OBJECT TROUBLE: CONSTRUCTING AND PERFORMING ARTWORK IDENTITY IN THE MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT The collections of many private and public art institutions today contain a significant number of contemporary artworks that involve or combine live performance, technology, and an ephemeral or replenishable materiality. Existing acquisition, loan, and collection care policies – conceived around 'traditional' artworks that exist as contained, relatively static physical objects or assemblages – have been challenged by this ever-increasing category of 'other' artworks that do not conform to established frameworks and protocols. In response, new frameworks and approaches devised in the last 20 years have focused on artwork identity as the object of conservation, as part of efforts to render such works collectable within a museum context, and to preserve them for future generations. In this article the notion of artwork identity is examined through a lens of queer theory and poststructuralist criticism to consider how an artwork's seemingly fixed and singular essence is constructed, reified, and at times fractured within the museum space. This paper examines how the ongoing display and enactment of artworks – reframed as *performatives* – may either perpetuate the illusion of a fixed and stable artwork identity or subvert and queer that singularity through deviation. Artwork identity is reconceptualised as a perspectival impression of significance that may vary between individuals, contexts, and over time. Artworks previously characterised as 'unruly' actors in the museum sphere (Domínguez Rubio 2014) are positioned as entities that queer not only notions of artwork identity and essence, but also entrenched museum conventions, policies, practices, and larger institutional norms. With this in mind, this article proposes that the focus of conservation might be reoriented away from a univocal essentialism at the level of identity towards a processual and constructivist understanding of a work's multiple, socially produced and negotiated grounds and centres.

Introduction

In his 2014 article, 'Preserving the unpreservable: docile and unruly objects at MoMA', sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio drew what he saw as a distinction between artworks that behave as 'docile' and those that behave as 'unruly' agents within the museum sphere. Those artworks that exist as contained, discrete, singular physical objects – such as paintings, sculptures, and works on paper – he characterised as docile in the sense that they generally comply with existing museum structures and frameworks, and, in so doing, reinforce existing protocols and conventions around acquisition and display. He contrasted these works with those that

'cannot be easily stabilised and transformed into time-less "objects" of formal delectation'.[1] These more 'unruly' artworks, he explained, 'operate as vectors of transformation and change within the museum by posing diverse challenges to existing boundaries, by redistributing competencies and expertise, and by creating, in so doing, a new cartography of power within the museum'.[2] He noted that Eva Hesse's *Expanded Expansion* is not inherently unruly due to the degradation properties of latex. Rather, musealised by what he calls the 'objectification machine' of the museum, such a work '*only* becomes unruly within the institutional context of the museum, where material stability is regarded as necessary to preserve the identity between material form and artist's intention'.[3]

The notion of an artwork having an 'identity' or 'essence' is a pervasive feature of the discourse around the conservation of modern and contemporary art.[4] In this article I challenge and reframe the notion of artwork identity that is often invoked in conservation and museological discourse. By examining this concept against Judith Butler's poststructuralist analysis of identity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), I seek to recast the supposed abiding core of an artwork's identity as an illusion, one that may be perpetuated or ruptured through practices of musealisation, conservation, display, and discourse. Following Butler's writing on gender, I propose that what is often described as the 'internal essence' of an artwork is in fact 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts'.[5] The repetition of a work in one or more instantiations may be read as *performatives* that perpetuate the illusion of a single, consistent, stable identity, or rupture that illusion through difference and deviation. Accordingly, I reconceptualise complex and 'unruly' works of contemporary art – namely works that resist material and textual stabilisation – as entities that explicitly *queer* the collecting institution and conservation frameworks by exposing and upsetting normative policies and approaches to acquisition, authorship, display, care, and artwork identity itself.

'Essentialism at the level of identity'

Since the 1990s, preservation frameworks for built and intangible heritage, digital library and archive materials, and most recently time-based media artworks, have increasingly adopted identity-based models to reconceptualise a heritage object's authenticity and integrity. Within these frameworks – underpinned by what could be called in Butler's parlance 'essentialism at the level of identity'[6] – the objective of preservation has expanded away from achieving material fixity for an object, and towards identifying and sustaining the features or properties considered significant, essential, character-defining, work-defining, or constitutive of its identity.[7] In recognition of the many similarities between musical works and time-based media art installations that also *recur* in multiple instantiations, authenticity has been framed as a quality that can potentially be maintained by identifying a work's 'score',[8] and ensuring that a work's various manifestations remain compliant. In practice, an artwork's score or significant properties are often identified through a combination of (1) artists' interviews, aimed at drawing out the work's display or activation parameters; (2) textualised directives solicited in contracts or accompanying guidelines, specifications, and instructions from the artist; and (3) collection caretakers' analyses of the formal features and circumstances of a work's previous manifestations.

