto University, Finland.

²The official definition of museum varies slightly according to authoritative institutions such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and Museums Association (MA), to mention a few. However, a recent controversy during the ICOM meeting in Kyoto, 2019, on what defines a museum in the 21st century in terms of sustainability, community decision-making and ethics triggered increasing public debate. If this has not yet given rise to concrete changes, prevailing museum definitions are more and more being questioned; as also exemplified by the fact that the MA hosted a conference on the issue in 2019.

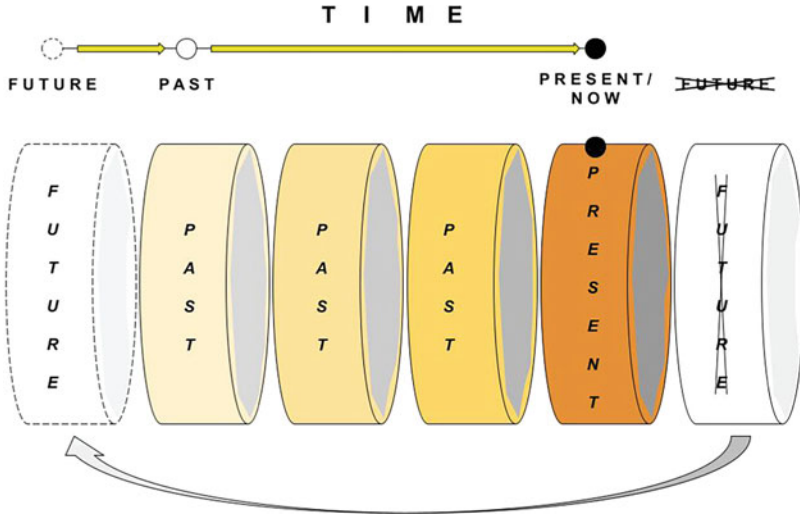


Fig. 1 This study is based on Tristan Garcia’s non-linear approach to time that is defined by intensities of presence: the present, or now, has the maximum presence; the past has a fading presence; and the future (on the left), which has no presence, comes before the past. In this perspective, the future (on the right) does not exist, which is why it is crossed out and, instead, moved to the left

In what follows, I propose an enquiry into how museums may re-think their relationship with objects perceived as deviant by collecting institutions. To illustrate this thinking and analyse the changes artworks undergo, I will discuss a “complex object family” formed by different entities of artist Naum Gabo’s *Construction in space: Two Cones*, made somewhere in the years between 1927 and 1937.³ *Two Cones*, which has gone through a metamorphosis, has intrigued me for some time now. Iconic, the work is notorious for its material degradation. Due to it being extensively discussed in the conservation field, the work prompts questioning of the status, materiality, and temporality of artworks. Made out of cellulose acetate, *Two Cones* “rested undisturbed in an airtight display case” until 1960, when the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), the institution that hosts it to this day, decided to open it (Siegl 1966, p. 151). Within less than 24 hours the work started to crumble apart. It became evident to the PMA that *Two Cones* was beyond repair, after which the work was classified as no-longer-suitable for display. Together with other versions of *Two Cones*, which are hosted by the PMA and Tate and also considered unsuitable for display, these objects form a “complex object family.” This “complex

³The 1927 date is debatable as potentially the work was made as late as 1937. See Colin Sanderson and Christina Lodder, ‘Catalogue Raisonné, Constructions and Sculptures of Naum Gabo’ in *Naum Gabo: Sixty Years of Constructivism*, eds. Steven Nash and Jörn Merkert (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1985), p. 215.

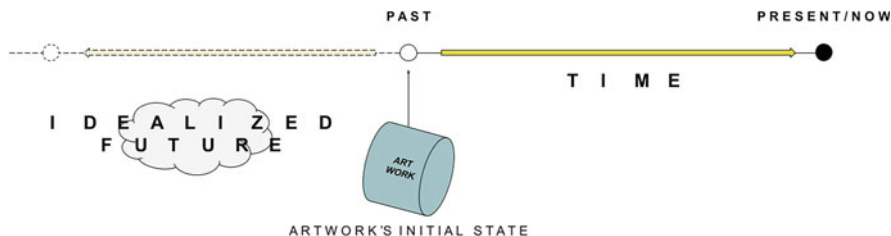


Fig. 2 The idealized future, which does not exist, is often envisioned by collecting institutions (in replacement of the now) as an attempt to preserve objects in the initial state in which they entered a collection. Instead, institutions could investigate ways of engaging with the past through artworks' present state

object family," I juxtapose with versions of Marianne Vierø's work *Great Transformation* (2015), which in turn addresses *Two Cones*' evolving state.

