

Dealing with non-traditional materials – a collaborative approach (case study)

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The conservation profession is forever evolving, particularly in the area of contemporary art, which continues to present more complex and multifaceted challenges for conservators. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) the preparation of works for an overseas touring exhibition brought just some of these interesting challenges to the fore, prompting conservators to reassess the suitability of traditional and standard conservation approaches in the treatment of contemporary artworks.

Focusing on a work from the Kaldor collection by Australian contemporary artist Christian Capurro, the paper traces the sequence of events involved in preparing the work for loan and subsequent treatment of the work on its return. Through correspondence and interviews with the artist, the paper also examines the artist's use of non-traditional materials and techniques.

By identifying the role conservators play as both collaborators and facilitators when dealing with contemporary art challenges, the paper also examines the subject of artistic intent, and importance of making it a key priority in all treatment considerations.

Keywords

correction fluid, non-traditional media, contemporary art conservation, artistic intent

Background

Further to John Kaldor's announcement of his intention to gift his collection of contemporary art to the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), a work from the collection by Australian contemporary artist Christian Capurro was requested for loan as part of an overseas touring exhibition. For the purpose of this loan the work was required to travel to a number of South-east Asian venues including Singapore, Bangkok and Chiang Mai. With the AGNSW now custodians of the work, but John Kaldor still the official owner, conservators were asked to prepare the work for loan in consultation with the key stakeholders including the owner, artist and respective curators.

The artwork

The work, entitled *Compress (pit of oublivores)*, is a series of fourteen drawings on magazine pages, which on initial examination appear to be a collection of blank sheets. On closer inspection, however, subtle images become apparent with

figurative shadows emerging in cool colours from the surface (Figure 1). The works are created through the physical pressure of erasing illustrations from magazine pages. The artist lays one page on top of another and, by erasing the top page, imprints images onto the bottom one. The original text or imagery on the receiving page is then painted over with correction fluid, a means of literally whiting-out the image. Delicate, intricate, and haunting, *Compress* presents the viewer with ethereal traces of physical gesture and form.

'Two magazine pages come together face to face, one relatively white and empty (the "host" sheet), the other with more printed bodies and goods to give-up under the hand-pressure of erasing the pages' reverse sides. Stain-like forms and silhouettes are imprinted, transferred from the face of one page onto the other. The host sheet is kept, the other discarded. Lastly, the original contents of the kept sheet are whited-out: only that and the image-transfer remain – a *Compress*' (Capurro).

The correction fluid sits on the surface of each page concealing the underlying contents, and the tension created by the thick solidified fluid results in a cockled, relief-like surface. The subtle contrast between the cool white correction fluid and the warm white magazine pages slowly becomes apparent as the viewer works hard to resolve the subtle images. The physical nature of

the artist's technique is unapparent at first glance; it is only by understanding the laborious process that has been undertaken to achieve these images of almost 'nothingness' that one can fully appreciate the skill involved. The process of obliteration and effacing takes its toll on the pages, which appear to be bruised and lived-on. The meaning behind Capurro's works is clear – by erasing the popular images of media leaving a near blank page he is working against an image-saturated society: 'the fastidious labouring of the body against the image' (Capurro).

