



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL INC.

**The Shock of the New: Modern Materials, Media and Methods  
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**Abstract**

**Title:**

*Contemporary Art Detectives: or conservation sleuths and the mysterious case of the time-based artworks. A collaborative tale*

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**Abstract:**

Conservation is always a bit like solving a mystery. We are presented with a puzzle, we investigate, sometimes following a few red herrings, and we eventually come to a solution. We are used to cases where we anticipate issues and find ethical and practical solutions. Yet, for contemporary artworks it can be difficult to even identify what the original intention was, let alone ascertain if any change or deterioration has occurred.

At the Art Gallery of NSW, objects conservators have been working closely with the specialised time-based art conservator to unravel the often complex issues surrounding works of contemporary art that have both physical, digital, electronic and kinetic components. This paper will follow the tales of several contemporary artworks that have required a collaborative approach across traditional institutionalised boundaries, and the cooperation and resources of multiple departments. Works include a major electronic installation by Tatsuo Miyajima, a light/haze room by Anthony McCall and several mixed media works by Australian performance artist Mike Parr. As well as assessing condition and applying preservation principles, conservators have had to play the part of contemporary art detectives, gathering information about the abstract nature of a work, which is not always logically documented and is sometimes only available within the dark recesses of institutional memory.

Conservators at AGNSW have had to move beyond the forensic investigation of the physical or digital preservation of the components of an artwork, into the psychological understanding of motives of the artist and the concept of the work. By gathering together previous information and improving and evolving documentation practices, the long-term preservation of these works is made more certain. Sleuthing tools such as iteration reports and artist questionnaires

have also been developed to suit the specific needs and resources of AGNSW. Deductions and case notes made now will provide invaluable back-up to conservators in the future.

**Brief Biography of the Author(s):**

Kasi Albert is currently an Objects Conservator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and has previously held positions at the NGA, Australian War Memorial, Artlab Australia and the National Trust. Holding a Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation from the University of Melbourne and a Postgraduate Diploma in Conservation and Restoration Studies from the University of Lincoln, Kasi has a special interest in the preservation and management of contemporary art, especially installation works, and in advocacy for the conservation profession.

Asti Sherring is currently employed as the first time-based art conservator at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, a position which began in 2015. Asti completed a Bachelor of Media Arts with honours from Sydney University in 2005. She completed a Post-Graduate Certificate in photographs conservation (Melbourne University) in 2011 and a Masters of Materials Conservation specialising in paper and photographic materials in 2012. In 2017 Asti began postgraduate research in the form of a PhD at the University of Canberra on Time-based art conservation in Australia.

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