Article: The butterfly effect: A case study on the value of artist collaboration in the conservation of ephemeral material
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A recent acquisition by the New Mexico Museum of Art provided conservators at the Museums of New Mexico with the unique opportunity to collaborate with artist Tasha Ostrander in the preservation of her artwork Seventy-three in a Moment. Consisting of 26,645 Xeroxed paper butterflies glued to Masonite, the 10-ft. diameter artwork presented conservators with the challenge of preserving the concept of the piece while faced with the ephemeral nature of materials.

The conservation of this artwork is discussed as a case study of the challenges presented by such a treatment. Meeting these challenges often requires a slight shift in conventional conservation practice. Collaborations with other conservators, scientists, and specialists in allied fields are becoming more frequent and can allow for new insights into traditional approaches and techniques. However, one of the most significant changes in conservation practices in the past few decades has been the integration of the artist's voice and opinion into preservation strategy.

Interviewing the artist provides valuable insight into the artist's materials, techniques, and goals for the piece. From the standpoint of the conservator, this aligns with our ethical mandate that all actions must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it. Full collaboration often takes this a step further and invites the artist to participate in the conservation process. This collaboration sometimes leads to treatments that may feel more (or less) interventive than with which a conservator is comfortable and requires a thorough consideration by the conservator as to the merits and disadvantages of the desired outcomes. It also requires an open dialogue between conservator and artist to ensure that concerns and goals are sufficiently addressed.

For this case study, conservators Mina Thompson and Crista Pack discuss these issues in relation to their experiences with the treatment of Seventy-three in a Moment and the artist collaboration it required. Additionally, artist Tasha Ostrander provides a meaningful look at the conservation process from the artist's perspective. The goal of this article is to emphasize the value of artist collaboration through a look at a specific treatment project involving ephemeral materials.

KEYWORDS: Paper, Butterfly, Masonite, Artist interview, Collaboration, Contemporary art, Ephemeral, Tasha Ostrander

1. INTRODUCTION

“But on paper, things can live forever. On paper, a butterfly never dies.”

- Jacqueline Woodson, Brown Girl Dreaming

The idea that a paper butterfly could live forever is alluring, especially when one considers the relatively short life span of an actual butterfly. Achievement of material immortality is a concept that may also resonate with those charged with the preservation of cultural property. However, as conservators know all too well, paper is not the most eternal of materials.

The case study presented here will look at the conservation challenges of an installation piece composed primarily of paper that was encountered by conservators working for the Museums of New Mexico (MNM). Specifically, we will focus on the collaboration with Santa Fe artist Tasha Ostrander for the treatment of her artwork Seventy-three in a Moment, which is composed of 26,645 photocopied paper butterflies arranged in concentric circles on a 10-ft. diameter Masonite substrate. The conservation of this piece presented the unique challenge of preserving the concept of the artwork while faced with the ephemeral nature of the materials. This challenge was successfully met as a result of the direct input and collaborative work with the artist herself.

Involving the artist in the conservation process for contemporary artwork is becoming more common. Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable increase in the integration of the artist’s
voice and opinion into the preservation strategies for contemporary works. Often, this is accomplished through an interview with the artist and provides valuable insight into the artist’s materials, techniques, and goals for the piece. From the standpoint of the conservator, this aligns with the ethical mandate that all actions must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it (American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works 1994).

For the conservation of Seventy-three in a Moment, the artist not only was consulted but also was invited to participate in the conservation process. This collaboration required thoughtful review of the desired outcomes and effective communication to ensure that concerns and goals were sufficiently understood by both parties. This article will discuss these issues in relation to the conservators’ experiences with the treatment of Seventy-three in a Moment and the artist collaboration that entailed in spring 2013. Additionally, Tasha Ostrander will provide a meaningful look at the conservation process from the artist’s perspective. The goal is to emphasize the value of artist collaboration through a look at a specific treatment project involving ephemeral materials.

