

Nina Quabeck, Early Stage Researcher, NACCA

Intent in the Making: Reconceptualising a Controversial Notion

In the conservation field, the artist's intent became the subject of heated debate time and again but, so far, the profession has not quite come to grips with this unruly notion. In common usage, it appears to be short-hand for a jumble of artists' wishes, rights, and responsibilities and has traditionally implied the aim to reconstruct the artists's state of mind at a specific point in time. This paper explores a different understanding of intent. Building on the premise that artist's intent is a concept in flux rather than singular and fixed (Gordon and Hermens 2013) it proposes to embrace intent as open-ended process. If it is accepted that an artwork can have multiple authenticities which it accrues over time as its biography unfolds, it would be counterintuitive to assume intent to be static. It poses the question whether conservation's striving to capture 'the artist's intent' runs the risk of determining it permanently, even though all artworks change over time, complex contemporary works in which the artistic process may go on beyond the point of creation especially so. They are installed over the years in different places, by different people, with and without the artist; in this ongoing process, more and more (and possibly differing) information accumulates. This paper argues that contemporary art conservation is not served by simply gathering information from artists, filing it away in a database, and regarding it as written in stone. Instead, it champions the notion that the co-stewarding of complex artworks is an open-ended exchange in which not all questions can be resolved at the same time. Some problems may take another decade, the life experiences of artworks, artists, and caretakers, in which changes in the artwork and practical actions are tested against the recorded information and in which the information gleaned is questioned, refined and updated continuously. Hence, the notion of a singular intent decreed unilaterally by the artist is replaced in this paper by the notion of a plurality of evolving intents, which do not solely lie with the artist but are brokered and collaboratively negotiated with others such as curators, conservators, external specialists, artists' representatives, etc. What does the conservation of contemporary art have to gain if intent is regarded not as frozen in time but as perpetually 'in the making'?