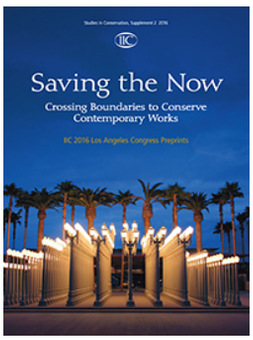

Studies in Conservation

ISSN: 0039-3630 (Print) 2047-0584 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ysic20

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To cite this article: Stavroula Golfomitsou (2016) The role of conservation in new contemporary art installations in new contexts: The case of Richard Serra's East–West/West–East in Qatar, Studies in Conservation, 61:sup2, 55-60, DOI: 10.1080/00393630.2016.1183099

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1183099

Published online: 19 Sep 2016.

The role of conservation in new contemporary art installations in new contexts: The case of Richard Serra's *East–West/West–East* in Qatar

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In recent years Qatar has invested a significant sum of money on exhibitions of contemporary artists and public art. This paper discusses decision-making processes in the conservation of contemporary artworks installed in newly emerging art markets such as Qatar, where there are no established practices. In 2014, Richard Serra's *East–West/West–East*, an installation of four vertical plates made of weathering (Corten™) steel, which span one kilometre at heights so as to reach the level of the surrounding gypsum plateaus, was installed in the Brouq Nature Reserve near Zekreet desert, two kilometres from the sea in the western part of Qatar. The artwork is already considered by some a landmark for the isolated area. The plates have started to develop protective corrosion layers, although Corten™ is not completely corrosion resistant when located near coastal sites. They have also started to bend and are heavily inscribed by visitors. Conservation of public art is complex, as site-specific artworks are linked with the landscape and defined by the relationships they develop with the public. Art installations of this magnitude demand not only conservation measures but also a management plan. The isolated location, the scale of the artwork, the aggressive environment, and the lack of supervision and monitoring of the area challenge current practices but offer an opportunity to develop methods to preserve art of site-specific art in new environments and diverse audiences. Monitoring will allow a better understanding of the interactions of visitors with the artwork and will shed light on the material's behaviour in this specific environment.

Keywords: Conservation of contemporary art, Richard Serra, *East–West/West–East*, Installation art, Emerging art markets, Corten, Weathering steel

Introduction

The conservation of contemporary art is a challenge. The diversity of artworks — from installation to performance art, from ephemeral media to modern materials — pose fundamental questions that not only stretch technical conservation methods to their limit, but pierce right to the very core of conservation ethics and principles. Museums, galleries, and collectors are increasingly aware of some of the conservation issues presented by contemporary artworks, particularly in relation to the ephemeral character of certain materials. Nevertheless, less openly discussed but equally pervasive issues, such as market forces and the globalization of art, also warrant careful consideration. Particularly in the case of well-established artists, the commodification of art as an economic investment exerts a strong influence on how it is considered and conserved. This paper aims to raise questions regarding decision-making processes in the preservation of contemporary artworks installed in newly emerging art markets such as Qatar, where there are no set rules or established practices.

The way in which conservation treatments can add, remove, or alter value has been discussed extensively (Taylor, 2015). Where contemporary art is treated as a representation of status and a financial investment, the role of conservation merits further consideration. The significance of artworks for different interest groups is at the forefront of decision-making in conservation. While newly installed artworks have yet to gain significance for many members of the local community in a country such as Qatar, the significance of contemporary artworks goes beyond the geographical territories they occupy, with certain works gaining instant attention in the international art scene. The role of conservation professionals in emerging markets for public art effectively pushes the boundaries of conservation as a profession.

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Received February 2016; revised paper accepted April 2016
DOI 10.1080/00393630.2016.1183099

Until recently, the general belief was that the new is not as valuable as the old. The accomplishments of many great artists in the past were recognized quite late in their lives or even after their death and as a result their work was only conserved once it was accepted as valuable. By contrast, the quest to save what might represent our era in the future is constant. As culture is primarily studied through its material remains, it is logical that we wish to conserve things for the future that might represent our culture. As Danto (1999, p. 6) stressed, the historical present is unknowable and will only be known in the future. Although, in theory, art should not be defined by monetary value, with prices hitting new highs annually, it is clear that there is an economic aspect to be considered.