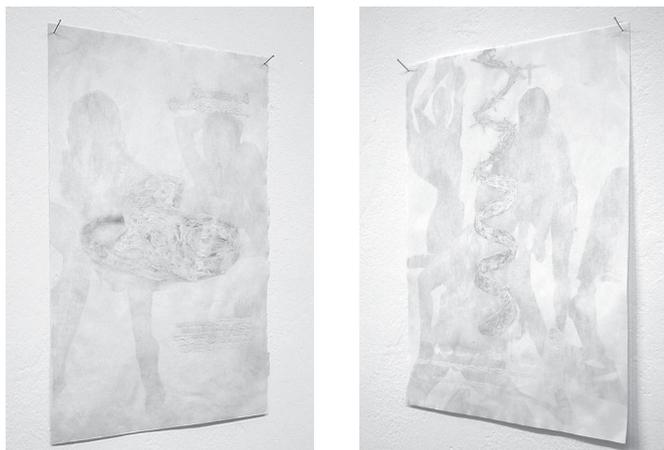


Figure 1 (left & right) – Christian Capurro, 'Compress (pit of doublivores)', 2006–2007, 2 of 14 works-on-paper drawn under the pressure of erasing other images, then corrected; magazine pages with erasure, correction fluid, ink and pins, 30 x 22 cm sheet approx. – Art Gallery of New South Wales, John Kaldor Family Collection. © Christian Capurro

What is significant to note about *Compress* from a conservation perspective is that many of its key features, if not interpreted correctly, may mistakenly be seen as deterioration problems. Cockling, creasing, discolouration and general wear – characteristics commonly associated with handling, display and age – are in fact intentional and deliberate aesthetic features of the work. In order to ensure the discrepancy between the condition and meaning of the work were not confused, the subtleties of the work were discussed in detail with the AGNSW curator during the condition-reporting process.

The media (non-traditional)

With little information available on correction fluid as an art medium, conservators set about gathering as much knowledge on the material as possible in order to:

- better understand its material properties
- improve documentation of the work
- make an informed decision on the preparation of the work for loan
- determine the most suitable methods of storage and display of the work once assimilated into the AGNSW collection

- develop a strategy for future preservation of the work.

Through correspondence with the artist, product research and non-destructive scientific analysis (XRF), information was compiled on the medium in relation to its material composition and working properties.

First developed in the late 1950s, correction fluids were designed to cover mistakes made while typing or hand-writing on paper. Typically applied using a brush (though pen, roller ball, foam and tape options exist today) it dries forming a solid film, which effectively covers errors and allows the correct mark to be written over. Correction fluids have steadily improved over the years, with several formulations in existence today, each with varying working properties. While there are many different types of ingredients that can be used to make correction fluid, the general formulas are composed as follows:

1. opacifying agent
2. polymeric film former
3. solvent
4. miscellaneous ingredients.

The opacifying agent is the key ingredient in the fluid formula, as it is the material responsible for covering the errant mark. The most common opacifying agent is titanium dioxide, an inorganic material derived from titanium ores, which has a high refractive index producing a predominantly white colour (Figure 2). When mixed with different materials a range of hues and tonal varieties can be achieved. In general, the opacifying agent makes up approximately 40–60% of the formula.

The polymeric material is used to affix the opacifying agent to the paper by creating a film that bonds to the paper fibres when it dries or cures. The film is designed to be strong so it will stay in place, but also flexible so it will not crack, flake, and fall off under normal conditions. A variety of polymeric resins can be used such as acrylic resins, petroleum resins, chlorinated polyolefin resins and even synthetic rubber. To make the optimal film, however, a copolymer is used, such as a latex emulsion. In a typical correction fluid formula, the polymer resin comprises 5–15% of the formula.

The solvent is required to control the viscosity and drying time of the correction fluid. The solvent works by diluting the formula and quickly evaporating to leave a dried film. The solvent also improves stability and helps make other materials in the formula more compatible with each other. Two types of solvents are used: aqueous-based and organic-based. Aqueous-based solvents are used for correction fluids that will cover oil-based inks, and are usually a mixture of water and alcohol. Organic-based solvents, which use volatile organic compounds (VOCs), dry more quickly and, as a result, are better for covering water-based inks. A variety of organic compounds can be used including acetone, toluene, xylene, ethyl acetate, and methyl ethyl ketone. (Note: Recent

