



Art Conservation and its Curriculum as Relational Mystery

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Abstract:

Art conservation practices tend to adhere to Eurocentric reductionism and rationalism that have dominated Western sciences and education, negating subjectivity and experience as knowledge sources. Aoki called for mysterious and generative middles between planned and live(d) curriculum to be *indwelled* through meditation, expanding curriculum to include individual *lifeworlds* and relations. This study mobilizes Foucauldian death meditation to destabilize and further expand curriculum by indwelling on death in life from the mysterious middles between human art conservators and more-than-human art objects. Bringing together neo-materialist and Indigenous perspectives, we reconfigure current limits of art conservation to consider agency, *intra-action* and permeability of human and non-human *lifedeath*. In the care of artwork by conceptual artists Komar and Melamid—intentionally created to disintegrate—meditations of attending and mourning reach toward more *response-able* forms of art conservation practice and curriculum. We propose an art conservation curriculum of *relational mystery* using *death meditation* entangled with conundrums of art mourning to deepen students' enchantment with unfathomable aspects of lifedeath, thereby invigorating teaching and conserving with mystery.

Keywords: mystery; neo-materialism; curriculum; death meditation; art conservation; relational worldview

La conservation de l'art et son programme comme mystère relationnel

Résumé :

Les pratiques de conservation de l'art tendent à adhérer au réductionnisme et au rationalisme eurocentristes qui ont dominé les sciences et l'éducation occidentales, niant la subjectivité et l'expérience comme sources de connaissances. Aoki a suggéré qu'il existe, entre le programme d'étude planifié et le programme d'étude vécu, des milieux mystérieux et générateurs dans lesquels on pourrait entrer par la méditation, et qui pourraient élargir le programme d'étude pour inclure les mondes de vie individuels et les relations. Cette étude mobilise la méditation foucauldienne sur la mort pour déstabiliser et élargir davantage le programme d'étude en s'imprégnant de la mort dans la vie depuis ces espaces intermédiaires mystérieux entre les conservateurs d'art humains et les objets d'art plus-qu'humains. En réunissant les perspectives néo-matérialistes et autochtones, nous reconfigurons les limites actuelles de la conservation de l'art pour tenir compte de l'agentivité, de l'intra-action et de la perméabilité de la vie et de la mort humaine et non humaine. Dans nos soins des œuvres des artistes conceptuels Komar et Melamid, intentionnellement créées pour se désintégrer, nos méditations d'attention et de deuil tendent vers des formes plus responsables de pratiques et de programmes d'études de conservation de l'art. Nous proposons un programme de conservation de l'art basé sur le *mystère relationnel* en utilisant la méditation sur la mort mêlée aux énigmes du deuil artistique pour approfondir l'enchantement des personnes étudiantes envers les aspects insondables de la vie et de la mort, revigorant ainsi l'enseignement et la conservation avec mystère.

Mots clés : mystère; néo-matérialisme; programme d'études; méditation de la mort; conservation d'œuvres d'art; vision du monde relationnelle

Realms of mystery involve dwelling with the unknowable, holding in tension the known as it is unravelled by the enigmatic, without readily giving in to closure or control. This essay explores mystery in the knowledges associated with art conservation—a practice focused on the human care of art objects. By employing Foucauldian (1982a, 2013) death meditation to *indwell*¹ between life and death, we rethink art conservation education with the enigmas offered by art objects. Along the way, literature embracing the ontological turn, including new and neo-materialisms and posthumanism, is entangled with aspects of Indigenous’ relational worldviews to reconsider the dominance of Eurocentric epistemic reductionism and rationalism over art conservation and its curriculum.

To further situate our comments, the authors’ backgrounds are relevant. Nadine M. Kalin is a White, cisgender female descended from members of settler colonial heritage communities, and she lived mainly in Vancouver, British Columbia, until moving to Texas almost 20 years ago. As a professor of art education, she has engaged with Scott for the last decade regarding his art conservation practice. Scott Joseph Peck is a White, cisgender male, descended from members of settler colonial heritage communities. Chicago-born and raised, he has lived between homes in Texas and Florida for the past 30 years. As a museum art conservator and curator, he has cared for, conserved and restored thousands of museum objects in a myriad of collections.

To orient our curricular propositions provoked by the relational mysteries of art conservation, we begin this essay by drawing out the conventional boundaries of the field of art conservation and its curricular tendencies. We then move to theoretical considerations of new and neo-materialism, posthumanism and Indigenous worldviews that open art conservation and its curriculum up to alternative perspectives embracing mystery. These are then explored through death mediation practices shared in narrative passages throughout the essay. Based on these explorations, we close out the essay with recommendations for rethinking art conservation curriculum as *relational mystery*.

Art Conservation Defined

Active responses to protect the existence of art objects considered cultural heritage is a widely held definition of art conservation (Powell, 2016; Szczepanowska, 2013). Based on intersecting disciplinary knowledge pulled from art, art history, biology and chemistry, aspects of conservation include object examination, documentation, consultation with cultural experts and diagnosis. Conservation practices, proceeding in a unidirectional action from human to art object, function to prevent and reverse the art object’s deterioration, destruction or death by assessing agents of deterioration and prior treatments, by stabilizing materials, removing decay and biological growth, as well as by undertaking surface cleaning, maintenance, preventative conservation and restoration. Art conservators determine, confer and extend the authenticity of what is real, related to an art object’s

¹ Indwell, a term appearing throughout this essay, based on the writings of Ted Aoki, refers to inhabiting, residing or being located inside something, such as third spaces between dichotomies where tensionality exists. To be implanted here means to contemplate and animate tensionality in the middle.

materials, meaning and classification (France-Lanord, 1996; Hermens & Fiske, 2009). Moreover, art conservators are integral to the being or existence of the art object; what it might mean for an art object's life to be reborn, sustained or deceased relies on the expertise of the conservator (Boullart, 2009; Muños-Viñas, 2004; Narkiss, 2009).