These various processes of score reduction aim to transfer the production of a work's manifestations from the artist to the collecting institution, whereby the work may remain a 'durable and repeatable' entity in the absence of the artist.[9] Drawing upon the poststructuralist theory of Jacques Derrida, Tina Fiske has characterised these methods as processes of 'tethering',[10] aimed at securing 'in absentia' artworks that face imminent, material dissolution, as is often the case with installation artworks. She argues that such processes function as a means of domestication,[11] to render these supposedly 'unruly' artworks benign to the system into which they have entered. Hanna Hölling has similarly described score reduction as a method of 'textual stabilisation'[12] carried out by collaborators and museum personnel, which has the effect of 'rewriting' artworks.[13] Although some artists may supply detailed specifications or 'prescriptions'[14] to the museum at the point of acquisition, in other circumstances score reduction may be carried out by conservators, taking the form of identity reports[15] and display specifications.[16] In these circumstances a work is thought to be stabilised by caretakers through essentialism at the level of identity, citing directives and 'sanctions'[17] from the artist about how the work should be installed and/or enacted.

Inherent in these approaches is the belief that the integrity of a work's manifestations may be secured through their *score compliance*,[18] that is, through their fidelity to the artist's directives for the work's enactment and display, or their embodiment of a 'critical mass'[19] of properties singled out as constitutive of the artwork's identity by its custodians. Within these frameworks, the ethical remit of conservators, as Fiske has commented, often 'becomes focused on minimising the erosion of identity between instances of a work'.[20] Compliance – enforced by collection caretakers – is presumed to guarantee and secure a work's ongoing integrity, authenticity, and presence.

The notion of an artwork having an identity that can be defined at the point of acquisition and maintained through time with conservation oversight is particularly compelling from the perspective of a collecting institution. It requires only slight shifts in thinking and approach on the part of conservators and collecting institutions with respect to existing policies and conventions, where the object of fixity for conservation purposes is shifted from material to concept or experience. In practice, however, 'score compliance authenticity'[21] may be difficult to gauge and enforce for works of art, particularly if an artist's specifications change over time or they are not well defined or articulated. Given that many contemporary artworks are editioned – held by the artist in an 'artist proof' as well as one or more collecting institutions concurrently – a single work may often exist as 'more than one', as Vivian van Saaze put it.[22] Artists may carry out updates, re-edits, or refabrication in response to material alterations, shifts in technological or contextual conditions, or as a consequence of their desire to continue *making* the work. In doing so, new versions may arise, and a work's 'score' may be continually revised or multiplied. Irrespective of the actions of a conservator at one institution, an artwork may continue to evolve in and through the artist's ongoing involvement,[23] whereby it continues *becoming* as a consequence of both its iteration and editioning.[24]

Pip Laurenson has remarked how 'early in the relationship with a new work the museum often accommodates the

exploration and development of the identity of the work, only later acting more conservatively to contain the work in its established form'.[25] Joanna Phillips has reiterated Laurenson's observation that a work's identity may initially be fluid, and cautions conservators against overdetermining work-defining properties while a work is still in a 'state of "infancy", thus in the process of forming its identity'.[26] Embedded in these and many other discussions of artwork identity or essence is a belief that – even if initially labile – it eventually crystallises into something monolithic and singular, an essence that conservators may not only discover but also protect. This presupposed single, abiding identity, essence, or core could be framed in Derridean terms as a 'centre' thought to be untouched by the 'play' of difference.[27]

There is a pervasive assumption or hope, both in conservation discourse and practice, that such a centre can be revealed and sustained through the actions of the conservator. Van de Vall et al. have, however, noted, that 'a work does not necessarily stop changing when it enters a museum collection' and caution against frameworks predicated on the idea that an artwork exists as 'an organic or functional whole possessing a singular identity'.[28] Drawing on the writing of sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, Laurenson has more recently considered how some artworks may be thought of as 'epistemic objects', which are open, incomplete and whose significances continually emerge through their indefinite 'unfolding'.[29] Indeed, many works of contemporary art exist as rhizomatic and mitotic processes, unfolding and multiplying in protracted states of creation or making that blur the distinction between a work's 'execution' and 'implementation' stages described by Nelson Goodman.[30] The belief that every artwork retains or ought to retain a single and knowable configuration of essential properties – a centre that may serve as the object of conservation – may, in many cases, be more a case of wishful thinking on the part of caretakers rather than a reflection of reality.

Case study: Alanna O'Kelly's *Sanctuary/ Wastelands* (1994)

In 1994, Irish artist Alanna O'Kelly (b. 1955) created a three-projector, 35 mm slide and sound installation titled *Sanctuary/Wastelands* (Figures 1–3). Over the course of 10 minutes, vignette images of rocks, beach, seaweed, and human remains eroded by the sea appeared and dissolved over a negative, black-and-white projected image of the burial mound at Teampall Dumhach Mhór or Church of the Great Sandbank, a mass grave on the west coast of County Mayo from the time of the Great Famine. The dissolving, projected imagery in the work was accompanied by a vocal soundtrack, consisting of the artist keening for the famine victims who were buried at Teampall Dumhach Mhór.