The role of museums as custodians of art is in some ways clear, as part of their mission is to protect artworks from deteriorating even when they are made of materials that were never meant to last. Installation art is changing the way we carry out conservation, going beyond traditional methods and with documentation and preventive conservation gaining centre stage. Concept and original artistic intent are at the forefront of curatorial and conservation decision-making processes. The conservation of public art is, however, more complicated as the artworks are linked with the landscape and defined by the context and the relationships they develop with different audiences. All the above are not only challenging concepts and practices but add to the ever expanding factors delineating contemporary conservation.

New contexts, new audiences

Over the last 10 years, the art market has expanded tremendously, with countries in the Middle East claiming a significant stake in the art world. Qatar has invested heavily in art through the purchase of well-known paintings and sculpture. The development of museums and acquisition of popular contemporary art are used as soft power tools in Qatar. The commissioning of public art pieces plays an important role in establishing Qatar as an international player in the art field, with Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the Chairperson of Qatar Museums, named the most powerful person in art in 2013 (Art Review, 2013). The development of the Art Mill project, which will host art galleries on the Doha Corniche waterfront, will add to the portfolio of contemporary art in Qatar Museums. However, in addition to purchasing important paintings such as Paul Cézanne's *The Card Players* and Paul Gauguin's *When Will You Marry?*, Qatar has invested a sizeable sum in public art installations including examples by Richard Serra, Damien Hirst, Tony Smith, Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois, Tom Otterness, Urs Fischer, Tom Claassen, Subodh Gupta, and Ahmed Al Bahrani. In 2013, Qatar Museums displayed *The Miraculous Journey* by Damien Hirst, an artwork made of 14 bronze statues, currently located at the Sidra Medical Centre, while in 2014, Richard Serra's *East–West/West–East* was unveiled (Foster, 2014). A more recent example is Tony Smith's *Smoke*, the eight metre high (24 foot) sculpture that is currently displayed at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Centre (Qatar Museums, 2015). The sculpture is made of aluminium and its provenance and date of manufacture are unknown.

The way in which these artworks are viewed by Qatar Museums is summarized in the statement found on their website 'The installations speak to people who could become cultural producers, creative practitioners, and museum professionals in years to come. They often attract international press attention, projecting a message about the diversity and spirit of our emerging cultural landscape. They help us form connections across continents. They are for everyone in Qatar, for now, and for future generations' (Qatar Museums, 2016). The statement presents in a concise manner the ways these artworks are expected to be perceived in Qatar and beyond. However, the majority of these artworks are exposed to environments that prove to be quite aggressive for the majority of materials. For example, the bronze statues of Damien Hirst's *The Miraculous Journey* were originally encapsulated in inflated cloth balloons which isolated them from their surrounding environment. This solution quickly proved to be complex and expensive to maintain, so the balloons were removed. However, as the statues are located in an area that is still under construction they could not remain uncovered and they were covered temporarily with fabric to protect them from the dust. The solution was meant to be only temporary and parts of the statues are now uncovered, with dust from the construction site — and the generally dusty atmosphere — gathering on the exposed surfaces. There is also the risk that the textile covering the sculptures will retain moisture and increase the corrosion rate. As the statues will be relocated in the near future all actions to replace or remove the covers are currently in abeyance, with the result that the bronze surfaces have started to corrode unevenly, with clear signs of active corrosion (Fig. 1).

At the other end of the spectrum is Richard Serra's *East–West/West East*, installed in the Brouq Nature Reserve near Zekreet desert, two kilometres from the sea in the western part of Qatar, around one hour's drive from the capital city of Doha. The artwork is an installation of four vertical plates that span over

Figure 1 Damien Hirst, *The Miraculous Journey*, which was placed at the Sidra Medical Center in 2013. The 14 statues are partially covered with textile.