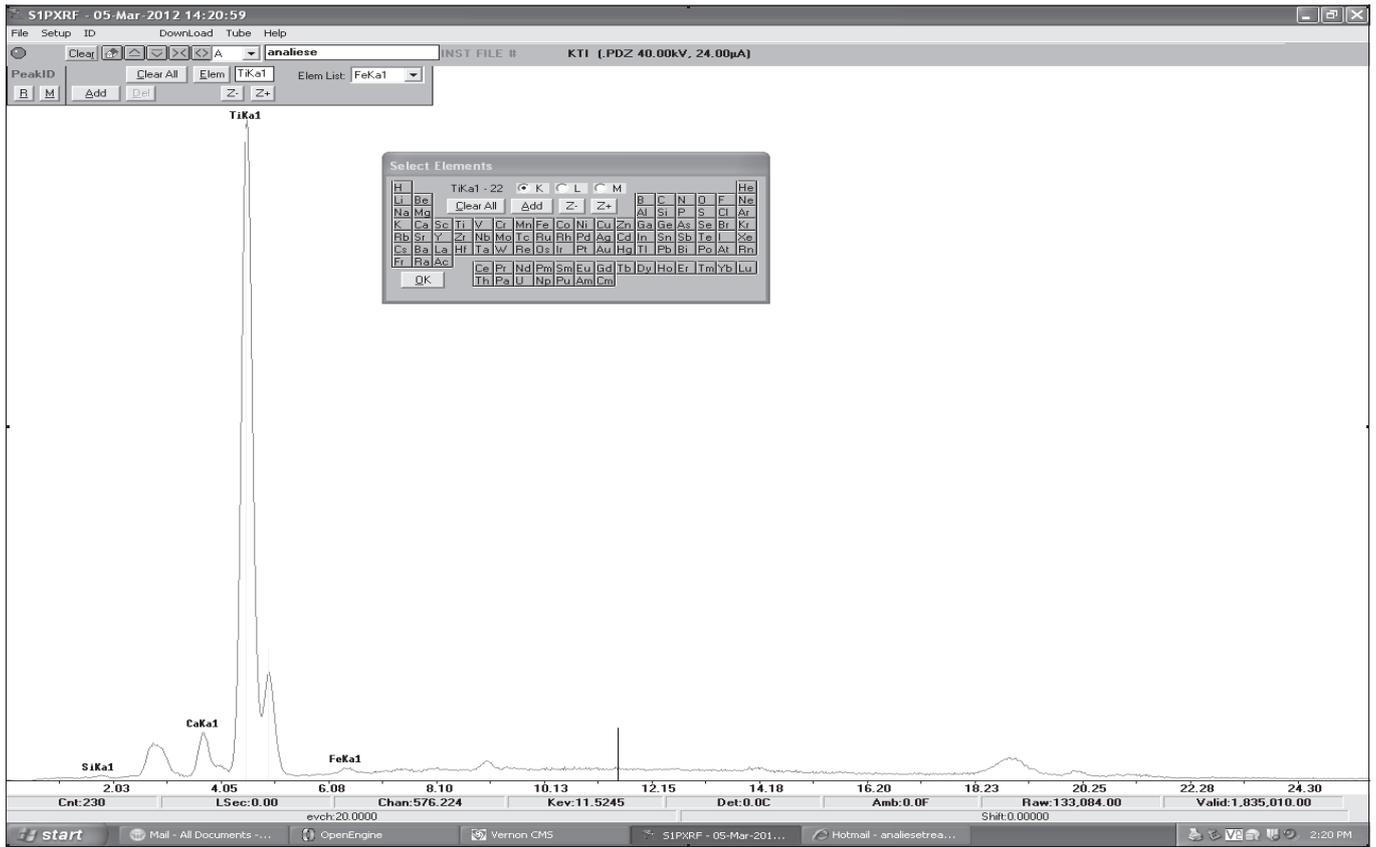


Figure 2 – XRF spectra for correction fluid used in ‘Compress’ confirming presence of titanium dioxide (opacifying agent)

environmental concerns have led to the development of formulas that use little or no volatile organic solvents). The formula can be composed of anywhere from 25 to 50% solvent.