Art conservation standards are culturally and historically constructed based on conventional and scientific ways of explaining phenomena. While from a Western perspective, art conservation preserves artworks for their protection, celebration, sharing and categorisation, these values also enforce the colonizing West's epistemic power. Art conservation has long served colonial and imperialist interests in prolonging the value of art objects acquired through capital accumulation strategies such as discovery, conquest, extraction, violence, racial exploitation, appropriation and robbery. The Western art world's colonial displacement of cultural assets from original Lands² has called on art conservators to sustain the lives of objects severed from, for example, Indigenous place-based knowledge systems (Deloria, 1999; Marker, 2019; Ng-A-Fook, 2009), thereby risking the supremacy of knowledge systems based in Western intellectual and cultural heritage.

Art Conservation Curriculum

A typical art conservation curriculum falls into what Aoki (1993) would describe as discipline-based, adhering to a techno-scientific "curriculum-as-planned" perspective that translates the surrounding world into objective meanings that minimize mystery and uncertainty. In response to the dominance of curriculum-as-planned in education, Aoki (1993) has called for "humanly embodied narratives to dwell contrapuntally with metanarratives" (p. 263) so that the objective can exist with the subjective in curriculum. According to Scott's experience, metanarratives based on art conservation disciplinary norms are separated from narratives grounded in specificities of experience in art conservation—the latter, viewed as subjective and falling outside of the rational limits of usefulness in the practices of art conservation and therefore omitted from its curriculum. Instead of retaining oppositions, Aoki (1986/2005) brings the objective and subjective into proximity with one another so that a middle, *third space* might be prompted where planned and lived curricula, personal stories and metanarratives, might cross and provoke alternatives (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 422). Furthermore, Aoki (2003/2005) invites educators to indwell such third spaces, where seemingly contradictory curricula and social forms commingle in lines of movement with their own zigzag tails, thereby enabling a multiplicity of options from mysterious middles (Aoki, 1993).

Mystery in art conservation curriculum humbles the disciplinary certainties of saving art objects from death, which deny curiosity regarding the furtive ambiguities between human/object and life/death relationships. Despite all existing knowledge, assessments and consultations, art conservation restores an art object to an unknowable—practitioners do not know all the circumstances of an art object's creation, its original form or changes across its life. Alternatively, art conservation might be viewed as an experiment with what is known and mysterious through time

² Throughout this essay, Land is capitalized to recognize Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and ongoing relationship with their ancestral territories as living entities sacred to their spiritual beliefs.

and matter, life and death. There are innumerable mysterious middles between artworks and their conservators.

Research Perspectives

Undergirding traditional Western art conservation is a Eurocentric conviction based on Enlightenment ideals that only human beings can be rational, thereby forwarding an anthropocentrism that has propelled settler colonialism and racist dehumanization (Pratt & Rosiek, 2023). Posthuman materialism, inclusive of new materialism (e.g., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Haraway, 2016), unravels rational humanist ontology that maintains a hierarchical separation of superior, bounded and objective humans over more-than-humans, including animals, objects, plants and matter. Posthuman materialism forwards that both human and non-human others are composed of inter-related matter that is “vital, intelligent, and self-organising” (Braidotti, 2022b, p. 1). The posthuman condition affirms that all matter (human and more-than-human) is vibrant (Bennett, 2010a, 2010b) and capable of exerting agency (Barad, 2007). *Agential realism*³ describes all existence as comprised of beings with mutable agency, rendering “both the boundaries of the object of inquiry and the subjectivity of the inquirer contingent to that activity” (Rosiek et al., 2020, p. 1157), thereby enacting “new subject-object or agent-agent relations” (Pratt & Rosiek, 2023, p. 11). Posthumanist scholarship documents co-construct *intra-actions*⁴ between agents. This vibrant agent intra-action lies primarily outside human comprehension associated with existing disciplinary, discursive and material boundaries, therefore requiring transformations of our human activities, habits and frames of reference (Braidotti & Fuller, 2019, p. 23). When encountering such bewilderment, Cohen (2018) recommends nurturing “an ethics of wonder and cautious regard” (p. 305) so that mystery, instead of signalling withdrawal, moves us to indwell such inconceivability.

In this essay, we suggest humans proceed from the axiom of relational mystery, anticipating that inconceivability is always and already occurring in our being and becoming with the world. While Western societies have long held mystery at bay through humanist reason and control, relational mystery eludes closure and human mastery over knowledge and non-humans alike. Porous, contingent and *affective*,⁵ relational mystery is a third space of multiplicity amongst entities.

Correspondingly, Sidebottom (2021) maintains the posthuman turn recognizes that “other-than-human agents are always present in processes of learning” (p. i) as humans and non-humans intra-act. Posthumanism embraces the interdependence between humans and non-humans in knowledge production, thereby challenging humanist curricula and pedagogical approaches (e.g.,

3 Agent ontologies stem from new feminist materialism (e.g., van der Tuin, 2011), new materialist philosophy of science (e.g., Barad, 2007) and new forms of vitalism (e.g., Bennett, 2010b).

4 Barad’s (2007) intra-action “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” where “agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements” (p. 33).

5 Affective and affect are used throughout this essay to encompass the interplay and influence of energies and emotions between entities both human and more-than-human associated with the frameworks of new materialism (e.g., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). This usage extends the typical meaning of these terms beyond conventional, human-centered emotional states.

jagodzinski, 2018; Jickling et al., 2018; Paulsen et al., 2022). To think with relational mystery is to indwell the tension of the known and the unknown. Such learning and knowing are partial, fluid and speculative in sustaining the undoing of humanist certainty through befriending unfathomability.

Hence, a posthumanist approach to art conservation does not offer a totalizing, authoritarian truth guide or definite ontology. It includes variable entanglements of humans and more-than-humans generating speculative possibilities based on their dynamic situatedness. Every art-conserving treatment is documented alongside uncertainties and guesses about how humans and art objects are changing together in ongoing becomings. Posthuman art conservation integrates inquiry into the practices of prolonging artworks' lives, through self-questioning habitual thought processes and epistemic biases associated with Western modernist hegemonies. Posthuman art conservation prioritizes ontological pluralism, including implications of relational worldviews.