Contrary to the view of the PMA and Tate, I will argue that the disintegrated state of *Two Cones* did not cause it to stop being an artwork, nor that it is unsuitable for display today. First, I make the case, following Garcia's flat-ontology, that all objects in a collection are equally relevant. Next, I explain how, according to contemporary conservation theory, the incorporation of *change* and the notion of time extend also to "traditional" artworks, implying that *Two Cones* should be considered an artwork suitable for display, regardless of its state. Finally, I suggest that, adding to the last point and following Garcia's notion of objects and time, that *Two Cones*, in its current (disintegrated) state, represents the maximum presence possible in the here and now.

More in general, I argue that a revised notion of collecting which accounts for change contradicts the traditional idea of accumulating artworks to be preserved for eternity. In my view, collecting institutions usually work towards an idealized future, which according to Garcia's thinking does not exist. In other words, traditional thinking ordinarily refers to the conservation goal as something determinate that would happen in the future but would reinstate the past: the indefinite preservation of the initial state of an artwork. Such state, obviously, can only *be* in the past, as it belongs to the "already happened." Moreover, the presence of an artwork's initial state necessarily involves a fading presence, as it moves away from the present as time passes. It is impossible for conservation to hold on to the fading presence of something that already took place. Instead, it can help to navigate the evolving presence of an artwork (Fig. 2).

While choosing to preserve for a future that does not exist or in trying to hold on to artworks' initial state, museums might work against the presence of the artworks in their collections and, consequentially, against themselves. When museums neglect change, one might argue that artworks in a collection cease to be present. How can museum professionals envision (and advocate) a more interesting life for objects than that of being stored or crated?

In other words, I advocate that collecting institutions, through the agency of museum professionals and their practices, promote the present, always evolving state

of an artwork. By concentrating on some idealized future, one will neglect the present, short-circuiting the idea of collecting (and preserving) for what is to come—the present again (albeit in a new guise).

The infographics (figures) featured in this chapter reflect my interpretation of Garcia's extended notion of time and presence regarding artworks in collections.

2 Managing Change

The traditional understanding in conservation practice and theory that objects should be preserved in the same condition in which they entered a museum collection has been questioned for some time now. Studies in the conservation of contemporary art such as by Laurensen (2006), Renée van de Vall et al. (2011), van Saaze (2013), Hölling (2016), and Annet Dekker (2018)—all accounting for the temporal nature of contemporary artworks—have contributed to new perspectives in conservation. Countering traditional thinking, these scholars understand that processes of *change* and *loss* that artworks go through across time are essential to the notion of conservation of contemporary art. Instead of focussing on the material or visual form of artworks, contemporary practice builds upon the idea that objects are subjected to transformations, changes and indeterminacy.

Not surprisingly, much of traditional conservation judgement is based on the “physical integrity” of a work. But “the notion of art as a ‘fixed’ material object has become highly problematic,” prompting expansion in the vocabulary of contemporary conservation (van Saaze 2013, p. 36). Terms such as flexible, fluid, variable and medium-independent appear to have replaced fixed, stable, material authenticity and medium-specific (van Saaze 2013, p. 56). The Electronic Media Group of American Institute of Conservation (EMGAIC) applies time-based-media as a term to “any artwork that has both physical and temporal dimensions.”⁴ Positionings as such shifted the discussion away from the idea of a single object to a complex object that is subjected to change. The main point here is that, because of the temporal nature of art in general, all artworks, regardless of their medium specificity or current state, incorporate time.

To tackle the variability of works, critical thinking was brought to conservation through professionals working on heritage and ethnographic collections (Laurensen 2006). van de Vall et al. (2011, p. 3) have introduced the concept of a biographical approach, where “the meaning of an object and the effects it has on beings and events may shift during its existence, due to changes in its physical state, use, and social, cultural, and historical context”. To leave the studio or to enter a collection does not mean the beginning or end of a biographical trajectory—they are two of the many reference points in an artwork's biography (Fig. 3).

⁴See http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Electronic_Media.