2. SEVENTY-THREE IN A MOMENT

Santa Fe–based artist Tasha Ostrander spent eight hours a day, seven days a week, for an entire year creating the 10-ft. artwork Seventy-three in a Moment in 1996. The 26,645 paper butterflies represent the number of days in seventy-three years, which was considered the average life span for an American at that time. Comparatively, most species of butterfly have a very short life span of mere days to a few months. The image of the butterfly was chosen specifically by the artist to reinforce the idea of the transience of life, as well as the concept of metamorphosis. As noted by New Mexico Museum of Art curator Laura Addison:

> The labor-intensiveness of the project was an important aspect of creating the meaning of the work. Because the work takes the form of a mandala, it reinforces its own symbolism as a meditative work or spiritual endeavor. To have the 26,645 butterflies seen in one glance is to demonstrate the intensity of a lifetime in a single moment. (Addison 2013, 78)

When Seventy-three in a Moment was first exhibited in a Santa Fe gallery in 1996 (fig. 1), it was immediately purchased by a private collector. The collector subsequently placed the artwork outdoors, under a portico, for several years. In this environment, it was exposed to the wind and sandstorms that are regular occurrences in New Mexico. Animals, pests, and humans interacted frequently with it, as evidenced by the spider webs, shed lizard skins, animal fur, and gum wrappers, and even a burnt matchstick that would be later found stuck within the piece. Birds also took advantage of its placement and picked off paper wings to weave into their nests.

When the piece was donated to the New Mexico Museum of Art in 2012 and brought to the conservation lab, it was clear that deterioration of the paper and adhesive had progressed rapidly as a direct result of its previous environment. There were numerous tears and losses throughout the brittle, distorted, and faded paper. Adhesives and coatings were discolored and becoming unstable, and, in many areas, actively flaking (figs. 2, 3).

Before addressing these issues, it was pertinent to understand exactly how the piece had been created. Many of the questions regarding materials and techniques could have been deciphered through careful observation, material analysis, and research. However, the option to obtain such information from the artist firsthand was understandably preferable to secondhand hypothesis. This would also give conservators the opportunity to ask questions regarding the conceptual aspects of the work and artist’s intent.
Fig. 1. The artwork shown just after its creation in 1996. Tasha Ostrander, *Seventy-three in a Moment*, 1996, Masonite, coffee and tea-stained Xerox paper, and gum arabic, $3 \times 0.07$ m. New Mexico Museum of Art, 2012.19. (Courtesy of Tasha Ostrander)

Fig. 2. Two of three parts to Ostrander’s *Seventy-three in a Moment* in 2013, before treatment and just after its acquisition by the MNM system. New Mexico Museum of Art, 2012.19. (Courtesy of the MNM Conservation Unit)
3. PRE-TREATMENT INTERVIEW

Tasha Ostrander agreed to an initial meeting in the conservation laboratory with MNM conservators Mina Thompson and Crista Pack in January 2013. Thompson had often consulted with artists and source communities as part of her role as Associate Conservator in the museum system. Pack, a third-year intern from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, also drew upon previous experiences with source communities and conservation work performed in consultation with contemporary artists. The curator and conservators determined questions ahead of time, but equally important in any consultation is explaining conservation to the artist. With the artwork spread over two tables, the conservators and artist discussed the artwork, tenets of conservation, and her expectations for her piece over time. Ostrander provided a detailed account of the creation of *Seventy-three in a Moment*, including challenges she encountered during the process. Additionally valuable was hearing Ostrander reflect on her thought processes when she assembled the piece. She had not expected her piece to be displayed outdoors, but she stayed in communication with the owner, occasionally supplying new butterflies to replace missing ones. One question always asked of an artist is, “when does the artwork lose its essence? At what point should (if at all) the artwork be retired?” Ostrander knew that her artwork was ephemeral but thought it still had many years left, with care.