The recent second phase of new materialism (Skiveren, 2021), referred to as neo-materialism (Taylor, 2023), calls for a reckoning in response to Western-centric biases that ignore intersections with decoloniality and Indigenous cultures. Neo-materialism enlarges earlier versions to incorporate the complex relationality of earthly life and matter across the nonhuman, human and dehumanized (Braidotti, 2022b), so that material agency and vitality may expose humanist injustices and exploitations, such as racial discrimination and colonialism (Hinton et al., n.d.). To curtail further Indigenous displacement, Rosiek et al. (2020) urge scholars to engage with Indigenous studies literature on non-human agency that establishes and renews Indigenous traditions, beliefs and philosophies (e.g., Bunge, 1984; Cajete, 2010).⁶

As White settler authors, we offer a humble recognition that our proposals for posthuman curriculum re-turn us to earlier and ongoing traditions based on non-Western Indigenous ontologies. As we venture into neo-materialist reckoning, we aim to undermine the perpetual erasure of Indigenous people and their scholarship. Throughout this essay, we highlight aspects of Indigenous knowledge and cultures pertinent to art conservation curriculum as relational mystery.⁷

Art conservation's historical dependence on museums and collections implicates the field with racist and colonialist practices of preserving stolen objects during the building and maintenance of empires. Collecting objects from traditional cultures enhances individual and institutional wealth and power. Within Indigenous ontologies, removing objects from their communities severs abilities that are otherwise possible between living beings—humans, objects, spirits and Land (Deloria, 1999, p. 133). This is the business of the art world and its collecting institutions, categorizing the White settler human above and superior to all other beings.

⁶ Hallowell (2010) described Anishinaabe social relations as inclusive of humans and more-than-human persons.

⁷ As Pratt and Rosiek (2023) disclose, we, too, anticipate that integrating Indigenous studies scholarship risks tokenism and cultural appropriation, while ignoring and excluding such literature risks this essay furthering racist and colonialist erasure of pertinent scholarship on nonhuman agency. As the latter of these risks holds more significance for us, we embrace inclusive citational practices. Moreover, in this essay, we draw from Indigenous studies for their valuable concepts of relationality, not subsuming them into or equating them with (or co-opting them for) posthumanisms or new/neo-materialisms.

First-wave new materialist and posthumanist theories, on which this essay relies heavily, have not sufficiently acknowledged the disregard of longstanding spiritual traditions and Indigenous knowledges in favour of the “colonial logic of the new—the colonial obsession with discovery and short memory for the origin of ideas” (Downey, 2022b, p. 29), and with it, the minimizing and replacing of intellectual contributions of marginalized thinkers for the work of White settler scholars (Todd, 2016; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Notably, in erroneously assuming a universal split between nature and culture, posthumanism and the ontological turn have been critiqued for erasing non-European, relational ontologies (Pratt & Rosiek, 2023; Rosiek et al., 2020; Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2015, 2016),⁸ something neo-materialism attempts to remedy (Rosiek et al., 2020).

Worldviews of relationality have been sustained by Indigenous traditions and scholars for centuries (Bignall & Rigney, 2019; Deloria, 1999, 2001; Youngblood Henderson, 2016). As Davies (2022) points out, “holistic knowledge based on the relationships of land, ecosystems and human communities is already held in different forms by multiple Indigenous peoples across the globe” (p. 39).⁹ This relational belief includes all components of the universe, including plants, animals and Land, which are viewed as living entities with personalities, abilities, spirits and choices (Deloria, 1999).¹⁰ Western beliefs that assume only human rationality can illuminate the nature of existence are at odds with this interrelatedness and unity in the universe.¹¹ Unlike Western rationality, in most tribal traditions, gathering information comprehensively includes knowledge from dreams, visions, animals, landforms and plants.¹² For instance, in articulating Sioux epistemology, Bunge (1984)

8 Noting the links between Indigenous thought and posthumanism, Braidotti et al. (2022) ruefully declare that “many Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, many strands of postcolonial and decolonial thought and multiple philosophies of the Global South refuse the separation of nature from culture that is foundational to Western science. Many of these bodies of knowledge and cosmological visions have long stressed the agency of non-human forces and the crucial importance of Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet. They have been speaking loud and clear, we have not been listening” (p. 5).

9 Relationality is a pervasive paradigm echoed across many Indigenous cultures. That is best understood in distinct and culturally influenced ways. For example, the Lakota phrase *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which translates into English as “we are all related”, depicts the deep belief that we are interconnected with all of nature (Cajete, 1994, 2005). Atleo (2004, 2011), in describing Nuuchah-nulth origin stories which form the basis of their worldview, highlights the core belief of tsawalk, translated to “everything is one”, inclusive of “all reality, including water, land, plants, animals, humans, and, indeed, anything that seems to be alive” (p. 4).

10 In Sioux epistemology, land and rocks are forms of breathing life and spirit that may talk or move like people (Bunge, 1984, p. 231). Further, traditional Lakota believed that “the spiritual world and visible world are one reality. They interpenetrate to such a degree that the line between them is but vaguely drawn, if at all” (Bunge, 1984, p. 225). According to Jones and Hoskins (2016), “Indigenous (Maori) ontologies always already assume a profound sameness, and therefore sense of recognition, between the abilities and sensibilities of objects and those of humans” (p. 85).

11 This interrelationship across all life forms, including the material and non-material, invisible and visible, is a holistic concept of quantum physics.

12 Western science has a long history of deception in conveying scientific data based on subjective experience. As Deloria (1999) articulates, “at the deepest level of thought in Western science, the greatest thinkers rely heavily on intuition, dreams, and visions. But this phenomenon is regarded as evidence of the individual genius of the scientist and not as data derived from external sources or drawn from a reservoir of subjective information available to all individuals” (p. 67).

imparts that the Lakota count anything that can be perceived as knowledge, including what Western cultures would characterize as feeling and emotion (p. 230).¹³

Mystery itself can be reconsidered as knowing, powerful, creative and loving. According to Deloria (1999), traditional peoples “maintain a sense of mystery through their bond with nature” (p. 360), accepting and honouring secrets from creation while willingly admitting without fear when something remains mysterious (p. 148). A commonly shared foundation occurring in most Native American languages is *The Great Mystery* (Cajete, 2005, p. 73). The Anishinaabe¹⁴ term *Gichi-manidoo*, or *The Mystery*, refers to “the generative, abundant force that creates, animates, and lovingly expresses itself through everything in the cosmos” (Garrouette & Westcott, 2013, p. 68), flowing through all at every moment. Sweat lodges are sacred commitments to *Gichi-manidoo* where tribal elders gather to create openings for *Gichi-manidoo* to flow.