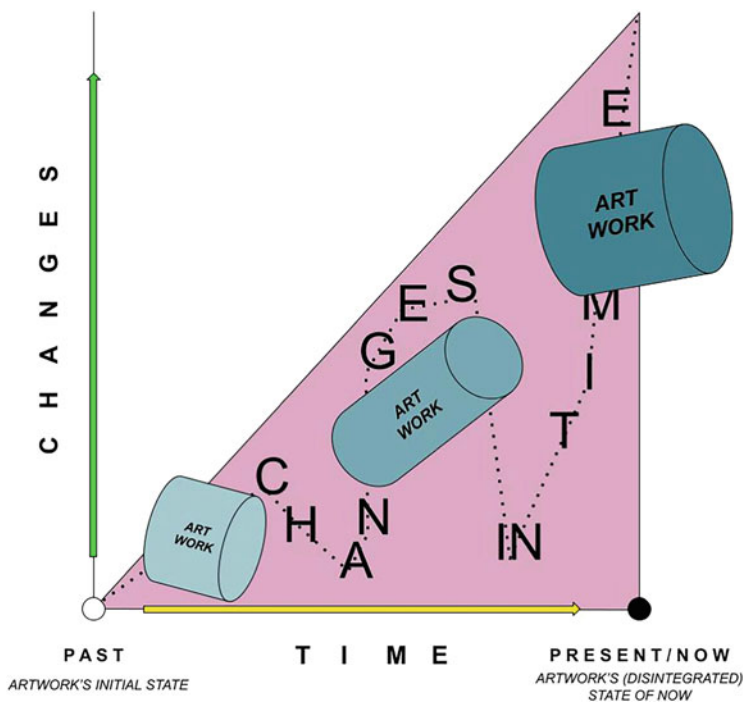


Fig. 3 An artwork's evolving identity and changes over time

Instead of a “truth-enforcement operation” (Muñoz-Viñas 2005, p. 65), contemporary conservation has learned from social process approaches in anthropology studies. Rather than operating under a single value, as noticed by van Saaze (2013), contemporary conservation theory puts forward negotiation, equilibrium, discussion and consensus (p. 76). In this more inclusive scenario, objects are influenced (and affected) by the changing environment and the other way around.

The traditional perspective that seeks stability and rejects change is commonly believed to follow a linear progression of time. In turn, the notion of time—often associated with change—is seen in a negative light by traditional conservation. However, Dekker (2018) explains that “[a]s a practice, conservation has always changed the ‘authentic’ state of a work” (p. 7). Interestingly, what traditional conservation seeks, at least in theory, is a constant return to the previous condition of an artwork. But in always trying to escape change, traditional conservation ends up as well subverting the linear conception of time, as pointed out by Hölling (2013, p. 157). Regardless of the tradition one follows, time is an intrinsic component of artworks.

In order to challenge the conventional conservation and curatorial practice, Hölling enquires whether all artworks should be conceived as temporal entities, including traditional paintings and sculptures. In this context she uses the notion of “long-durational artworks” (Hölling 2016, p. 19). To re-think traditional objects

through the lens of the new means to re-think the conventional thinking in museum, conservation and curatorial practices. This prompts an opportunity to engage with (traditional) artworks as durational objects, or in Hölling's words, to "think of artworks of all kinds as everchanging and evolving entities that continually undergo physical alteration and transition" (Hölling 2016, p. 22). Before presenting a new reading of artworks that currently do not conform to the conventional norms of museum collections as a means to create conditions for their survival, I will first explain the theoretical framework for this chapter, Garcia's flat ontology, followed by a discussion of notions of time and presence.

3 Flat-ontology System, Time, and Presence

Garcia (2013) explains his philosophy as "thought-experiments on the 'equality' of all things" (p. 15). In a flat-ontology system,⁵ the point is not that things are ontologically equal or that everything is equivalent. Instead, to enter this system is to be open to the idea that all objects (imagined or not) are equally significant, existing in "equal ontological dignity to each individuated thing" (Garcia 2014a, p. 4). A flat-ontology "[refuses] to presuppose an ontological difference between two kinds of objects (humans and non-humans, for example)" (Garcia 2013, p. 17). This perspective helps to re-think the notion of managing collections because it not only confers equal importance to objects, but also establishes non-hierarchical relationships between objects themselves and between objects, practitioners, and hosting institutions.

This way of thinking creates a parallel to artworks in collections, offering potential ways of understanding artworks as engaged in relationships with others, as well as with the changes they go through. Overall, this theoretical background might also help revise what museums do to artworks no longer considered suitable for presentation.

To advance this perspective, it is worth having a deeper look at Garcia's approach to time modalities. As for Garcia, the relationship between artworks in a collection and between an artwork and time is of the same type. The importance of the present state of an object is equal to that of its previous states in the past.