The work was first exhibited at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) as part of the Glen Dimplex Artists Award Exhibition in 1994, and entered the IMMA collection in 1997. In 1999, two significant changes were introduced to the artwork. Under O'Kelly's supervision, animator Marc

Figure 1 A 35 mm slide used in the original three-projector slide version of Alanna O'Kelly's *Sanctuary/Wastelands* (1994). (Photo: Brian Castriota.)
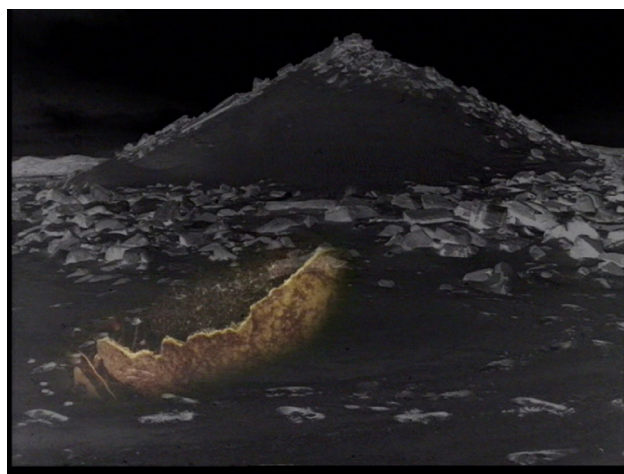

Figure 2 Still of the video version of Alanna O'Kelly's *Sanctuary/Wastelands* (1994). (Reproduced courtesy the Irish Museum of Modern Art.)

Figure 3 Video version of Alanna O'Kelly's *Sanctuary/Wastelands* (1994), installed at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2019. Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art, Purchase 1997. (Photo: Ros Kavanagh. Reproduced courtesy the Irish Museum of Modern Art.)

Doyle was contracted to create a video version of the work (Figure 2) from the original slides. Using a video recording of the slide installation as a reference, Doyle and O'Kelly used After Effects (Adobe) to precisely reproduce the masking of the imagery and the timings of the original dissolves.[31] O'Kelly also took the opportunity to record a new musical

soundtrack with musician Tommy Hayes, which featured Hayes' *bodhrán* drumming and a variety of other voices and textures in place of O'Kelly keening.

Reflecting on these changes in 2020, O'Kelly explained that the transfer to DVD in 1999 allowed the work to travel more easily, and highlighted how maintaining the slide installation was at times 'painful' from a logistical perspective, with projectors jamming often. Despite this, she remarked that the original slide format 'was so powerful, the slides were very beautiful. They relate differently, they translate differently in digital'.[32] Speaking about the change to the soundtrack, O'Kelly commented that 'although I loved elements of [the original soundtrack], I wasn't completely happy with it. And when I was transferring the work ... I got a chance to revisit the sound.' She noted that the *bodhrán* drumming sounded like 'tapping the body', which connected with the content of the work in a new and profound way. Over the last 20 years, only the single-channel video version of *Sanctuary/Wastelands* with its revised soundtrack has been exhibited (Figure 3). However, a set of the original 35 mm slides and a cassette tape containing the original audio were recently rediscovered in the IMMA collection archive. The original soundtrack was digitised and made available for online streaming in conjunction with IMMA's online screening series *IMMA Screen* in 2020.

Both O'Kelly's migration of the three-projector slide installation into a single-channel video projection and her creation of a new soundtrack typify how an artwork's making may continue years after it was first executed. More importantly, these arguably significant changes – introduced after several episodes of display – demonstrate how a single artwork can exist in a state of multiplicity through its 'variants and versions'[33] as a consequence of an artist's interventions. Is it therefore accurate to frame an artwork's identity or essence as something latent that conservators can excavate and know through empirical inquiry, and protect from erosion by functioning as compliance officers? If not, how *is* identity constituted, and what wider implications might there be for conservation frameworks and practices?

Identity, performativity, and rupture

In his discussion of Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, James Williams remarks, that

> things acquire fixity, that is, they acquire parts and hence boundaries through repetition. These parts and boundaries then allow us to see the individual as a member of a class or species ... We come to recognise an actual thing and assign a fixed identity to it because habitual repetitions, recorded in memory, allow us to have a fixed representation of things.[34]

'Repetition', he notes, 'underlies the illusion of fixed identities'.[35] The repeated or iterate instances of any entity produces a sense of its constituent parts, and its limits or boundaries. It is through this repeating of something that 'significant points'[36] are calculated, and what we might consider the identity of a thing is established. In the case of *Sanctuary/Wastelands*, prior to 1999, the repeated presentation of the work as a three-projector slide installation accompanied by O'Kelly's keening soundtrack functioned to reinforce these features as 'significant points' or properties of the work, and the illusion of a stable and consistent identity or essence.

Judith Butler maintains in *Gender Trouble* that 'identity is "performatively" constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results'.[37] This notion of performativity is based on J.L. Austin's 'performative utterances'[38] or *performatives*, which Butler extends to non-verbal bodily acts around gender expression. She explains that 'Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*'.[39] The repetition of attributes commonly ascribed to a particular gender identity performatively constitute the identity of which they are thought to be expressions.