Learning in Indigenous communities is holistic, relational and experiential, steeped in traditional ceremonies and daily observations (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2021; Cajete, 2010), while revering mystery. In describing Indigenous education, Cajete (2010) highlights the importance of the intuitive, sensuous and interpretive through “direct subjective experience, combined with affective reflection” (p. 1130) to “recognize and honor the spirit within themselves and the natural world” (Cajete, 2005, p. 77). These dimensions offer profound understandings of the “multi-dimensional relationships between humans and their inner and outer worlds” (Cajete, 2010, p. 1128). Thus, Cajete (2010) claims that “because traditional native education is holistically inter-relational, and not dualistic, it does not intrinsically separate theory and practice, human beings and nature, or the classroom (or learning process) from the world” (p. 1128). Our version of posthuman art conservation proposes the integration of Indigenous knowledge and educational foundations to generate additional vantage points and contest the supremacy of Eurocentric thought’s utility, in rethinking with the mysteries of art conservation.

Researching Art Conservation With Death Meditation

The entry into this inquiry for Scott was integrating meditation as a part of his conservation and teaching practices in the museum where he works. While Aoki (2003/2005) alludes to enlightenment through meditating on third spaces and Bhabha (1994) recommends opening these spaces of possibility through meditation that engages “critical self-reflection” (p. 54), below we offer Foucauldian (1982a, 1988, 2013) death meditation as a mode to access and ruminate with mystery between bodies, knowledges, agencies, processes and unknown others.

Foucault’s later writings emphasized human care for their “bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” in order to attain states of wisdom and

13 Bunge (1984) shares that the Sioux readily admitted that much escaped human understanding: “Unlike the Europeans, the Lakota never concerned themselves with fixing the boundaries of the knowable. They frankly acknowledged that there were limits but, in an equally frank manner, acknowledged that they did not know these limits” (p. 228).

14 The *Anishinaabeg* are a group of culturally related Indigenous peoples in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States. They include the Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi, Mississaugas, Nipissing and Algonquin peoples.

immortality (Luther et al., 1988, p. 18). Integral to this caring for the self is care for the other (Foucault, 1982b, 1988). In conservation, the other in care is the nonhuman art object. Concerning the care of the self/other, Foucault (1988, 2017) advocated for death meditation, wherein humans critically reflect on their lives and the lives of others with the same urgency as if death were imminent, inviting contemplation from the “point of view of death, or of the actualization of death in our life” (Foucault, 2005, p. 478).

Based upon ancient Greek Stoic philosophy, Foucault (1982a) mobilized death meditation through self-writings and recordings, repeatedly revisited and memorized, in order to rest with and reimagine inevitable adversity, atrophy and death. In this essay, we expand Foucault’s human-centred approach to think with the mysteries of human and non-human life-death associated with art conservation. Over five years, death meditation facilitated reconsidering art conservation knowledge as co-produced and entangled with materials and objects. The reflective inquiry of death meditation, involving contemplating, meditating, writing and re-reading, opened Scott to the relational, contingent and embodied aspects of his practices. Scott regularly shared his death meditations with Nadine, who wrote back into them, asking questions and offering reactions. Together, we would undertake shared readings from varied worldviews and disciplines to extend the reflection process to the context of Scott’s professional and pedagogical becomings. The practice of death meditations brought us to the theories of new (followed by neo-) materialism as well as Indigenous perspectives. In the sections that follow, Scott’s meditations are marked by italicized text.

Death meditation might be likened to Karen Barad’s (2017) articulation of re-membering as “a bodily activity of re-turning” (p. 84) in the midst of what she terms the *void*—“a dynamism of indeterminacy, a threading through of living with dying and dying with living, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming that cannot a-void matters of life and death” (p. 78). Such a “vacuum is far from empty; rather, it is flush with yearning, with innumerable possibilities/imaginings of what was, could be, might yet have been, all coexisting” (Barad, 2017, p. 78). While mysterious in its indeterminacy, this void must be thought with (instead of a-voided) through re-turning rituals, such as death meditations, to cultivate insights.

To harmoniously engage with the unity and mystery of the Earth, without separation between human and the more-than-human, but with an openness to indirect experience, the Nuu-chah-nulth, Indigenous peoples of the Canadian Pacific Northwest Coast, offer the spiritual process of “a deliberate state of inner smallness” (Atleo, 2011) via “the insignificant-leaf approach or the humble-stance approach towards the non-physical or spiritual realm” (p. 64), where ego gives over to a natural identity. From this outlook, humans might gain access to the non-physical while asking how anyone might describe the unutterable, wonderous and indescribable unity of all creation (Atleo, 2011, p. 35). Likewise, death meditation might provide a protocol to tap into heightened awareness akin to how Cajete (2010) describes accessing one’s *knowing Centre*¹⁵ in Indigenous education through ceremonies, rituals, art and stories (p. 1130). This knowing Centre “reflects the knowing

15 Following Cajete (2010), the term “Centre” is spelled with uppercase to indicate respect for Indigenous peoples’ spiritual beliefs in the sacredness of the self.

Center of the Earth and other living things”, which may lead to the “potential healing and whole-making power in each person” (p. 1130).

Below, Scott describes an initial attempt to incorporate death meditation into conserving damaged art objects.

I pause in meditation, quiet my mind and attune to my body while holding space between myself and the art object. We are related as death approaches.

In this self/other contemplation, death and its urgency reach me like waves rhythmically deteriorating the shore. I soften. We both embody states of perishing as I deteriorate and break down with you, albeit at different paces. Your fragments are around me and in me, penetrating permeability.

How would my body and mind function if I knew this was my last day? How might the art under my care answer? Would you alter yourself to live longer? What is self-care to you?

I have these short moments of life left, yet my body increasingly appreciates how little control or knowledge I have over the procession of death. I am in a state of decay in both mind and body, yet I am increasingly alive as I summon my senses to the surrounding vibrancy.

Staying with the unknown, death meditation releases art conservation and its curriculum to the dynamism of *affective* contemplation on enigmatic encounters. Documentation of death meditation traces a becoming with open questions and inklings, inviting ontological vulnerability.¹⁶ Common rituals associated with the mysteries of death, attending and mourning offer further *affective* depth.