Moreover, a different understanding of time calls for a serious consideration of other timelines in museums and collections than human ones. To claim that something lasts forever is to limit a thing to a temporal dimension narrowly understood in human terms. As Hölling argues, "the problem of the understanding of artworks as being *in time*, *in duration*, . . . has something to do with the understanding of time in terms of endurance as cut to the human dimension" (Hölling 2016, p. 17). Because

⁵This system, also called object-oriented ontology (OOO), shares similarities with those proposed by more well-known philosophers, e.g., Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, with references to the notion of a flat-ontology having existed since Alexius Meinong (1853–1920). See Graham Harman, preface to *Form and Object* by Tristan Garcia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014): xxiv.

the human-centric approach is currently highly questioned, we know that this understanding is limited; yet museums seem to cling to it and thereby neglect possibilities to creatively develop a combination of conserving, curating and collecting.

In a search for a philosophical model that concerns “*only time, yet completely time*” (2014b, p. 1), Garcia takes as a starting point Saint Augustine’s conception of time. Augustine states that the three tenses of time are “the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things” (as cited in Garcia 2014b, p. 2), while we tend to refer to these, inaccurately, as past, present, and future. According to Garcia (2014b), there are three philosophical traditions concerned with Augustine’s conception. Briefly put, the first tradition, associated with presentism and phenomenology, is further developed by Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. The second tradition is dialectical and associated with eternalism, and reflects on contradictions of being and non-being—represented by thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Bloch, Benjamin. Less known is the third, analytical tradition, which explores the redistribution of time modalities and eternity, as reflected primarily in the work of Charlie Dunbar Broad, who in turn was influenced by Bergson and Whitehead and who criticizes McTaggart’s dialectical view. In 1923 Broad formulated the so-called Growing Block Universe Theory (GBUT),⁶ in which modalities of time are replaced by intensities of presence. Garcia further developed this conception and he arrived at the solution that time should be arranged in terms of presence.

4 Intensities of Time and Presence

The understanding of time in this chapter, or another order of time as introduced by Garcia, presents a rupture with the Cartesian perspective in which time flows from past to present and to future. Garcia argues that presence, instead of time modalities, is the guiding force in this *intensive* order of time, where:

the present is first, as maximal intensity of presence; the past, which is a second order in the very interior of the order of time, is the classification of events by the relative weakening of their presence; the future, finally, which is the ground rather than the horizon of time, corresponds to the greatest possible absence. (Garcia 2014b, p. 11)

This explains why, for Garcia, the future—which has no presence, and is only absence—does not exist. This subtlety is crucial here when discussing the assessment of objects and acknowledging the importance of the numerous changes objects (regardless of the will of their hosting institution) go through in collections.

⁶GBUT is based on a dynamic conception of the universe that sees the universe as a block, continuously expanding itself in terms of presence. The past and present *are*, while the future, which has no presence, does not exist. Because of the continuous character of the present, the universe is constantly increasing in size, as more things are added all the time. GBUT’s downside is that it treats the present of now and that of yesterday (or 1937) as one and the same.

Although conservation tends to reinforce an eternal present, “it is more interesting to follow the variability of the work and thereby accept the idea that time is not neutral or objective,” as argued by Dekker (2018, p. 9). Similarly, Domínguez Rubio (2020, p. 4) claims “that objects are not given once and for all but are fragile and temporal realities.” If we cease thinking of time in terms of modalities (past, present, future), according to Garcia (2014b, pp. 7–9), we envision time instead as variations of intensities of presence. “Temporal order is *both* the increase of presence and the decrease of indeterminacy” (Cogburn 2017, p. 179). Time is nothing other than the accumulation of presence.

Moreover,

Contrary to the past, [the future] is not an ordered process. [It] is a fixed point of reference—without extension and in minimal intensity—which progressively detaches itself from the present, which is an irrevocable increase in the determinations of the universe. We therefore do not get closer to future as time passes: in reality, we move away from it. (Garcia 2014b, p. 9)

If this model puts museum practices on shaky ground, it also offers new possibilities to them. To re-think the temporality of objects in terms of intensity of presence is to question not only the approach to objects in collections but also the discourse on the management of changes in collections. By understanding the present as *maximal presence*, one realises that being present is paramount for existence. The presence of an object in a collection is directly related to its ability to survive in spite of change. This is, however, contrary to the conventional understanding of how collections manage changes, unwanted or not. In most cases, objects are assumed to behave according to expectations; and if they do not, their artwork status is removed from them.