3.1 MATERIALS

Ostrander recalled that to create the butterflies, she photocopied 20 to 30 different species from a field guide—the 1992 *Eyewitness Handbook of Butterflies and Moths* by David J. Carter. Each butterfly was
then hand cut and stained with tea and coffee. Ostrander would dip them multiple times to get the
desired effect, drying them on blotter paper after each round. She noted that the butterflies would often
curl a bit as they dried.

The back of every paper butterfly she created in 1996 was numbered in pencil with a year (1–73)
and day (1–365) to ensure that there would be an accounting of every single day in the life span (fig. 4).
When the artwork was examined upon arrival in the conservation lab, it was noted that some of the
paper butterflies were not numbered on the back. The artist explained during the interview that the
numberless butterflies were replacement pieces. These had been applied by Ostrander during previous, ad
hoc restoration campaigns requested by the owner when the piece had begun to exhibit numerous losses
due to its outdoor placement. These replacement butterflies were identical to the original but without
numbers on the back. Later, the owner had an assistant make additional replacement butterflies. These
replacements were easily identifiable, as they were simply black and white (no tea/coffee stains) and were
sometimes glued in the opposite direction of all other butterflies.

Fig. 4. Detail of the back of two butterflies: the lower clump of butterfly shows the artist’s original numbering system,
with “27” representing the year and “17” representing the 17th day of the year; the butterfly at the top shows a new
butterfly marked with 2013, the year it was made. (Courtesy of the MNM Conservation Unit)
The last material component that was discussed with the artist was the yellowed, flaking substance that appeared to be splattered across the top surface of the butterflies. Ostrander stated that it was gum arabic, applied to add some sheen and sparkle to the piece. During the discussion, she expressed that she would like to see the discolored, flaking material removed and more gum arabic added to replace the lost sheen.

3.2 ASSEMBLAGE

The 10-ft. diameter circular Masonite support separates into three panels, consisting of a central circle and two outer arcs. Ostrander began her process in the center of circle and worked her way out. She said the hardest part was aligning the butterflies so that they matched, exactly, on the two outer arc pieces once the whole ensemble was put together.

To assemble the piece, Ostrander stacked and interleaved the butterflies, generally placing smaller, more heavily stained butterflies in the top layers and larger butterflies toward the bottom. Ostrander noted that in its current condition, there were several areas where the smaller, heavily stained butterflies were missing, making the larger, lighter-colored butterflies more visible. Ostrander recalled that the stacking and grouping was not planned out but rather was based on the look and feel of the piece. She would group a few in her hand, interleaving the wings, and glue the stack onto the Masonite board using a lot of Yes! Paste, a commercial starch paste made from corn dextrin and preservatives (Yes! Paste 2015). Once all of the butterflies were placed, Ostrander dipped a bamboo sketching pen into liquid gum arabic and flicked droplets of the gum all over the piece. The gum arabic dried into shiny spots, proud of the paper, that reflected light in a way pleasing to the artist, contrasting nicely with the duller appearance of the paper butterflies.

3.3 ARTIST’S INTENT

The last question for Ostrander during this interview was aimed to better understand her intent for the piece. The conservation team was curious to learn how she viewed the natural aging process of the piece and in what ways that might inform the work and any treatment in the future. Initially, the life span of the piece—or the potential point where she may no longer consider it exhibitable—was not something the artist had previously considered, and she did not have an immediate answer for that question. In later discussions, she indicated that she knew there would be a point when the piece would reach the end of its life and would no longer be exhibitable. The fragile nature of the materials was meant to underscore the ephemeral and transient nature of life. However, the accelerated aging due to its initial outdoor location was not acceptable and had compromised the integrity of the piece.

4. THE CONSERVATION PERSPECTIVE

The pre-treatment interview also provided conservators an opportunity to discuss the proposed treatment for the artwork with the artist. Proposed conservation materials and methodologies needed to preserve the artist’s concept of the piece in addition to its physical structure. These discussions served as a springboard for additional conservation measures, as well as a discussion on the merits of restoration for the numerous losses throughout the piece.