Art Conservation as Attending and Mourning

While Pinar (1992) suggested meditating on death in education might enhance clarity in living, numerous scholars have explored death in relation to curriculum (e.g., Downey, 2022a; Nellis, 2018; Snaza & Weaver, 2015). Downey (2022a) surmised that curriculum theory had focused more on life than death, inspiring his call for educators to integrate teaching, learning and thinking about death as it surrounds humans and non-human others, through *attending* and *mourning*. Attending refers to “an active engagement with the generative and transformative possibilities of a conversation, a moment, an event, a person, a relationship, or a phenomenon” (Downey, 2022a, p. 25) and its various intra-actions, even at the microbial level (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). Loss demands *mourning*, in an unresolvable aporia of tensioned haunting by existence and non-existence, as learning to live with ghosts of change while we say goodbye to the old and embrace the new (Derrida, 1993/1994; Downey, 2020, 2022a; Nellis, 2018).

¹⁶ According to Daigle (2022), to have the capacity to be wounded or to wound “amounts to affect-ability, the ability we have to affect and be affected, materially and subjectively. Because our beings are porous in manifold ways, we are under constant threat of being undone and are in fact undone through my [sic] new relation, entanglement, affect or shift thereof” (p. 151).

Posthuman art conservation incorporating death meditation as an attending and mourning practice foregrounds death in the present along a continuum of life and death, or *lifedeath* (Lykke, 2021, 2022). This lifedeath is interrupted with acts of mourning that frame the loss of art object matter as procreative assemblages, through which affirmative ways forward may be established (Braidotti, 2019). Death connects the human and art object in the conservator's realization of a new materialist perspective wherein the inhumanizing of the body in death's decay is considered a transcorporeal, material and vibrant posthuman process shared with nonhumans.

As an art conservator, I keep returning to my hunch that the death of an art object becomes a part of me.

You are my relation—we are lifedeath together.

My being and your being have intra-acted intensely and have become intertwined. For example, even with a respirator on, my lungs have been harmed by the solvents used to clean the debris of your damage.

In my formal reports, I write the stories of how you have deteriorated and how I prolong your life. However, I omit that in fixing you, I break myself.

Cradling you in my hands, I empathize and relive your lifedeath journey, resulting in shared trauma responses in my body. With these and other affects, your lifedeath continues to be a part of me.

Death meditating, mourning and attending all focus on death in life, death giving way to new life and shared processes of decay. The more radical Indigenous belief that everything is alive and everything is my relation, even after death, opens additional considerations and connections with the mysteries of lifedeath. Suppose everything is alive and related across all stages of lifedeath continuums and beyond. In that case, the vista of all the lives worthy of care (human and more than human, art and non-art objects) increases exponentially. Perhaps more overwhelming is to consider art as alive and not needing conservation since art will still be alive through all of its transformations, even apart from artist and conservator control.

Paraconsistent Logic of Art Conservation

Continuity of the original artist's intent and hand are paramount in art conservation.

As an art conservator, I typically propagate the lie that you do not atrophy, through reversal, denial and eradication. I suspend your lifedeath with protocols and poisons so that generations of future lives may experience your afterlife as an adequate simulation of your actual life before I was hired to hide your age and create an alternate life. This post-art object life is what we create together—you, the art object, and me—with contemporary thinking and processes meeting, simulating or replacing your life. I play the role of the original artist, resuscitating their hand, eye, mind and heart in the present. No matter how much knowledge I bring, this revivifying always dances with mystery.

Quantum superposition (Schrödinger, 1935) encompasses being simultaneously alive and dead. This superposition advances awareness of the end of what we are (in Deleuze & Guattari's 1994 terminology—the *actual*) and what we are in the process of becoming (*ibid.*, the *virtual*). Such lifedead entanglements and intermingling of vibrant material relations (Bennett, 2010b) are where art conservation activity dwells. The art object's very atoms, particles and matter are revitalized into a facsimile of the original artist's creation. At the same time, this afterlife of the artwork exists intermixed with traces of its demise. Scott encountered this suspension of life and death indeterminacy in an artwork where intra-active deterioration is purposefully displayed.