one kilometre (Fig. 2). Each plate has a different height, between 14 and 18 m, to correspond with the level of the surrounding gypsum plateaux. The plates are made of weathering steel or Corten™, which is a steel alloy containing small amounts of copper, nickel, phosphorus, and chromium. Corten™ has been used extensively by Richard Serra and other artists as it develops a layer of iron oxyhydroxides that act protectively against further corrosion. The protective patina develops over a number of years and its composition depends largely on the environment to which it is exposed. The artwork is already a landmark for the picturesque area, although it is difficult to reach without knowing its GPS coordinates. The artwork is in general perceived in a positive light by the public, although there have been some bemused reactions from locals who do not understand what it represents and why it is located in that specific area. Although the sculpture has started to develop a protective patina, a number of issues can be noted; for example, the metal plates have started to bend slightly because of their height (Fig. 3). The lower parts of the plates are scratched and inscribed heavily by visitors using limestone fragments found in the vicinity. The inscriptions are superficial, but result in the formation of different corrosion layers, some of which appear to be active corrosion (Fig. 4). The wind also carries abrasive sand particles, which might prevent the formation of a uniform passive layer that will act protectively. In addition, Corten™ does not appear to be resistant to corrosion when located on coastal sites — such as the location where this work is installed — that are characterized by a high concentration of airborne chlorides and fluctuating relative humidity (Fig. 5).

Although the composition of the Corten™ plates and the thickness of the metal can guarantee a significant number of years in terms of lifespan, the replacement or removal of an artwork of this magnitude will be problematic. The destruction and relocation of site-specific art is by no means a new topic and has previously affected works by Richard Serra. In 1989, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which was commissioned in 1979 by the General Services Administration for the Federal Plaza in Manhattan and completed in 1981, was removed from the site (Senie, 1989). Since the artist declined to sanction the relocation of the piece, it has since been placed in storage (Senie, 2002).

Although many artworks have been purchased by Qatar Museums and individual collectors, commissioned art differs. Pieces such as Richard Serra's *East–West/West–East* were made deliberately for the specific site and the landscape is as important to the artwork as the material itself: the art installation is an integral part of the surrounding landscape. According to Serra the artwork gives the site a demarcation between east and west and gives humans a scale to measure their relationship to nature (Grichting *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, Serra stated:

> Before, there was no way of discerning where anything was in relation to where you were, because you had no point of reference. What that piece does is give you a point of reference in relationship to a line, and your upstanding relationship to a vertical plane and infinity, and a perspectival relationship to a context — and pulls that context together. It makes it graspable. That's actually a place out there now, and there certainly wasn't one before. We did that simply by putting up four plates (*The Independent*, 9 April 2014).

What to save and how

Richard Serra has commented that 'How long those pieces will last, nobody knows. But I think this piece has a good shelf life' (New Yorker, 16 April 2014). The shelf life of contemporary artworks is an interesting concept, especially when considering that there are cases in which materiality is not important, such as media art. There is no definition of what the shelf life of an artwork should or could be, yet conservation needs to (re)invent methods to preserve both the notion and the material. Should action be taken from the moment of installation to monitor and document the changes as they occur? Or should the artwork be left alone until there is a real need for intervention? Is corrosion prevention even possible when discussing artworks of this size placed in a relatively isolated area? Is documentation replacing conservation and will we reach a point where artworks will be simply archived photos and videos?

Figure 2 General view of Richard Serra, ***East–West/West–East*** **installed in the Brouq Nature Reserve near the Zekreet desert. The four vertically placed Corten™ plates span over one kilometre.**

Figure 3 Details showing bending of one of the plates of ***East-West/West-East*****.**

The advantages of monitoring change are clear as the results will allow us to understand better both the audiences' interactions with the artwork and the material's behaviour in its specific environment. They will also allow detection of early signs of failure that could lead to a conservation intervention. However, in art installations of this magnitude, conservation measures are not enough and a management plan is considered necessary to preserve the artworks. Managing an installation such as Serra's *East–West/West–East* comes with a number of challenges, including the isolated location, the scale of the artwork, the aggressive environment, and the lack of oversight and

Figure 4 Detail from a Corten™ plate of ***East–West/West–East*** **, showing inscriptions made using limestone.**

Figure 5 View of the surface of one of the four Corten™ plates of *East-West/West-East*.

monitoring of the installation landscape. Another issue often overlooked is how the surrounding natural heritage environment is impacted by visitors to the site, especially as the lack of established routes to and from the site results in a plethora of tracks across the landscape from four-wheel drive vehicles. Lack of facilities, such as waste disposal, also leads to litter across the site. Furthermore, the unsupervised interaction of visitors with the artwork, including graffiti, leads to non-uniform corrosion that may well affect the longevity of the installation, and potentially its value. While interaction with the artwork is part of the visitor experience, it can be detrimental to its presentation and preservation.

