Alison Richmond, Alison Bracker, *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*

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REFERENCES

*Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker, editors

EDITOR’S NOTE

Nous avons reçu l’ouvrage début octobre et le compte-rendu en français n’a malheureusement pu être réalisé dans des délais aussi restreints –le nombre et la diversité des contributions nécessite une approche détaillée. Nous proposons en anglais, le texte d’Iris Kapelouzou qui a assisté par ailleurs au colloque, dont elle fournit également un bref compte-rendu.
Over the past few years, through a number of conferences, workshops, but fewer publications, conservators have attempted to challenge the concepts and principles that seemingly render common conservation practices unethical, and to revisit the foundations of their profession. Crucial to this process has been the growing practical and intellectual interactions of conservation with other associated fields, such as art history, curating, built heritage management, museum studies, sociology. These interactions often provide the stimulus but also the necessary theoretical frames for such reflections and revaluations. Attempts to date to critically examine the conservation profession from within have been sporadic and restricted to only certain conservation specialisms.

**Book review**

Following from this recognition, *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, edited by Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker, provides a compilation of subversive current writings on conservation theory and ethics. The thought-provoking journey through the book’s twenty-one chapters questions the basis, central aims, status and specific practices of conservation. It stresses the need to clarify them, in order to define and justify the place of conservation in today’s ever evolving society. Failure, fashion, value, subjectivity, management, intangibility, social and cultural dynamics, the nature of objects and their relationship with people and language are but a few of the book’s recurrent themes.

*Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths* successfully highlights the inter- and cross-disciplinary character of conservation theory and practice. The editors’ goal was to enliven the discourse by bringing together into a single volume the writings of people from as many backgrounds and cultures as possible. Authors include conservators, art historians, sociologists, archaeologists and others, representing conservation specialisms ranging from traditional to contemporary art, to archaeological objects, to human remains and to living cultures. The texts focus on conservation advancements in less familiar geographical areas and they introduce a wealth of also less well-known bibliography.

The first seven chapters invoke challenges to existing notions within and beliefs about conservation ethics at a more general level. Paralleling conservation objects to “auto-icons” and the practice of restoration to that of text translation, Jonathan Rée suggests that the symbolic significance of objects may be retained through material reproduction. Jonathan Ashley-Smith argues that there is no single historic basis for conservation ethics and that ethical concerns within conservation can never completely converge. He offers
evidence of the practical basis of conservation ethics through an account of his personal experiences as a conservator, and suggests an evolutionary account of how principles spread within conservation based on the meme metaphor. Chris Caple shows how the aims of conservation, i.e. to “maintain and enhance” the value of objects, may vary between objects and across time, or even become irreconcilable with each other. Though his arguments are largely based on what seems to be a limited conception of the conservation object, he rightly highlights the need to re-examine conservation aims in order to accommodate differing traditions. Shifting the debate to built heritage, Nicholas Stanley-Price focuses on the discrepancies between existing principles and the actual practice of reconstruction. Premising that reconstruction is a creative act resulting in new buildings, and that justification for reconstruction as a conservation practice is ultimately derived from the public interpretation of the value of the reconstruction, he proposes his own set of principles. Challenging the limits of objectivity in conservation decision-making, Salvador Muñoz-Viñas argues that the notion of minimal intervention is an oxymoron. He suggests that the changes brought about to an object are ethically relevant only insofar as they affect its meaning, and proposes the notion of equilibrium between gains and losses of meaning as a better alternative for a guiding principle.

Jonathan Kemp examines the relationship between authenticity and conservation ethics. He adopts current theoretical trends of viewing the object as an actor within a social network, and he proposes that more emphasis be placed on technology for documentation, since “technology defines practice that in turns creates theory”. Providing a history of the development of conservation principles through the tracing of international documents and the creation of international organizations, Jukka Jokilehto advocates a dynamic conception of heritage conservation and stresses the role of critical judgment in the practice.