Komar and Melamids' Crucifixion Altarpiece

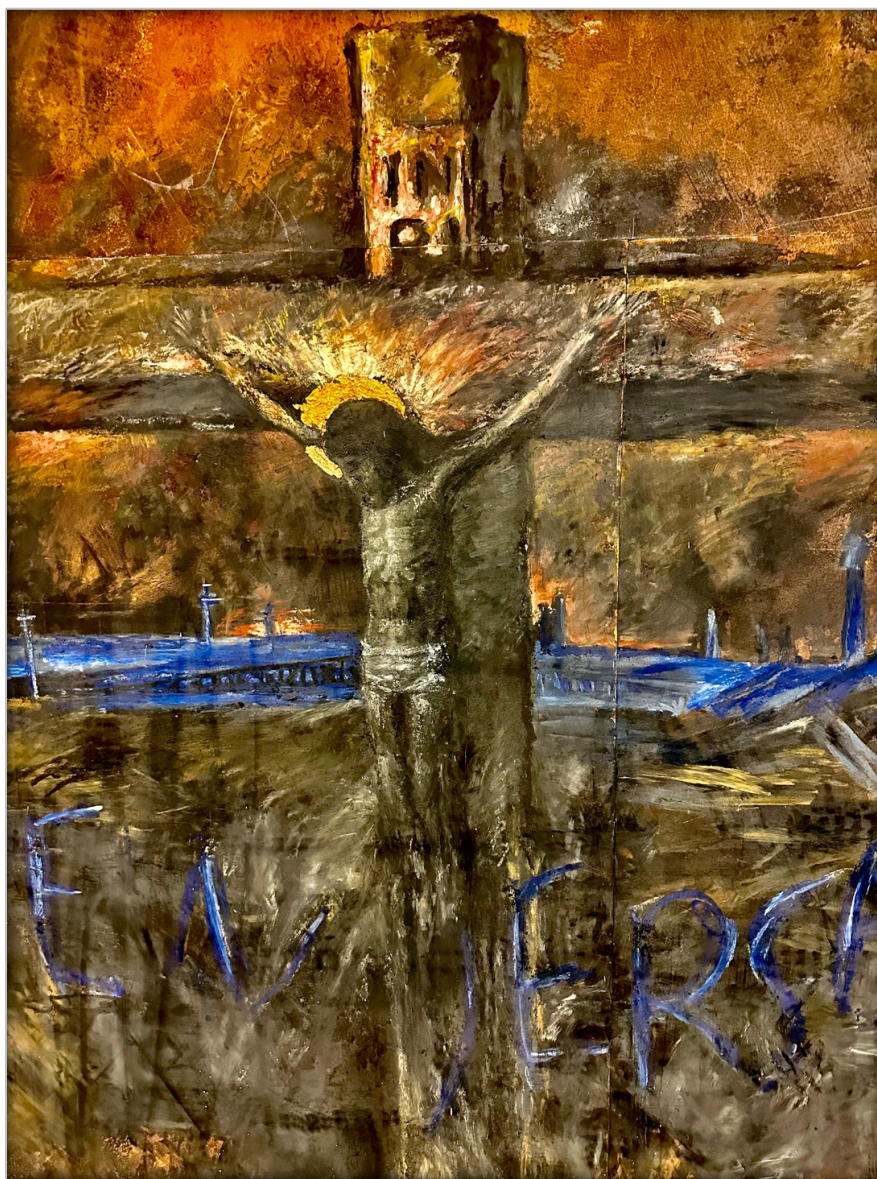


Figure 1. Detail of *Crucifixion Altarpiece*. See Komar and Melamid (1990).
Photograph courtesy of S. Peck. Artwork printed with permission of V. Komar, creator and copyright holder.

While art objects are always aging and changing, artists may choose to utilize decay as a part of their creative output. Russian-born American conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's (1990) series of altarpieces and religious-themed works are created through the ongoing breakdown of metal, specifically steel panels (see Komar & Melamid, 1991). For instance, the *Crucifixion Altarpiece* (shown in Figure 1) is a gigantic steel panel illustrating Christ on the cross, created (and still in the midst of [re]creation) from the application of corrosives, acids and chemicals. Over time, including while on display and in storage, the chemical change process creates other images or intensifies the images already contained in one of the artwork's layers. The panel changes colour and intensity through intentional decay while undergoing constant minute metal flaking. The surface has also become increasingly pitted (see Figure 2). Previously, a vibrant globe or world materialized above the crucifixion scene, which has subsequently disappeared. The words "New Jersey" (the commissioning church's location) are still visible below the crucifix. The artwork is unveiled repeatedly through its atrophy.

Below is Scott's death meditation on encountering this work as an art conservator.

I am a conservator. I cannot conserve you—my professional identity is suspended. To take care of you, I must violate my ethics of care based on the drive to alter your material being against its agential knowledge and power—your will to deteriorate.

I must allow you to die while on display according to your human creators' intentions. I affectively experience your decay as embodied trauma—our forms metamorphosizing in a series of chemical reactions and molecular transformations. My human body's adrenal glands secrete cortisol and norepinephrine hormones delivered to my brain cells. As intense emotions are felt, associated hormones increase the heart and breathing rates along with blood pressure while also contributing to changes in brain chemistry that may further anxiety.

You inadvertently signal my professional know-how as I jump from the empathic reaction to the facts and truths from my training that I can use to reverse your ongoing death display. My use-value is denied as you don't need to be rescued from your autonomy.

Komar and Melamid's *Crucifixion Altarpiece* presents its mutability at an unnerving pace, exposing its agential sovereignty and force working against its survival as a fixed artwork. Most artworks' volatility is much slower and more obscured from the human eye. The fluidity of the altarpiece's contradictory suspension between lifedeath allows for viewing something in the midst of becoming, escaping visible stability as its dynamic agential churn is palpable on the art's surface. Experiencing this spectacle stirs a vibrant *response-ability* (Haraway, 2012, 2016) in Scott, throwing his identity into instability as the principle of the excluded middle can no longer be contained, causing subject/object relational indeterminacy (Pratt & Rosiek, 2023).



Figure 2. Detail of *Crucifixion Altarpiece*. See Komar and Melamid (1990).
Photograph courtesy of S. Peck. Artwork printed with permission of V. Komar, creator and copyright holder.

I am in a daze. My fealty to human exceptionalism has failed me. I've lost control as the more-than-human intra-actions hold sway over the art and the terms of my engagement. These processes undo me ontologically just as your layers dissolve before me.

Your contradictory and accelerated death procession activates dissonance in my mind and body—a felt urgency to restore, while concurrently spurring new questions about evolving cultural attitudes and notions regarding time, value and usefulness of lifedeath objects, let alone conservators.

At the base of my saviour drive is the neo-liberal motivation to prolong the life and, therefore, value of art for its owners. Instead of art's agential churn being permitted, it is suspended through art conservation without care for the will of matter. I never even wondered how maintaining the life of the art object in a holding pattern might throw other ecologies, beliefs and processes off balance.

To display the suspension of lifedeath without visible traces of restoration, as in the altarpiece, denies the pathos evoked when we witness the organic and inevitable decay of an art object. Scott's art conservation incapability in the face of irrevocable damage marks the start of his *response-able* apprenticeship to the more-than-human as art, wherein he unravels limiting ontologies to think with the mysteries of art as it is, outside of a conservator's desire to staunch deterioration.

As a conservator, I am so frustrated that I cannot control all of art lifedeath. My inabilities and limitations leave me barren. What's done is done. Your chemical changes are irreversible; were you not perfect before? I am not permitted to deactivate the delicate timebomb that is this altarpiece. I cannot turn back time or stem its progress. What are you doing here, unmasking my powerlessness?

Is mourning what you once were the best I can do? My body is re-memorizing in these meditations, feeling and being with your molecules in this conservation void. I am speechless, but my mind is going in multiple directions simultaneously. Could this perplexity at your own vibrancy be awe?

What forces are propelling your will? How are the components of this intra-acting assemblage communicating? What other agencies are enabled by your demise? What do you know that I don't?

In mourning, I remember, wonder and listen. What are you now, and what are you becoming?