An artwork, as a temporal object, “runs forward as it is in the present, and runs backwards as it is in the past” (Garcia 2014b, p. 11). Needless to say, this applies to artworks in collections—we think of them as becoming more and more present as they enter a collection. In the order of time, as argued by Garcia, “the past, a given state. . . passes and moves away from the present; it finds itself progressively buried under more and more ulterior states of itself” (2014b, p. 11). One might think of the changes that an object undergoes—the initial state of an object moves more and more away from the present (now) state of that object; the original state of an object becomes less and less present. Time, in other words, “both intensifies [an object’s] presence and orders the different states of [an object’s] presence—that is to say, [its] past—by degrading them” (Garcia 2014b, p. 11). Not surprisingly, this is exactly the distinctive legacy of *Two Cones*.

5 Constructions in Space

The decision to make *Two Cones* inaccessible followed conservation guidelines from the 1960s. Would the fate of *Two Cones* be different if the work's purported disintegration had occurred today, given the new perspectives in conservation? An approach that is not narrowly based on the materiality of the object can open us to a creative approach to the development/biography of an artwork, as emphasised by Dekker (2018, p. 8). Even under contemporary conservation's critical progress against traditional thinking and its openness to change, it is likely that this would not have (yet) been the case. In a thought experiment, would the crumbling apart of *Two Cones* today be understood as another point in the trajectory of the artwork—like leaving Gabo's studio or entering the PMA collection? What is necessary for its disintegration to be understood as a continuation of its being an artwork instead of its ceasing to be artwork?

After entering a museum collection, as we know from *Two Cones*, artworks keep changing—as they might lose or acquire properties—throughout their loan journey, exhibition history, or storage room stay. From a discussion in 2009, van de Vall et al. recall that “rather than ‘preserving objects’ conservators are ‘managing change’—sometimes with the artists around, but very often without them.”⁷ This new perspective guides us to re-thinking not only objects, but also collecting and curating, in relation to the under-constant-change-understanding of time. Rather than perceiving artworks as having a single preferred state, museum professionals could fully embrace artworks as having *evolving identities*—and, in turn, understand objects as time entities.

Writing about the conditions of net art, Dekker (2018, p. 5) reports that museum professionals avoid discussing the conservation of artworks where change is imminent because of their fear of the new (it is known that because of its dependency on technology, time-based media can quickly become obsolete). When dealing with this art form, museum professionals have to come to terms with change in a more radical way. An artwork “is a complex document with kinks, folds, hiccups and slippages, which twist and bend in various directions, creating uncertainty and unpredictable behaviour,” argues Dekker (2018, p. 16). With that in mind, one can conclude that Gabo, when experimenting with plastic's new technology in the first half of the 1900s, unknowingly added obsolescence to his work while at the same time preparing the ground for something new—in a manner quite similar to the fast pace in which new technology might confer obsolescence to net art works.

How could museums actively collaborate with time instead of dismissing it? On the meaning of the word “contemporary,” Boris Groys (2009) writes that “[t]o be con-temporary means to be ‘with time’ rather than ‘in time’” (p. 6). In this view, time

⁷ van de Vall et al. recalls the statement made in the round table discussion *Ethical Dilemmas in the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art* at the Getty Conservation Institute on 29 April 2009. See https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/videos/public_lecture_videos_audio/ethical_dilemmas.html.

can get some help from time-based art. An artwork becomes “a comrade of time—because time-based art is, in fact, art-based time” (p. 7). For the management of collections, it is important to witness the presence of objects in time. Moreover, “to be con-temporary . . . can thus be understood as being a ‘comrade of time’—as collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties” (p. 6). Artworks’ evolving states are a reminder for collecting institutions that they can help facilitate the troubled understanding of time that often idealizes a non-existent future. When addressing issues of time, the changeable character of objects in a museum collection enables us to re-think them in their current condition (regardless of when they were created) as contemporary. By acknowledging and accepting that artworks change over time, it becomes possible to collaborate with time, so to speak, within the context of a museum collection.

6 Appearance of Other Objects: A Complex Object Family

To exhibit works like *Two Cones*, as argued by Hölling (2016), is to ask more profound questions concerning their nature and functioning. In dealing with instability, there is always the inevitable element of chance. It is far from easy, after all, to imagine how a work will look like at different moments in time. Almost any work of art may and ultimately will undergo major changes across time.

As the deterioration of *Two Cones* unfolded, it gave rise to the emergence of other objects. Since its deterioration, this work started to proliferate its features through different objects, listed here chronologically: (1) a scaled model (made out of celluloid), 1927–1937; (2) the original artwork (made out of cellulose acetate), 1927–1937; (3) a study copy (using Plexiglas), 1968 (Price et al. 2009); and (4) an artist replication of the original (again in celluloid), 1968. Given the deteriorated state of the original work and following unsuccessful discussions between the PMA and Gabo, the museum commissioned an artist (Arturo Cuetara) to make the study copy, which is at the PMA together with the original. Gabo donated the scaled model and the artist replication to Tate in 1977; both have faced deterioration.