Given the lack of established practices for public art in Qatar, this might be an opportunity to experiment with new management models. A starting point would be to understand better the interaction of visitors (Qatari nationals, expatriates, and tourists) with the artwork and the surrounding site. Management models developed in the region for public sites such as archaeological or historic sites will be a starting point as they can be developed to suit local needs. Although the visitor objectives may be different, small isolated sites face similar issues and require values assessment with all possible stakeholders to discuss possible management and conservation scenarios (Palumbo *et al.*, 2014). Scenarios could include monitoring to record changes, establishment of a maintenance plan or management of the site in relation to visitor perceptions and local community concerns, regardless of how small the latter might be.

The role of preventive conservation

In the case of *East–West/West–East*, replacement of the large metal plates will be costly and not particularly environmentally friendly given that they were made in Germany and shipped to Qatar. While the artwork is site-specific and the metal surface has yet to develop protective corrosion layers, the thickness of the plate is, nevertheless, such that the artwork will survive for a number of years. Whether preventive measures and monitoring of the development of corrosion are necessary is yet to be decided and will depend on the future significance of the artwork. At present the significance of the artwork exceeds its value as an investment as it is already considered a landmark in Qatar and has gained international attention.

In addition to these challenging dilemmas, it is clear that we need to improve our knowledge of the deterioration rate of modern materials such as weathering steel. Current studies show a relationship between the formation of stable and less stable corrosion products. Aramendia *et al.* (2014) showed that there is a direct relationship between the protective ability index, which is calculated from the ratio of stable to unstable corrosion products present on the sculpture surface and the overall stability and the aesthetic appearance of weathering steel. Importantly, in this particular research sculptures made of weathering steel were studied, including Richard Serra's *The Plow*, which was manufactured in 1992 and has been on long-term loan to the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, since 2008 (Aramendia *et al.*, 2014). It is evident from studies that have been conducted to date that the protective corrosion layers formed on the surface of weathering steel depend on the alloy composition (in particular the percentage of copper it contains) and the environmental conditions to which it is exposed. Factors such as the orientation of the artwork and its proximity to the sea are also important. Other studies that have looked at the differences between Corten™ surfaces that have a naturally formed patina, an artificial patina or have been protected with wax, have emphasized the need to obtain long-term data from in situ structures (Chiavari *et al.*, 2012). The behaviour of Corten™ in these environmental conditions will inform further studies.

One of the advantages of monitoring the development of protective corrosion layers in a variety of

environments is that this information will be collected in real conditions and in real time. This is essential for most modern materials used in contemporary art, as although accelerated weathering tests are extremely useful to help understand a material, information regarding behaviour under long-term exposure in different environments is of greater value.

Conclusion

The globalization of art means that we do not save art only for a single nation, but also for the rest of the world. As contemporary art goes beyond geopolitical boundaries, conservation should follow suit. The accepted practices applied in places with long-standing traditions of public art installations might be overlooked in emerging art markets and may even be irrelevant due to different environmental contexts and heritage management structures. The challenge lies in the fact that western concepts of best practice often clash with local socioeconomic realities and with different understandings of the difference between intellectual property and physical ownership. Contracts with artists for commissioned art often include clauses related to maintenance. However, lack of clarity in the contracts or experience of when an artwork will need maintenance can lead to different outcomes. One can only assume that any professional involved in the conservation of contemporary art will consult the appropriate stakeholders and that correct decisions will result. However, in organizations such as Qatar Museums, high staff turnover and lack of transparency in relation to contracts can impede such consultations and the implementation of advice and planning. Globalization of art means new challenges in the approaches to art conservation but also solutions that do not fit existing models. With this in mind, the conservation of installations will progress in response to new environments and diverse audiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Flavia Ravaioli, Stephanie Black, Alison Heritage, and Jane Humphris for valuable feedback, and Austin Nevin for his support.

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