Scott apprentices to the artwork's lifedeath vibrance while defamiliarizing both the limits of art and conservator. Allowing matter to display its lifedeath stages is transfixing, an awe-inspiring reminder of the mysteries and power of death of all living beings. In this way, art conservation might be reconsidered as potentially participating in the re-emergence of artworks and humans journeying toward and through vibrant death processes (Lykke, 2021).

While ontological flexibility may loosen certain thresholds of art conservation professional practice, most relations are imperceptible (Braidotti, 2006, 2013), as certain agency eludes and exceeds apparatus available to humans, such as measuring and perceiving devices (Barad, 2007). The mysteries of a posthuman understanding of linguistic *impossibility* might offer some further insights.

Linguistic Impossibility With All My Relations

Through death meditation, Scott's encounters with this irreversible, yet deliberate, damage to an art object initiated his release into the void between his and the object's knowledge. Instead of mourning as a-voiding or fixating on the past and longing for a return to wholeness, Scott paused with his incomprehension. Based on Deleuze's (1969/1990) notion of the impossible as contradictory and co-existing relations, Clemens (2022a, 2022b) outlines *linguistic impossibility* as incompatible languages "caught in a tangle whereby they each contradict the others and yet their

existence is constituted by their multiple relations with each other” thereby permitting “affirmatory possibilities of divergence, disjunction and difference” (Clemens, 2022b, p. 72).

In Indigenous worldviews, interspecies communication with animals and plants is common and considered a source of knowledge, as it would with any communication between relations (Deloria, 2001, p. 60). While humans may not ever claim linguistic equivalency or mastery over the impossibility of languages or subject/object divisions (Clemens, 2022b, p. 72), communication is still possible, albeit multiple, becoming and contradictory (Deleuze, 1969/1990, pp. 173-174).¹⁷ This relational mystery connects the material and the molecular to the multi-linguistic in what Braidotti (2022a) would refer to as “shimmering intensity” (p. 179).

In art conservation, the languages of the human are impossible to the languages of art object matter. Indwelling this generative yet unresolvable gap as relational mystery may facilitate the de-centring of the human subject and of rationalist mechanisms of capture, to remain open to imaginative leaps.

(In)Spiriting

Aoki (1996/2005) summarizes Bhabha’s (1990, 1994) third space as ambivalent zones “where inspirited newness is ongoingly constituted and reconstituted” (p. 422). Following this logic, opening art conservation and its curriculum to mystery *inspirits* and excites new life into its processes and parameters with puzzles and irrationalities, invigorating *affective* thinking with, through and betwixt the mysteries that are humans and non-humans. (And betwixt the mysteries of students’ live(d) experiences and educators’ curricular plans.) However, the conception of inspiring new life suggests a human activation of a dead spirit through human revealing, inserting, instigating or discovering. In addition to, or instead of the human activation of inspirited newness, humans might contemplate *conjuring* as an evoking of, appealing to, or bringing forth, spirit (Derrida, 1993/1994, p. 50). Conjuring isn’t correspondence—an echo or representation—it is a humble and hopeful beckoning to something unfamiliar or mysterious.

Scott’s attending as re-membling (Barad, 2017) in the void, through death meditation, conjures potentialities and an as-yet-unknown limitlessness perchance of matter’s spirit. Komar and Melamids’ altarpiece seems to materialize a spirit in its more-than-human agency through an inter-species assemblage, including the artists’ desires. While the altarpiece reveals spiritual connections between Jesus and the church that commissioned the work, it could also be understood as a display of what Rosiek et al. (2020) identify as the “presence of an essential ‘spiritual’ dimension of agency” (p. 342).

¹⁷ For example, researchers are learning about crocodilian communication to understand the species better, enhance human-crocodile relations and create a crocodile dictionary (Ham, 2023). The endeavour is yielding information that contradicts previous beliefs in communication. Since no reptiles have a larynx, crocodile language comprises vocal and nonvocal forms of “speaking”, including blowing bubbles and infrasound underwater (previously considered exclusively created by sea creatures the size of whales).

Watts (2013) encourages a decolonial operationalization of non-human agency as being connected to the spirit (referring to the relationship, knowing, will and sentience) found in all things. This conceptualization of spirit infuses art conservation with reverence, not just reverie for the monetary value and cultural significance of art objects but also for the spirit in the agency intra-acting around us, multiplying the ecology of art conservation beyond the art world. This expanded sphere of the context of art care is opened to the spiritual and agential mysteries calling on alternative apparatus in the practice and curriculum of art conservation.

Mysterious Futures of Art Conservation

By and large, the goal of art restoration is to replicate the materials and intentions of the original artist so that the spectator will not see the labour of the conservator or the ravages of time but only the hand of the original artist in the form of the original artwork. The viewer should have no idea that the artwork ever sustained any damage or has been restored. Art conservation wishes to exist as hidden and mysterious, so any flaws or traces of age in an art object are concealed to keep the original artist's and artwork's spirit intact.

Furthermore, as one of the significant tenets of art conservation, treatments should be as reversible as possible so that any repair can be removed and replaced with an alternative. This is because technologies that could be applied in the future are constantly being introduced. However, it is also because ethics and perceptions are open to a degree of future modification. Stated differently, art conservation's provisional relationship between the mysteries of the past and future in the present *leaves the option always available* that it could be otherwise. The future itself is a mystery beyond our control or conception. Therefore, the continuity of care, from one human's hand passed into the restorative care of a future being, invites speculation in art conservation through hunches, reflections, projections and questions will likely push the field of art conservation into alternative adventuring.

Relational Mystery as Art Conservation Curriculum

Relational mystery may be provoked in the excluded middle of dichotomies (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007). Thus far, this essay has proffered mystery as manifesting in relational sites of linguistic impossibility, incomprehension, awe, mourning and inspirit, located between the known and unknown, human and non-human, visible and invisible as well as life and death. Death meditations have rendered art conservation as relational mystery activated by lifedeath conundrums that loosen the control of the known in art conservation through indwelling the incomprehensible. In the last sections, we move from death meditation interpretations to implications for art conservation curriculum. We propose an art conservation curriculum of relational mystery using death meditation entangled with enigmas of art mourning to deepen students' enchantment with unfathomable aspects of lifedeath toward more response-able forms of art conservation.