These objects that proliferated after the work crumbled apart added something new to *Two Cones*. As pointed out by van Saaze (2013), “in the passage of an object through time things are also created; the outcome is something new” (p. 25). *Two Cones*’ disintegrated, “new” state prompted the emergence of new objects. While engaging with such indeterminate object-multiples, collection conservators are faced with new questions, which potentially allow for the formulation of new strategies (van Saaze 2013, p. 146).

Treated as commodities, artworks’ trajectories in museums are usually guided by market economies and reinforced by the traditional conservation approach. Hölling (2016) argues also that “the process of musealisation counters disappearance” (p. 19). But if *Two Cones* is denied the status of artwork, what kind of disappearance does the process of musealisation exactly counter here? Since its deterioration, the work no longer conforms to conventional museum collecting norms. Artworks that

present (signs of) impairment in relation to their initial state are usually excluded from or segregated within collections. *Two Cones* can be seen as representative of many artworks in a similar condition within museum collections.

By understanding a family of artworks together—as collective—argues van Saaze (2013), one “opens up possibilities for creating and exploring new relationships and directions. . . that. . . were unthinkable or considered unsuitable for a museum” (p. 180). In groups, artworks might be understood as equal entities that establish a bilateral relationship amongst each other. Since artworks keep changing, museums then no longer store whole or complete works, but parts of works, as stressed by van de Vall et al. In being together, parts of objects form collections. A family of (parts of) artworks form a conceptual collection that questions the conventional approach of museums towards objects. As such, *Two Cones* can no longer be reduced to a single artwork.

To add to this already peculiar object-multiples biography, a few other objects based on *Two Cones* were made by artist Marianne Vierø. Her work, called *Great Transformation* (2015),⁸ consists of an edition of two, in addition to an archive copy of a 3D rapid prototype 1:1 reproduction in recently developed plastics of the original version of *Two Cones* as of its decomposed state in 2014. *Great Transformation* adds again to the artwork family of *Two Cones*, now consisting of (at least) seven objects. So, in addition to the four items listed at the beginning of this section, there are three more: (5) one of *Great Transformation*'s editions is at the PMA; (6) an artist edition is with Vierø herself; and (7), an archive copy, presented as a gift to Gabo's estate. The natural degradation of Vierø's work is part of its original conception. In fact, Vierø chose materials for *Great Transformation* that will visibly degrade over time.

Vierø's work brings contemporaneity to Gabo's, and, in turn, *Two Cones* is the reason why *Great Transformation* exists. As noted by the PMA, they are all subjected to the same warps, bends, and cracks. *Great Transformation* contains *Two Cones* and the other way around. Vierø's work makes *Two Cones* visible as it is in its current condition. As argued by Hölling, “One could focus attention on the aesthetics and qualities of change, accepting change as a positive value with regard to both short-durational and long-durational works” (Hölling 2016, p. 18). Singularity can be obtained by keeping things connected, even if apart in spacetime, as illustrated by the case of *Two Cones*.

Two Cones and its object-multiples constitute a complex object family: seven individual evolving biographies, timelines, and ageing processes blend into each other as an intriguing whole. They continue to develop, resisting storage rules and challenging museum conventions. The complex artwork family in this case is conditioned by each of the individual works and by how they interact with each

⁸Marianne Vierø's work was commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and first shown there in 2016 as part of the exhibition *Into Dust: Traces of the Fragile in Contemporary Art*, June 6 - October 25, 2015, curated by Amanda Sroka. The work was then acquired by the museum in 2015 with acquisition funds and proceeds from deaccessioned works. See <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/333811.html>.

other, together—without necessarily being in the same space or sharing the same time. How to account for the presence of objects like *Two Cones*—becoming—and understand them as an active part of a collection? When assessed in terms of presence, the complex artwork family of *Two Cones* presents itself as the maximum of presence to collections that might still be insisting on neglecting change.

7 Objects, Changes, Absence, Presence

The situation of *Two Cones* is contradictory in terms of presence because even though various versions of the work are comprised in the PMA and Tate’s respective collections—they have accession numbers, have not been deaccessioned—they are not recognised as artworks suitable for display. By acknowledging *Two Cones*’ trajectory as part of its biography, these museums would proactively address this work’s contemporary presence in their collections. This would confer relevance to the artwork, instead of increased absence (the refusal of its present state). If being contemporary is the acceptance of the current state of an artwork, museums, when denying change, automatically deny contemporaneity as well. By not acknowledging the changes objects undergo, museums, as a result, seem to accept absence in the form of artworks which are denied their present state (Fig. 4).