Chapters eight to eleven discuss the emergence and evolution of principles in specific areas of conservation, mainly through the analysis of case studies. The concept of authenticity, its different perceptions and interpretations, through the history of wall paintings’ restoration in Denmark is Isabelle Brajer’s central topic. Cathleen Hoeniger continues with a very detailed account of the emergence and gradual establishment of conservation ethics in 19th century France and Italy in relation to contemporaneous conceptions of the work of art and of the original. In the following chapter, in a sense a complete case study in its own right, Zuzana Bauerová brings to light structuralist influences underlying the development of Czech and Slovak conservation theory and practice, which preceded similar trends in other areas of Europe. Helen Clifford offers thoughts on the cultural specificity of the values and meanings attributed to things.

Chapters twelve to seventeen present accounts of conservation as a cultural construct and a social process. Elizabeth Pye traces the evolution of archeological conservation from a solely scientifically based practice to a social one, involving a wide range of stakeholders. Miriam Clavir defines cultural significance as a social construct. She emphasizes the subjective aspects of ascribing meaning to objects and of conservation decisions, and she suggests that the practice of conservation itself changes meaning. Also defining conservation as a dynamic social process, Dinah Eastop explores the dialectic relationship between conservation principles and practice. Employing a material-culture approach, she analyses three case studies in order to expose the linguistic metaphors that underlie the meanings of the notion of principle. Simon Cane adopts a systemic approach in an attempt to illustrate the position and define the function of conservation within the
broader systems of museums and culture. It is a plausible attempt to map the changes in value to objects brought about by conservation interventions. The ways in which postmodern theories and dichotomies between the local and the global, and between the particular and the universal, have influenced the development of value-led conservation planning is the main topic of Erica Avrami’s chapter. She suggests that the very process of conserving may generate social benefits, and she stresses the need for broad public participation in decision-making. Following is Catherine Smith and Marcelle Scott’s comparison of the AICCM and NZCCM Codes of Ethics, focusing on the amendments that recognize the special rights of indigenous peoples. They present differences in the actual application of these amendments between Australia and New Zealand, and they discuss the results of a survey concerning the strengths, weaknesses, use and role of the particular codes of ethics. Marian Kaminitz et al highlight the intangible aspects of objects at the National Museum of the American Indian. The particular mission of the museum, to sustain contemporary cultures, demands collaboration and joint decision-making between conservators and Native communities. The chapter also includes the description of such a process.

The last three chapters of the book focus on the challenges brought about to traditional conservation values and principles by more contemporary art forms. Glenn Wharton and Harvey Molotch expand on characteristics of installation art, such as ephemerality, contingency, lack of clear boundaries, and physical transformation, in order to exhibit the change in the role of the conservator necessitated by such artworks. The particular difficulties contemporary art museums face when dealing with installation art, and of the new responsibilities conservators take on are accounted by Jill Sterrett. She suggests that the only way to cope with them is to keep decisions open-ended. Last but not least, Tina Fiske offers a Derridean analysis of the relationship between different possible manifestations of Andy Goldsworthy’s *White Walls* (2007) and the work’s identity. She compares conservation to foreign-text translation, proposing similarities in the ethical concern to “minimize erosion of identity between the instances of a work”.

In spite of some content overlapping in the historical reviews of the emergence of conservation principles, and the lack of any groundbreaking solution or conclusion, there appears to be a clear, overarching premise emerging from all the chapters of the book, to “embrace diversity”. This premise is the focus, aim, and value of *Conservation Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*. The book embraces a diversity of voices, from a diversity of backgrounds, writing on a diversity of areas within conservation, yet they all exhibit similarity in concerns and convergence in conclusions. There is agreement on the need for a reframing of conservation ethics based on principles that accommodate the uncomfortable truths of the profession and which at the very least prevent dilemma situations arising from their own inconsistencies.