In her characterisation of the 'abiding substance' of gender as a fictive construction, Butler also refers to psychiatrist Robert Stoller's notion of a '"gender core"... produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence'.[40] According to Butler, gender identity is

> a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to begin or end ... Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.[41]

She argues that the appearance of an abiding substance or core is constructed in accordance with certain 'regulated attributes' or norms, producing the illusion of a fixed identity; what we take to be an 'internal essence' is in fact 'manufactured through a sustained set of acts'.[42] In the case of *Sanctuary/Wastelands*, we can see how the illusion of a fixed *artwork* identity – up until 1999 at least – was maintained through a set of repeated acts whereby certain elements were consistently repeated and present in each manifestation.

In conservation practice, the formal manifestations of an artwork – that is, particular episodes of display, installation, or enactment – are typically framed as the products of a score-based enactment or materialisation, like cakes made by following a recipe.[43] However, understood as performatives, we can see how these manifestations are less expressions of an artwork's identity than they are the basis upon which we construct an *impression* of its identity, reifying our sense of what the artwork is. In the purposeful or accidental perpetuation of certain properties or features – be they a particular sequence of images, a type of display technology, the spatial arrangement of installation elements, or the artist's body in a performance – these

properties become the norms through which the illusion of a consistent identity, centre, or ground appears. We may also consider how the repeated or ongoing display of a physical object like a sculpture or painting in a particular, unaltered state or configuration (e.g. fragmentary, with a yellowed varnish, in a particular setting) over a long period of time may also function as performatives which, through repetition, produce the appearance of a fixed identity.

Through successive episodes of display or enactment, we can see how a work's manifestations function as performatives that establish and perpetuate certain perceptions of its identity. The authenticity of a manifestation may be derived through its formal resemblance with prior, sanctioned instances, and in turn it may be cited as a benchmark against which the authenticity of future manifestations may be judged. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler refers to law and judicial precedents as an example of Derridean acentric structure, whereby authority is derived through citationality. Like judicial rulings or the performatives of gender expression, each successive, sanctioned instance of a work functions in a sort of 'echo chain of their own reinvocation',[44] where the authenticity of one manifestation may be argued for on the basis of its 'precision of resemblance' to a prior or initial manifestation.[45] As long as each instance of a work remains in compliance with the ground, centre, or identity affirmed by prior, sanctioned instances – each functioning as a precedent of sorts – the ground remains solid, the centre remains intact and authoritative, and the appearance of an abiding substance and singular identity is maintained. Manifestations seen to remain in compliance through strict adherence to verbal or textualised instructions from the artist can be said to reinforce the illusion of a stable and singular identity, and the appearance of a self-same entity recurring in time and space. Similarly, a manifestation that retains a precision of resemblance with the formal features or appearance of prior episodes of display, installation, or enactment reinforces that singularity, stability, and sense of timelessness.

Conversely, sanctioned or authorised instances of a work that deviate significantly in appearance or physical constitution from prior instances may rupture the illusion of the work's continuous, stable, self-same identity. Butler argues that the appearance of an identity is 'structured' by repeated acts that 'seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity', but 'in their occasional *dis*continuity [they] reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground"'.[46] When an individual perceives significant difference in a particular manifestation of a work, the illusion of a singular identity and abiding essence may be fractured, prompting talk of new versions, double dates, changes to medium lines, and concerns about authenticity. The significance of any difference is of course a subjective judgement, connected in part to a hierarchy of values, which may vary between viewers or interpreters. Although some differences may be seen as incidental, there may not always be agreement among audiences about whether a

perception of difference – understood as 'play' in Derridean terms – is significant enough to produce a rupture at the level of the work's perceived identity.

Butler remarks how 'within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing'.[47] Her characterisation of gender as something that is performed – a 'doing' as she puts it – chimes with both Sîan Jones' account of constructivist positions on authenticity in cultural heritage preservation,[48] as well as Vivian van Saaze's thesis in *Doing Artworks*.[49] We may also draw a link with the CCSDS's definition of authenticity, defined as 'the degree to which a person (or system) regards an object as what it is purported to be'.[50] In this light, we can see how material assemblages or events may be regarded as authentic, token-instances of a particular work when they *pass* as the work they are purported to be.[51] This passing operates at multiple levels within museological taxonomies: an assemblage or event may or may not pass as a manifestation of a particular artwork, a particular presentation mode of the artwork (e.g. 'slide version' or 'video version'), a particular edition of the work in a particular collection, or a particular class of work (e.g. 'slide installation'). Oftentimes this kind of nominal identity is reinforced by gallery texts and wall labels asserting (with institutional authority) the title, creation date, edition, and medium.