Objects that do not conform to the norm are denied existence because of a conflict between their initial and current state. But if we understand artworks as being present, the significance of the “disintegrated state,” meaning the result of their accumulated presence, has to be acknowledged as equally valid. Even though parts of *Two Cones*’ instances have, for the collections that host them, lost their artwork qualities, the complex object’s evolving (despite disintegrating state) presence of now is the maximum of its possible presence. Every past state of *Two Cones* can only have a fading presence/increased absence. To attempt to preserve an artwork in its initial state it is to deprive it from its presence.

The disintegrated version of *Two Cones* has gathered perhaps more interest than the initial state of the work. As pointed out by Dekker (2018), “meaning is constituted *through* the object and is not necessarily or solely held *within* the object” (p. 4). The meaning of the disintegrated state became more interesting than the illusion of a stable *Two Cones*. As discussed by van Saaze (2013), the authenticity of works can be discovered through context (p. 87). Even if not initially intended, the disintegration has become familiar, intrinsic to the work. Similarly, one can claim that the authenticity of *Two Cones* of now can be discovered over time, through conservation research, by familiarity with the evolving state of the work, by seeing, hearing, or reading (about) it over and over again (Fig. 5).

As art historian Altshuler (2005) claims, “works exhibited in museums are placed in the future, identified as playing a role in an anticipated history” (p. 2). By trying to grant presence to the past through projecting itself into the future, museums, through conventional conservation approaches, might in turn skip the present state of artworks altogether. The “ideally preserved” version of the artwork, which does

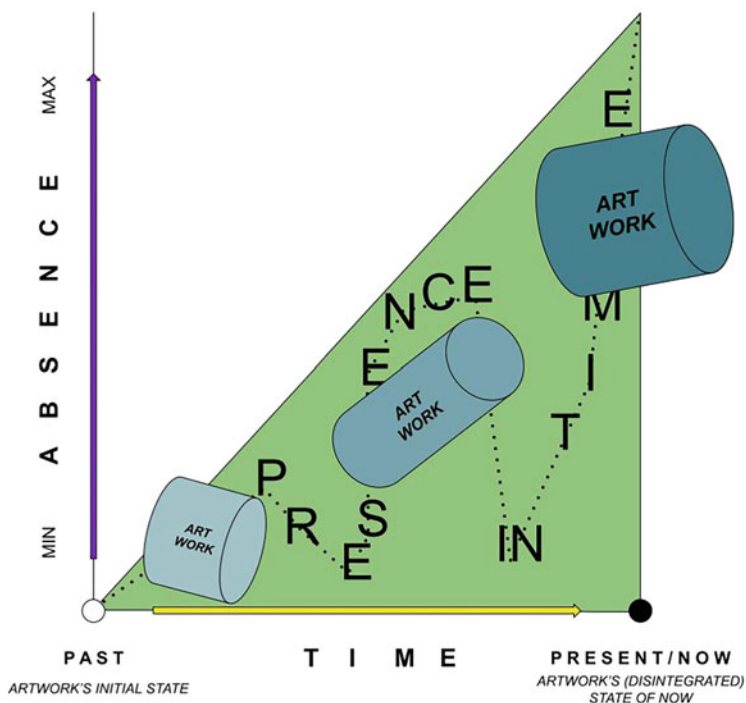


Fig. 4 Presence is directly related to the changes that objects undergo. To understand objects as being present in a collection, one must acknowledge and accept their changes as part of their evolving identities

not exist and can only be seen as an idea, refers to an equally idealized version of the future, which, in turn, cannot exist either. Instead of a fading past or non-existent future, museums need to focus on what artworks hold—through presence and change—to promote access and usage.

By challenging the conventional approach to presence and change, *Great Transformation* highlights the presence of *Two Cones* in its current state. It approaches the disintegration of an artwork as a relevant fact in its biography. The fact that they both disintegrate draws attention to their constant evolving state. However, while *Great Transformation* is free to pursue its natural disintegration,⁹ *Two Cones* is still confined in its no-longer-suitability as an artwork by the museum. Garcia (2014a) claims that “by affecting the form of our representation through some new representation of the world, an interesting work creates its own interest” (p. 276). As a complex object that continuously “misbehaves,” *Two Cones*’ disintegrated state opens up possibilities for becoming a contemporary object. Together, the complex artwork family transforms the form in which its members appear. And still, as time

⁹As mentioned, inspired by *Two Cones*, *Great Transformation* is made of materials that are meant to degrade over time.