For the conservators, a restoration project that brought the piece back to a state similar to its original appearance was more interventive than had originally been envisioned. The initial treatment discussion among conservators focused on cleaning, humidification of distorted paper, stabilization of loose elements, and infilling losses of the Xerox toner. Stabilization options for the degrading gum arabic
were also discussed. The artist, however, expressed a desire to see it reapplied rather than simply stabilized, as she did not feel that it served its intended function any longer.

From there the discussion led to filling in paper losses with butterflies that had previously become detached. However, it was clear that the small amount of detached butterflies that had been saved would not be enough to fill in all the losses. Ostrander then offered to create more butterflies as she had for the previous restoration campaign with the previous owner. This would provide a more uniform look, which was something the artist felt was integral to the concept of the piece. Although it had not been a treatment option initially considered, once it was proposed, both conservators agreed that adding butterflies made by the artist would be the best option. Furthermore, the conservators felt that not only should Ostrander create replacement butterflies, but she should be the one to reapply them, as there was no specific pattern for their placement and it was solely based on a certain aesthetic the artist wished to portray. The conservators also requested that all new additions be marked on their back with the year “2013” to make the replacement pieces easily identifiable (figs. 4, 5).
Throughout the treatment process, it was imperative that both parties were communicating to ensure that materials and methods were appropriate. Problems with the gum arabic’s longevity and tackiness prompted experimentation with other options, which were then presented to the artist to make sure that the one chosen by the conservation team also matched the desired aesthetic of the artist. The team ultimately found Aquazol 200 to be an appropriate substitute, as it did not remain tacky at room temperature and had an appropriate viscosity, a wide solubility range, and a sheen similar to the gum arabic. It also has good aging properties and, in a controlled museum environment, should remain stable for the remaining life of the artwork. Ostrander applied the new butterflies in small batches, using a mixture of wheat starch paste and Lascaux 498 HV in lieu of Yes! Paste, and she consistently updated the conservation team on her progress. Wheat starch paste was chosen for its consistency with the artist’s materials, as Yes! Paste is starch-based, and for its better aging properties. Lascaux was added for both strength and flexibility, as the paste alone proved too brittle for an adhesive on a substrate as flexible as Masonite. Ostrander kept count of how many she added and strove to add only what was needed to prevent altering the original aesthetic (fig. 6).
What became almost immediately apparent was the value of having not only the artist’s voice as an integral component of the treatment decision process but also having the artist available to perform the more subjective components of the treatment. This shift from artist as consultant to artist as collaborator reflects a change in strategy for the conservation of the artwork and was critical to the success of the treatment, enhancing the team’s sensitivity to the concept of the artwork and the artist’s intent for how the piece is to be perceived.

It also is the result of the trust and respect that both parties have for each other, as well as the willingness to understand each other’s desired outcomes and find ways to align them. It was not always easy. The conservators had to constantly evaluate the work and determine if we were overstepping any ethical boundaries of conservation. Often, the conservators were also working on other projects and had to step away from *Seventy-three in a Moment* for short time periods. This would slow down the artist’s work, as she had to wait for us to finish cleaning a section or wait for a time we could be in the lab to allow her in to work. Luckily, a woman who is willing to dedicate eight hours a day every day for a year to creating an artwork is a patient person and was understanding when our schedules were complicated.

5. THE ARTIST PERSPECTIVE

Thompson interviewed Ostrander about her experiences working with conservators to treat her own piece to gain her perspective on the project. Questions posed to the artist were the following:

- How did you feel about the piece when you saw it in the [conservation] lab?
- What did you think of the conservation process?

![Still image from a video of the artist, Tasha Ostrander, sharing her perspective on the conservation of Seventy-three in a Moment, excerpted from an interview by Mina Thompson (Courtesy of Mina Thompson). Video available here: https://youtu.be/dnGpeNpaHRk](https://youtu.be/dnGpeNpaHRk)
What did you think of using different materials than the original? Did you feel like we were improving the piece or changing it? Does the improvement relate to the piece as symbolizing a life? What do you think about the fact that there probably aren’t 26,645 butterflies anymore? Is there anything that surprised you about conservators or the conservation process?