Writing about authenticity in the lives of women of colour, Emily S. Lee has noted that the question of authenticity arises from a 'perceived epistemic incongruity, a lack of correspondence' between an image or idea of a particular cultural identity, and its physical embodiment in lived experience,[52] wherein that idea or image is neither universal ('culture is heterogeneous') nor static ('all culture evolves and changes').[53] In the context of works of art, questions of authenticity can be said to arise from a perceived incongruity or lack of correspondence between a manifestation's formal attributes or features and those singled out as significant, essential, work-defining, or constitutive of the artwork's identity by a viewer or interpreter, that is, their image or idea of what the work is or should be. Some individuals may prioritise the historicity of certain materials or the formal features of either the initial instantiation or some other historical moment. For others, the continuity or evolution of concept or effect may be viewed as more significant than the historicity of original material fabric or appearance.

In this respect any concerns about an entity's authenticity, or debate arising from conservation interventions, signal that some degree of rupture has taken place. Rupture may occur as a result of change in the technological underpinnings of a work – such as the substitution of analogue devices or carriers with digital technologies. Rupture may occur through an artist's re-editing or re-working of content, as seen with O'Kelly's interventions in 1999 and her creation of a new soundtrack. Rupture may also appear through the partial or total refabrication of degraded physical elements, whereby the artifactuality and historicity of

artist-made or artist-modified elements – produced at a particular point in time – are lost. In the case of performance artworks, what might previously have been seen as constitutive of the artwork's identity can be thrown into question by the authorised substitution of the artist-performer with delegated performers. Similar destabilisations of a fixed and singular identity may occur when performance artworks are reconfigured into installations or presented as documents standing both as the work and in 'supplement' to the work.[54] With more 'long-durational' artworks,[55] a singular identity may also be ruptured as a consequence of cleaning, the removal of overpainting or historic restorations, the compensation of historic losses, or relocation to a new setting.

As performatives that potentially shift, expand, or multiply what the work is, a work's manifestations establish precedent that may be cited in future episodes of display or enactment by virtue of the fact that they are sanctioned or approved by the artist. Verbal directives from artists contained in contracts, written correspondence, as well as artists' public or private comments may also function performatively to reinforce an existing perspective on a work's identity, or rupture that perception and effectuate difference at the level of identity. As alternate versions or presentation modes emerge, these new centres or grounds may be in tension with an identity that was established previously. This kind of rupture can occur close to the point of the work's initial instantiation, or much later in its 'trajectory'.[56] Where and when we find debates about authenticity – that is, the degree to which an assemblage or event passes as an instance of the work it is purported to be – so too do we find a perceived incongruity between an artwork's embodiment in a particular manifestation (e.g. 'current state') and an image or idea of what the work is or should be (e.g. 'ideal state'). Although the performatives of an artwork's formal manifestations may reinforce or undo the illusion of its singular or fixed identity, these are not the only means through which perceptions of an artwork's identity may be buttressed or subjected to change. An artwork's identity may also be performatively reified or ruptured as a consequence of an artist's statements, textualised directives, art criticism and art historical discourse, as well as conservation interventions, reports, and documentation.

Documenting identity

It is clear that O'Kelly took great pains to maintain a 'precision of resemblance' in the migration of the work from slide to video in 1999, working with Doyle to perfectly emulate in the video medium the original image masking and timings of the slide dissolves. Her creation of a new soundtrack, however, was a significant shift from what existed before. Whilst *Sanctuary/Wastelands* underwent some dramatic changes early on its history, for the past two decades it has only been installed as a projected video installation with its re-made soundtrack. Indeed, through the performatives of

this consistent repetition its identity in many ways appears to have stabilised, congealed, or crystallised as a video installation with this second soundtrack. That said, the fact that a set of slides and its initial audio soundtrack have been rediscovered leaves open the possibility that the initial configuration may again be presented to audiences, and it is also not outside the realm of possibility that new versions or presentation formats may emerge in the future, given the artist's ongoing interest in the work.

In light of this discussion we can see how an artwork's identity is not established solely by a work's initial instantiation and declarative statements about the work made by the artist at one point in time, nor is it necessarily something that can and should be protected from change. Irrespective of the actions or inactions of a conservator, the features or properties that are regarded as constitutive of a work's identity may vary over time. Material degradation or loss of functionality may prompt partial or total material substitution or refabrication, actions that may be carried out by conservators or artists and their surrogates. Shifts in an artist's thinking around the conceptual focus of a work, or preferences for a higher technical fidelity may also prompt re-edits or updates, interventions into the display of their 'artist's proof' or an editioned version in another collection, and subsequent revisions to display specifications. A work may therefore accrue multiple versions or presentation modes, and may take on divergent identities between collections. An artist's verbalised or textualised directives for a work's display or enactment should therefore not be thought of as an eternal centre or a bedrock foundation that exists outside the materialised work, nor the only benchmark against which to measure the authenticity of a manifestation. Although a particular set of directives may inform conservation decision-making around how the work is (re)materialised, individual judgements of authenticity may be predicated on much more than compliance.