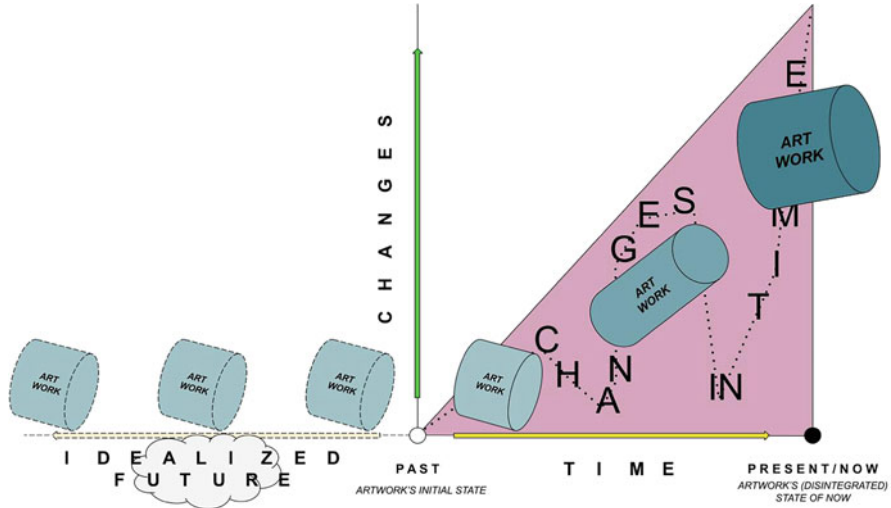


Fig. 5 The future, which does not exist, is instead imagined as in its idealized state by conventional collection management. When an artwork’s state is preserved for the idealized future, it represents absence and in turn has no presence

passes, they continue to look different again, individually, following the deterioration of their own material temporalities. Together, these objects are in flux; they are time-based.

8 Conclusion

Although contemporary conservation theory puts forward progressive thinking, museums still face challenges in understanding change when it comes to “traditional” artworks. Artworks can actually move in and out of states because their (flexible) status is not solely connected to the way they look or how they “shape.” But can collecting institutions also approach with flexibility what it means to collect presence and change? It is key to comprehend that the initial state of artworks is merely temporary. *Two Cones* demonstrates that objects shape their own times. Changing artworks can point to artistic understandings beyond the “original ones.” Garcia’s flat-ontology system highlights the contradictory position museums take, where in trying to preserve the past, museums eventually lose presence, and in turn, contemporaneity.

When museums make the disintegrated status of a work inaccessible, we may question the ways of collecting they promote. Museums need to start accepting artworks’ changing, evolving states more often. Otherwise, a museum’s understanding of art is conditioned to a time that has fading presence (past), or that has never been present (future). Contemporary conservation does not ‘secure’ the permanence

of an ideal condition in the future. Museums need to involve a combined (conservation, curatorial, legal, museological) approach to objects in collection.

Museum professionals must think of scenarios where different understandings coexist. What one specific museum defends might be (and usually is) only part of the whole truth. In this speculative scenario, there is room for creativity and experimentation, both of which are much needed today. Collaborations between museums could take a step further and think in terms beyond acquisition or display. Different museums, under shared ethics, could potentially promote different ways of collecting, managing collections, and learning from objects they host instead of declaring them inaccessible. This perspective prompts new discussions around ownership and understands artworks beyond their materiality—to collect something does not necessarily mean to materially own it.

To re-think the current engagement with works, as van Saaze (2013) stresses, encourages us to “reformulate the existing protocols of exhibition against the constraints of fixed time-space, that prevent artworks and exhibitions to expand beyond temporal boundaries” (p. 157). Objects in a collection are space-time-bound. They are entitled to their own logics that build their trajectories, forming a more layered and more intriguing collecting environment. If the notion of collecting is freed from a restrictive understanding of time, artworks in museums positively add to each other, and contemporary artworks add to the understanding of “old” works.

A collection that would only carry artworks in their initial state of acquisition short-circuits the idea of collecting. Small shifts over time lead to shifts in the presence (and history) of things, including ways of managing collections (Appadurai 1986, p. 36). Museums should safeguard not only objects but also change, instead of safeguarding objects from change. Through the everchanging objects they hold, museums can choose to *highlight* presence instead of attempting to *hide* it. This approach would move us towards a contemporary notion of artworks and, by collaborating with changing objects and time, collecting institutions will move towards a contemporary approach to collecting itself.

Acknowledgments This chapter is based on research funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

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