6. CONCLUSION

The desired outcome for both parties was first and foremost to preserve the concept of *Seventy-three in a Moment*. Second to that was preserving the materials that remained intact and stable. Ultimately, the artist identified the deterioration and resulting treatment of the artwork as analogous to the life cycle concept on which the piece is based.

Full collaboration with the artist is not a decision that can be entered into without some forethought by all stakeholders. The artist, curators, and conservators must be able to communicate effectively and be receptive and respectful to the needs and desires of the other. In this case, the artist was able to communicate her desires for how the piece should look. Equally important was that the conservators understood those desires, took them into consideration along with the history of the piece, and then communicated to all parties the ethical and material concerns regarding any changes to the piece and what might happen as it continues to age.

Direct collaboration with an artist was a definite benefit and one that does not present itself frequently for conservators who do not work in a museum or lab dedicated solely to contemporary art. Most importantly, it informed the treatment decisions and activities in a way that preserved the unique character and significance of the piece better than if the artist had not been involved. It also provided a unique opportunity to work with materials that are not as commonplace in an objects lab and required the experimentation and development of new techniques for its treatment. Most of all, it forced a paradigm shift in the thought process for the treatment from conservation of original material to restoration of artist’s intent.

The project also provided numerous opportunities for outreach through local interviews and articles to publicize the work that we were doing. The uniqueness and large scope of the project garnered a lot of attention locally and provided the opportunity to share the work that we do as conservators with the public.

The most unforeseen benefit to the project was the resulting professional relationships and friendships that developed from working in such close proximity with the artist. We were able to learn more about each other’s professions and lives on a much greater scale than would have resulted from a single interview. We believe that these relationships were not only beneficial to the time period surrounding the conservation treatment but for the long term as well. Each of us has been inspired and transformed by the project, and it is our hope that the outcomes will last longer than the life of a paper butterfly.

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REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


SOURCE OF MATERIALS

Aquazol 200, Lascaux 498 HV, and Wheat starch paste
Talas
330 Morgan Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11211
212-219-0770
http://talasonline.com

CRISTA PACK received her MS from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation and an MA in art history from Virginia Commonwealth University. Her major area of study has been in the care and conservation of ethnographic objects, with a minor concentration in preventive conservation. She is the Objects Conservator at the Missouri History Museum. She recently completed a Kress Fellowship at the Arizona State Museum. Prior to that, her third-year internship was with the Museums of New Mexico. Current research interests include the study of plant-based adhesives used by the Tarahumara of Mexico, as well as material and technological studies of pre-Columbian ceramic figures. Address: PO Box 11940, Saint Louis, MO 63112-0040. E-mail: cpack@mohistory.org
MINA THOMPSON has been the Associate Conservator for the Museums of New Mexico since 1999. She received her MA and Advanced Certificate in conservation from Buffalo State College and has trained and worked at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, as well as the Poggio Colla archaeological site in Italy. Most recently, she served as Program Chair, Chair, and Emerita Chair for the Objects Specialty Group between 2011 and 2014. She has become more active in artist interviews regarding the conservation of contemporary art and collaborations with Native American source communities. E-mail: mina.thompson@state.nm.us

TASHA OSTRANDER has worked as a professional artist for the past 22 years. She began her art studies as an apprentice for photographers Walter Chappell and Willard Van Dyke and later received a BFA from the University of New Mexico. Her most recent solo show, *Plains of Apparition*, opened in 2014 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a series of photographs that show a journey of ancestral history and her family’s participation in the development of the dioramas at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. For Ostrander, natural history museums, collections, and collectors of natural specimens are some of the main subject matter she uses to create a language in the complex inquiry into our connectedness and alienation with our natural environment. She creates installations, making things orderly, obsessive, and constructed as perception toward a micro and macro visual narrative, as a strategy toward her ongoing investigation of our internal and external placement within nature. E-mail: tashaostrander@msn.com