More-than-Human Curricular Relations

In curriculum, spaces between planned and live(d) curriculum may provoke relational mystery. Such spaces of textured unease yearn for, or incite, anxiety and conflict. However, they may also foster curiosity, openness and wonder, while listening for a multiplicity of creative and generative possibilities (Aoki, 1993; Pinar & Irwin, 2005). While Aokian (1986/2005) third spaces between *curriculum as live(d)* and *curriculum as planned* concentrate on the teacher-student pedagogical relationship in the discursive and social dimensions of curriculum plans and the lives of learners, Aoki wasn't explicit about the material aspects of curriculum and all lives, human and more-than-human. Relational art conservation curriculum includes the possibility of mysterious intra-actions with all life. Just as Kim's (2021) *curriculum-as-relations* expands Aoki's theories to global citizenship education (GCED), we further open the aperture of live(d) curricular relations to include relations with the more-than-human.

To reconsider art conservation curriculum through an Indigenous relational perspective that everything is related is to bring to the fore possible interconnections between the human, physical and nonphysical world. All more-than-human agents, including nature, animals, plants, water, Land, rocks and spirit, are active in art conservation learning and knowledge. Such an ecological perspective would need to ground processes of art conservation in the axiom of equality of life—human and more-than-human. For example, mapping the lives at play in conservation relationships from various perspectives would ask students to contemplate Indigenous, spiritual and posthumanist perspectives alongside Eurocentric, scientific and art historical knowledges in completed, proposed or current conservation interventions of either previous conservators or students themselves.

Situated Praxis of Curriculum-as-Live(d)

Indigenous pedagogies favour learning through thinking, doing, feeling and intuiting, pointing to the importance of *affect* and experience (Restoule & Chaw-win-is, 2017). Aoki's (1983/2005) curriculum-as-live(d) refers to curriculum as embodied by learners and educators, contingent on the specific contexts of their lifeworlds. In art conservation, these lifeworlds add knowledge to learning and praxis within conservation laboratory apprenticeships that require hands-on practice with art treatments. Through experiential learning, situated praxis is enabled in art conservation. Revisiting artworks via multiple encounters allows students to develop relational insights by working with artworks over expanded periods.

Moreover, specific art conservation projects within laboratory apprenticeships may be reconsidered as opportunities for apprenticing to fluctuations in agential realism co-constructed between the boundaries of art conservation learners and the art objects under their care. In this approach, art conservation might facilitate an unknowing where separations between bodies and processes are blurred in their dynamic situatedness. A pivotal inquiry might be: What agent or subject-object intra-actions are occurring and possible in our lifeworld?

Death Meditating

In proximity to discipline-based, curriculum-as-planned metanarratives in art conservation, the embodied and subjective narratives of individual experiences voicing curriculum-as-live(d) would be occasioned for art conservation students as provocative and speculative third spaces of relational mystery. Death meditations such as Scott shares above might stimulate curricular tensions and incite students to practice such rituals while repairing objects and contemplating spaces between the living and the non-living (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 422) with an urgency of extinction in mind. Indwelling mysterious middles and their multiplicity of relations and *affects* proffers the co-constructed yet enigmatic nature of intra-action between agents that occur beyond human comprehension. Students would be encouraged to indwell knowledge gaps sustained by the unknown and the incomprehensible aspects of our interrelated lifedeath, asking themselves: What am I unsure about? How might I inhabit this unknown? How does this manifest in me? What questions might I ask from material and spiritual perspectives?

Acknowledging the limits of human understanding, students of art conservation would observe, listen, feel, remember, wonder, dream, intuit and death meditate in their gathering of all orders of information, attempting to reorient art conservation practices toward locating, maintaining, animating and honoring the possible flows and expressions of mystery. Therefore, art conservation curriculum as relational mystery aims to diversify and interconnect existing knowledge *while* speculating on the unfathomable. Correspondingly, standard reports in art conservation practice may document decisions and analyses as entangled assemblages that include attending and mourning as art conservation processes. These reports might also intra-act with the speculative, mysterious and as-yet-unknown *affective* conjurings of spirit emerging during death meditations. Journaling to chronicle death meditations in sound recordings, drawings, poems, movies, notes or other reflective forms invites students to share these ongoing inquiries within a community of art conservation learners. Known best practices, standard protocols and Western scientific truisms that train conservators to control for mystery may be juxtaposed with enigmas of art mattering.

Speculating in the void between a-live(d) and dead self/other, death meditations may undermine an all-knowing humanist art conservation curriculum based on European rationality by transforming limiting dichotomies into unresolved, reciprocal and exploratory mysteries ripe with potentialities and *affects* we may yet comprehend. Further, we, teacher and student, human and object, may indwell on our mysterious relational intertwining *as* curriculum. To seek enigmatic suspensions of certainty in curriculum moves art conservation education towards embracing the hidden, the mysterious and the as-yet-unknown *as* art conservation curriculum, continually undergoing dynamic indeterminacy in becoming something else. Art conservation curriculum would leave the door always ajar for the discipline to be otherwise based on what revisioning and remaking might be enabled by students' inquiries, intuitions and *affective* reflections.

Closing Thoughts

Ordinarily, mystery acts as a dead-end, an inexorable gulf or an unfathomable disjunction that might hold our momentary attention before quickly disappearing out of focus as we turn away from it, judging it invalid and therefore unworthy of patience, reflection or speculation. Death meditations open art conservators to the “wondrous in the commonplace” (Bunge, 1984, p. 233), befriending mystery as an indication of possibility, enabling open questioning, cross-disciplinary exploration, speculative inhabiting of contradiction and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016, p. 4). Indwelling lifedeath as attending and mourning through death meditation offers mysterious and novel encounters between art conservators (seasoned and novice) and art objects. Relationalist orientations to art conservation integrating neo-materialist constructs and Indigenous worldviews may provoke reconfigurations, while promoting entanglement between curriculum as live(d) and planned in art conservation education. This essay hasn’t demystified art conservation and its curriculum; rather, we have begun reconceptualizing the field as inclusive of relational mystery. Ultimately, art conservation curriculum should invite all to think, feel, look and listen with the lifedeath that surrounds us, thereby enhancing the curiosity and compassion with which we commune more response-ably in the enfolding mysteries of lifedeath.

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