The documentation produced by conservators – e.g. artwork 'biographies'[57] or 'identity reports'[58] – should therefore be recognised and explicitly framed as perspectival representations made by an evaluator at a moment in time. To extend Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe's analogy of thinking of an artwork like a river's catchment area 'complete with its estuaries, its many tributaries, its dramatic rapids, its many meandering turns and, of course, also, its several hidden sources',[59] these reports may be thought of as maps of the catchment area at a particular moment, not the rules by which the river flows. And as with any cartographic representation, such a map of an artwork's 'anatomy'[60] is both schematic and partial, a cartographer's approximation of a landscape that may never be totally known or represented fully, and which is forever in process.[61] Indeed, critical cartographic theory tells us that maps are not objective or neutral, but socially produced documents situated within specific regimes of power, which construct knowledge and exert power.[62] Reframing conservation documentation around artwork identity in this way recognises how judgements of identity are rooted

in individual perception and subjectivity, and how a plurality of valid interpretations of a work's identity may co-exist.

Given the immense power the conservator has in reifying and reinforcing a particular impression of an artwork's identity within the museum sphere, they should not hide behind passive voice constructions in their documentation. Conservation reports should embrace first-person description, eyewitness testimony, and critical reflection rather than defaulting to authoritative, godlike language and tone that presents the conservator's interpretations – however rigorous and equitable – as unequivocal statements of fact about an artwork's identity or phenomenological and ontological perimeters. While the latter may feel more objective, neutral, and 'scientific' it is frequently anything but. Such shifts in approach to documentation – consonant with other recent trends in the field towards autoethnographic and reflective methods[63] – would help to foreground and render visible the conservator's role both in interpreting, mediating, and constructing the knowledge about a work and its perceived identity. Further to this point, greater distinction can be made in conservation reports between objective truths – such as what make and model projector a work has been displayed with historically – and more qualitative, subjective, and value-based judgements of significance, spirit, and feeling made by the evaluator. Such a distinction may extend to the documentation of an artist's *explicit* guidelines – with reference made, for example, to dated communication or interviews with an artist – and *implicit* guidelines the evaluator has interpreted and extrapolated from a variety of sources, including but not limited to their study of a work's previous manifestations or the artist's statements.[64] Additionally, greater attention should be paid to the properties or features of the work identified as significant by other invested parties – including audiences – as well as understanding how significance is derived and tracking how it varies over time and in different contexts.[65]

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that an artwork's singular, enduring essence or identity is not a latent quality but an individual's impression of a work's significances that may be reinforced or fractured at various points in time. Each consecutive installation or enactment of an artwork – often held in many collections at once through editioning – may have the effect of reinforcing or rupturing a previously constructed ground or centre. The illusion of an abiding essence may be perpetuated and affirmed through the citationality and performatives of a work's activation, whereby a single centre or ground is buttressed through acts of repetition; if artworks appear contiguous and unchanging it is because an enforced repetition of conventions around the work's presentation is producing that illusion of stability and stasis, a self-same entity persisting or recurring and reappearing in discrete episodes of materialisation. These artwork-level 'norms' may be maintained or repeated by artists, their surrogates, or caretakers. When and where these norms are deviated from, however, the illusion of an eternal, authoritative, and singular core of an artwork's identity may become disrupted, thereby fracturing consensus around a work's constitutive properties and leading to disputes about authenticity. Episodes of display or enactment are importantly not the only points at which this kind of rupture may take place; this frequently occurs as a consequence of an artist's ongoing, creative interventions, revisions to display specifications, their public or private statements about the work, material alterations, or various changes in the surrounding contextual ecosystem.[66]

In practice, there may not be consensus on the properties regarded as constitutive of or essential to an artwork's identity and its perpetuation. Indeed, their degree of significance may vary over time and among a work's viewership. Artists, their heirs and estates, museum curators, conservators, and audiences may each hold differing opinions about what properties of an artwork are significant or work-defining, and, by extension, what might constitute an authentic instance of a particular work. Conservators may therefore be set up for failure by frameworks that implicitly liken them to compliance officers, when artists frequently revise or change their directives and specifications, enforcing compliance is often infeasible, and compliance itself sometimes becomes a matter of interpretation. This does not mean that conservators should adopt a *laissez faire* approach to a work's ongoing activations or materialisations, or that the historicity of a work's prior formal features or materials should not be valued. Rather, this implies that a manifestation's precision of resemblance to an initial instantiation or compliance with one set of directives from the artist does not necessarily equate with the entity's safeguarding, and that more sophisticated, reflective, and critical inquiry at the level of identity is necessary.

In this light, we can see how modern and contemporary artworks previously characterised in conservation discourse as 'unruly' objects might be thought of as *queer* collection objects, where queering is read, in Butler's parlance, as 'exposure that disrupts and upsets … repressive surfaces'.[67] This queerness is a function of their existence as explicitly dispersed, rhizomatic, evolving, and mitotic processes, in contrast to the seemingly discrete, contained, or repeatable entities that collecting institutions are accustomed to. Although an unintended or ancillary effect of many of these artworks,[68] they queer via their troubling of entrenched, normative conventions and frameworks, such as those outlined in this article around artwork identity and the remit of conservators. In so doing they challenge collection caretakers to imagine and implement alternatives to centralised, colonialist, and one-size-fits-all approaches to display, ownership, and custodianship.