**Conference review**

On the occasion of Alison Richmond’s and Alison Bracker’s recent publication *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, the two editors organized an homonymous conference to expand and compliment the content of the book. Indeed, one might say, that if the book concentrated more on discussing conservation principles and dilemmas, the conference mainly exposed the uncomfortable truths of the profession.
The conference was conceived as a public event, and took place at the Geological Society in Burlington House, at the heart of multi-cultural London. In a way, the choice of venue reflected the central aims and accomplishments of the conference, i.e. to provide its audience and speakers with the opportunity to connect with conservation theories and practices in cultures outside of the Anglo-Saxon tradition; to spur further discussion on the themes of the book; and to encourage interactions between conservators, built heritage professionals, urban planners and other heritage-related fields.

The relatively informal nature of organizational aspects of the event acted positively, in creating a relaxed atmosphere for engaging with many of the book’s authors, conference presenters, and others who attended. The conference was directed towards the general public, hoping to communicate conservation theories and concerns to a wider audience than that of the book, and perhaps receive useful feedback from non-specialists. In light of this, conference presenters refrained from proceeding into depth in their analyses of their themes. But even though presentations occasionally lacked thoroughly convincing arguments that would satisfy conservators, they gained in simplicity and clarity of message.

With a vibrant sense of humor and an evident desire to self-criticize and demythologize conservation, over the two days of the conference the twenty speakers addressed a wide range of topics. The talks were divided into four sessions, two on each day, inviting the audience to participate in the panel discussions at the end of each session.

On the first day, Jonathan Ashley-Smith set off the first session by demonstrating the “adolescence” of a conservation profession still suffering from numerous internal intellectual conflicts, which sometimes blur the distinction between conservators and “nutters”. Sarah Maisey’s presented a notable analysis of human errors within a profession, suggesting to conservators alternatives to hiding their mistakes. Further attempts at the session to deny objectivity in decision-making and to convince that conservation is an act of fashion or taste nearly collapsed into complete relativism; yet the speakers managed to make their point. Dinah Eastop and others presenting during the second session expanded on different theories influencing and challenging conservation principles. They illustrated how principles are context and culturally bound rather than universal, and overturned the up-to-date presumed passivity and objectivity of visual perception as a guide to conservation treatments. Brandian theory was discussed in light of its possible application to contemporary art conservation, while Ari Tahanpää stressed the fact that conservation is an act of critical interpretation and that object identity is relative to the concept under which we classify it each time.

If the first day of the conference was more introspective, i.e. focusing more on deficiencies and theoretical lags within the conservation profession, the second day really broadened the scope of discussion by introducing issues involving social values, living cultures and continuing use and function of surviving heritage objects and sites. During the first session of the day, Sanchita Balachandran questioned what constitutes respectful conservation practice when treating human remains, suggesting that ethical and moral obligations towards the dead ought also to be taken into consideration when making conservation decisions. Sudha Srestha’s talk, delivered by Alison Brown, argued that it is essential to preserve the socio-cultural landscape in order to preserve the urban form and character of places like in the Kathmandu Valley. The speakers who followed further emphasized the role of intangible factors like social memory in the preservation and restoration of historic cities, buildings, and even paintings. The second session of the day,
concentrated on built heritage and sites, offering examples of cases in India, Taiwan, Scotland and Cairo. Traditions of destruction, proximity to public daily life, and ascription of a variety of contested values to heritage were presented as the most problematic issues conservators have to confront and compromise. Hsien-yang Tseng argued that demolition might in fact be the best way to treat a site, depending on the values attributed to it, and Ehab Kamel emphasized that it is the intangible values, meanings, memories and feelings that keep the tangible aspects of heritage “alive”.

The day was brought to an end with the launch of *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, bringing together in a symbolic way the people and concerns expressed in the book and during the conference. The formality of a hardcover was overcome by the symposium, which exhibited how different fields share similar concerns, provided a live platform to exchange ideas, and spurred desires for further research, communication and dialogue.

In line with the aim to offer the content of the conference to a wider audience, the event will be available for downloading from the Royal Academy of Art’s website [http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/).

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**Mots-clés:** restauration, éthique, théorie, déontologie, valeur, choix

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