A variety of other ingredients are also added to correction fluid formulas to optimise stability and performance. As titanium dioxide is not generally soluble in solvents due to its tendency to settle out over time, suspending and dispersing agents are often added. Examples of the former include hydroxyethylcellulose, xan-than gum or guar gum. Examples of the latter include phosphate esters, ethoxylated alcohol, and polysorbitans. Other ingredients added include chelating agents, defoamers and preservatives to prevent biological contamination.

Through correspondence with the artist it was established that up to half a dozen different brands of correction fluid were used in the work, each offering varying characteristics (Figure 3):

‘I use different brands of correction fluid depending on availability as well as what characteristics – hue, luminance and tone of white, opacity, drying characteristics, consistency and flow, surface sheen, bottle brush types or correction pen nib sizes, etc. – I think might suit what I’m doing. The most commonly available brands in OZ, and ones I use a lot, are Liquid Paper, Bic, Tipp-Ex, Marbig, Pelican and Pentel (only in pens). Overseas I always try what’s locally available.



Figure 3 – Selection of commercially available correction fluids used by the artist

‘I never tone the white-out though I do get quite different end qualities from how I use the combination of pigment, solvent and drying retardant.’ (Capurro 2012)

The artist confirmed his preference for brush application of the fluid, and pointed out the varying surface characteristics that could be achieved by shaking or not shaking the bottle prior to application. Interestingly the artist noted that in all the time he worked with correction fluid (since the mid ‘90s) he had never observed yellowing of the media or any other obvious deterioration problems commonly associated with age.

The loan

For previous displays of the work, the artist had provided detailed installation instructions for the pinning of the pages directly to the wall. As loose, fragile and vulnerable sheets of paper, however, the primary concerns in preparing the works for this loan were the damage that could potentially be sustained during pinning at each venue in addition to the risk of damage to the media and support as a result of unstable environmental conditions. In order to find a suitable method of displaying the works without compromising the artist's intent, a range of approaches was discussed with the artist until a solution was found.

Figure 4 – 'Compress' page #10 – detail of work attached to acrylic box frame

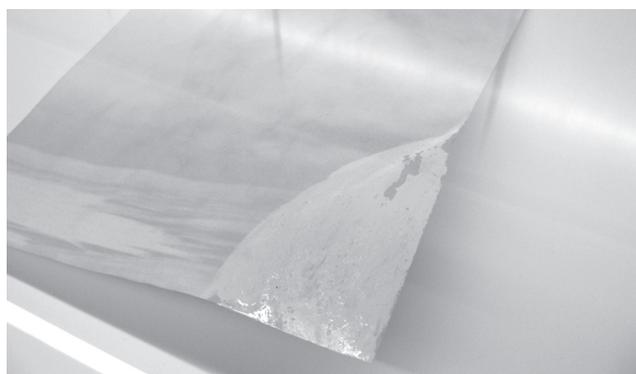


Figure 5 – 'Compress' page #10 – detail of area of media loss

It was agreed that the pages would be floated within custom-made acrylic box frames designed to the specifications of the artist. The pages would be pinned at the top left and right hand corners, as originally intended, to maintain the effect of the works appearing to float effortlessly on the wall. The paper surrounding the pinholes was strengthened on the verso of each page with Japanese Kozo paper and wheat starch paste, in order to reduce the risk of tearing. A new set of display instructions was then

prepared for the loan outlining the artist's preferences in terms of layout, arrangement, spacing and lighting.

Upon completion of the loan, the works were returned to the AGNSW in good condition with the exception of one page within the series. It appeared that page #10 in between venues had regrettably been stored leaning face forward, resulting in the lower right-hand corner of the page becoming adhered to the acrylic box frame (Figure 4). Increased planar distortion within the page suggested that the work had been stored in an unstable environment with an elevated relative humidity, resulting in the correction fluid becoming tacky and in turn adhering to the acrylic. Upon return of the work to the AGNSW the page was mechanically separated from the acrylic box frame but a moderate-sized area of media loss remained (Figure 5).