Alongside other pluralistic approaches that recognise a diversity of values and perspectives, the notion of an artwork's identity should be recognised not as an innate, fundamental essence, ground, or core – unearthed, documented, and protected from erosion by diligent conservators – but a perspectival impression of significance

that may differ from person to person and over time. Rather than assuming these impressions to be consensual, eternal, and unrelated to cultural values, norms, and conventions, conservators should place greater emphasis on understanding why and for whom certain properties are considered more or less significant and documenting how that significance may vary or drift over time, in different contexts, and between individuals. Moreover, through transparent exhibition practices that reveal the processual nature and rhizomatic dimensions of an artwork's creation and perpetuation by a changing cast of individuals, we tell not only a more interesting story but also a more truthful one.

Author's note

Like the artworks discussed, this article has itself gone through processes of iteration and mitosis, and exists now in a state of rhizomatic multiplicity. It first grew out of my doctoral thesis research, and various sentences in this text may be found there. A version of this text was delivered at the Institute of Fine Arts' 'Queering Art History' symposium held on 2 March 2019 in New York. It was then developed into this paper, which was used as the basis for an online audio essay programmed in conjunction with the Irish Museum of Modern Art's *IMMA Screen* programme in 2020. Thereafter it underwent subsequent revision prior to its publication in *ArtMatters*.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Domínguez Rubio 2014: 622.
2. Domínguez Rubio 2014: 621.
3. Domínguez Rubio 2014: 623.
4. Artwork 'identity' as the object of conservation is a common feature of the literature, popularised in part through the *Inside Installations* project (2004–2007). Notable discussions include Van Wegen 1999; Laurenson 2004 and 2006; Jones and Muller 2008; Fiske 2009; Van Saaze 2009b and 2013; Brokerhof et al. 2011; Van de Vall et al. 2011; Jadzińska 2011 and 2012; Phillips 2012 and 2015; Hölling 2017. References to an artwork's 'essence' are also common, e.g. Guldemond 1999: 81; Stringari 1999; Mancusi-Ungaro 1999: 392; Coddington 1999: 24; Bek 2011: 207; Rinehart and Ippolito 2014: 178.
5. Butler [1990] 2007: xv.
6. Butler [1993] 2011: 58.
7. In built heritage and landscape preservation the term 'character-defining features' has been used (Jester and Park 1993;

Birnbaum 1994; Birnbaum and Peters 1996), while the Nara Document on Authenticity refers to 'original and subsequent characteristics' (Larsen 1995: xxii). For digital objects and records in library and archives preservation, the terms 'significant properties' (Holdsworth and Sergeant 2000; Hedstrom and Lee 2002) and 'essential properties' or 'essence' (Heslop et al. 2002) are common. In modern and contemporary art conservation, the terms 'medium-independent behaviours' (Ippolito 2003) and 'work-defining properties' (Laurenson 2006 after Davies 2001: 27) have been used. See also Nelson Goodman's notion of a work's 'constitutive properties' (Goodman 1968: 116), Umberto Eco's discussion of a type's 'pertinent properties' (Eco 1976: 245), and Joseph Margolis' discussion of artwork "identity" (Margolis 1959), which utilises a type-token ontology.
8. For discussions of the 'score' in the context of installation and time-based media artworks see Viola 1999; Van Wegen 1999; Rinehart 2004; Laurenson 2004; MacDonald 2009; Noël de Tilly 2011; Phillips 2015; Van de Vall 2015; Hölling 2017.
9. Laurenson and Van Saaze 2014: 34.
10. Fiske 2009: 233.
11. Fiske borrows the term 'domestication' from translation theory to describe the impulse of traditional acquisition processes to 'assimilate the work into museum culture and languages of perpetuity' (Fiske 2004: 138).
12. Hölling 2016: 18.
13. Hölling 2017: 32.
14. Noël de Tilly 2011.
15. Phillips 2015.
16. Lawson et al. 2019.
17. Irvin 2005.
18. The notion of 'score compliance' with respect to the authenticity of contemporary artworks is discussed explicitly by Van de Vall 2015, although the term originates in Goodman's *Languages of Art* (Goodman 1968: 117, 186–187) and is not common parlance in conservation literature.
19. Gordon 2011, 2014.
20. Fiske 2009: 234.
21. Dodd [2012] 2015.
22. Van Saaze 2009a.
23. Van de Vall et al. (2011: 4) argue that a work's 'biography' does not always begin 'at a single moment in time (leaving the studio) and that the moment of entering a collection does not always mark the last of its biographical phases'; Laurenson and Van Saaze (2014: 38) have noted that there are some contemporary artworks that may be 'designed to evolve over time'.
24. MacNeil and Mak (2007: 29) have commented that 'Authenticity is … not an object that can be held, or a condition that can be achieved; the authentic "me" does not exist as a static state of being, but is in a constant process of becoming'.
25. Laurenson 2004: 51.
26. Phillips 2012: 140.
27. Derrida [1967] 2001; Castriota 2019: 109–31.
28. Van de Vall et al. 2011: 3. See also Caitlin Spangler-Bickell's discussion of dividual personhood, in this issue.
29. Laurenson 2016; Knorr Cetina 2001.
30. Goodman 1984: 143–5.
31. Doyle recounted this experience to me in December 2020: 'It took about a full week, at least 40 hours, from the Monday to the Friday. All the time Alanna was there with me. Normally I would have done that kind of animation work on my own and say "how's this" at the end, but Alanna was there the whole time … It was a very intense experience because it was very, very personal work. She wanted to get it right and exactly as it

had been. She wanted every transition to be exactly as it was before … We had high res scans of the slides, what I had to do was reproduce the masking as I best could, the feathering, that was one of the most difficult things, second only to the timing of each transition … We used [Adobe] After Effects essentially to reproduce the transitions that had previously existed. We used a video recording of the slide installation as a guide, there was no room for being "there" or "thereabouts" it had to be exactly the same as it was.'

32. O'Kelly 2020.
33. Hölling 2016: 16. See also Castriota 2021.
34. Williams 2013: 11–12.
35. Williams 2013: 85.
36. Williams 2013: 144.
37. Butler [1990] 2007: 34.
38. Austin 1962.
39. Butler [1990] 2007: 191.
40. Butler [1990] 2007: 32–3.
41. Butler [1990] 2007: 33.
42. Butler [1999] 2007: xv.
43. See the quote by Martin Kemp (1990) critiquing this analogy, cited by Rebecca Gordon in her contribution to this issue.
44. Butler [1993] 2011: 70.
45. Ross 2006; Innocenti 2013. Innocenti comments that the 'notion of "precision of resemblance" is intended to reflect the fact the initial instantiations of digital objects and subsequent ones will not be precisely the same, but will have a degree of sameness. This degree of sameness will vary over time – in fact in the case of digital objects it is likely to decline as the distance between the initial instantiation and each subsequent one becomes greater … Thus each time a digital work of art is instantiated, it has a greater or lesser precision of resemblance to the initial instantiation, which the artist created' (Innocenti 2013: 225–6).
46. Butler [1990] 2007: 192.
47. Butler [1990] 2007: 33.
48. Jones 2010.
49. Van Saaze 2009b.
50. Consultative Committee for Space Data Systems 2012: 19.
51. The notion of passing invoked here refers to the instances in which an individual may pass as a particular gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity that may or may not align with their identity (see Ginsberg [1996] 2009; Sánchez and Schlossberg 2001). For further discussion of authenticity framed within a type-token ontology see Castriota 2019, 2021.
52. Lee 2011: 259.
53. Lee 2011: 261. Writing on the subject of cultural identity, Stuart Hall has remarked in a similar fashion that identity is 'a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being" (1990: 225). Hall writes that cultural identity 'is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation' (ibid.).
54. Jones 1997; Derrida [1967] 2001. An example of this occurs in MoMA's 'translation' of VALIE EXPORT's performance *Abstract Film No. 1* (1967–1968) to a 'fixed installation' (Wharton 2016: 29). Another example is Carolee Schneemann's performance artwork *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1974–1976), which was recently reconfigured into a video-sculptural installation (Foerschner and Rivenc 2018).
55. Hölling 2016: 19.
56. Van de Vall et al. 2011.
57. Van de Vall et al. 2011.
58. Phillips 2015.

59. Latour and Lowe 2010: 4.
60. Brokerhof et al. 2011; Jadzińska 2011, 2012: 94; Phillips 2012: 152.
61. For a concise historiography of this discourse see Crampton and Krygier 2010.
62. Harley 1988, 1989; Wood 1992.
63. Stigter 2016; Marçal and Macedo 2017.
64. This distinction between explicit and implicit guidelines is based on Sherri Irvin's (2005) distinction between explicit and implicit sanctions.
65. Rinehart and Ippolito (2014: 178) have advocated for a 'crowdsourcing' approach to identifying an artwork's 'essence': '…the Variable Media Questionnaire now encourages input on an artwork's essence not just from the creators and curators close to a project, but from those with no more claim to authority than the average gallery-goer. Sometimes this might lead to revelations that are often left out of history books'. See also the contribution by Marta García Celma, in this issue.
66. For a discussion of how changes in the surrounding contextual ecosystem can redound onto our individual impressions of an artwork's identity and authenticity, see Castriota 2021.
67. Butler [1993] 2011, 130–31.
68. In this context, artworks designed with a more overt intention to disrupt museum conventions (e.g. Tino Seghal's performance artworks that prohibit audiovisual documentation) might be characterised as *punk* rather than *queer*.

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Biography

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