The treatment approach

In order to ensure a well-founded decision on the conservation treatment of the work could be achieved, taking into account the material, visual, conceptual and historical values of the work, a number of discussions took place involving the key stakeholders. As part of these discussions, a range of possible treatment approaches was considered including standard consolidation techniques to reduce the risk of further media loss in addition to traditional toning and retouching techniques in order to reduce the aesthetic impact of the damage. Further to these discussions it was agreed the most suitable course of action was to have the artist repair the area of damage in consultation with the conservation department. This decision was made on the basis that the artist, through many years of working and experimenting with this non-traditional medium, was most familiar with its properties and, having built up a palette of correction fluids, was not only the best equipped to repair the damaged area in terms of tone, hue, luminance and texture, but was also the most experienced.



Figure 6 – 'Compress' page #10 – post treatment in custom made storage enclosure

Another justification for the choice of treatment was that, by having the artist involved in the repair process, both the material identity and integrity of the work would be maintained. In consultation with the conservation department, the work was repaired by the artist at his Melbourne studio, and detailed documentation of the process was gathered and placed on the conservation files for reference. Further to the treatment, a new storage enclosure was devised for the work in order to ensure the surface of the repaired sheet would remain untouched, thus reducing the risk of future damage (Figure 6).

Interview with the artist

With *Compress* intended to become part of the AGNSW collection as part of the Kaldor Gift, conservators took the opportunity, during the course of the project, to interview the artist in greater detail. The aim of the interview was to document clearly the following:

1. the artist's intentions in the work
2. the artist's use of non-traditional materials and techniques (their significance and meaning)
3. the artist's opinions and recommendations on conserving the work into the future.

Through the interview process it became clear to conservators that Capurro's artistic intentions and choice of materials and techniques in *Compress* are inextricably linked. His use of correction fluid is not just an aesthetic choice made by virtue of its material quality, but a choice based equally on its functional role as a 'corrective device' and as a 'literary reference'. For Capurro the medium contributes directly to the meaning of the work, thus any modification of it (through conservation treatment or otherwise) would result in the meaning of the work being altered.

The interview also highlighted the importance the artist places on the presentation of his works, this being as significant to him as the physical works themselves. Interestingly, Capurro's display preferences for *Compress* are very much at odds with conservation standards as he specifically chooses very high light levels:

'... to create an even invasive white light throughout the space, an illumination I would describe as bright, brittle but deathly dull, this quality of light, particular to fluorescents, works sympathetically with the compress sheets. If the only available lighting is incandescent it should be high key and even. The warm case of incandescent light that is (especially) noticeable in low 'works-on-paper' levels of illumination is unsuitable for this work'. (Capurro 2007)

While acknowledging his preference for non-archival display options and non-traditional materials, Capurro pointed out that he chooses his materials not for their stability but for their suitability

to express his ideas and to create a specific visual image. He graciously accepts that his works have a limited lifespan and thus is not consumed by the challenge of making them last forever. While Capurro sees *Compress* as part of the here and now, he hopes that, through accurate and detailed documentation of his work, his original concepts, ideas and artistic intentions will live on.

The interview process was both enlightening and informative on a number of levels. In addition to enabling conservators to better document the work in terms of its artistic intent, the detailed information provided by the artist on his use of non-traditional materials (i.e. brands & suppliers) and techniques (methods of application, etc.) also provided conservators with a solid frame of reference for future conservation strategies. The process also provided a platform on which a valuable relationship was established between the artist and conservators, and in turn a mutual appreciation for the roles each would play in continuing the successful presentation of the work into the future.

Conclusion

Through the course of this project it became clear to conservators that approaches to dealing with contemporary art challenges differ greatly to those of traditional art. Today, the intentions behind many artworks are very often defined by the materials and techniques used to create them – a symbiotic and interdependent relationship, which must be acknowledged as such. Any intervention to aspects or component parts of contemporary artworks thus will most certainly affect the integrity of the work and potentially alter its meaning. By gaining a greater understanding of artists' intentions through correspondence, discussions and interviews, the significance behind artists' choice of materials and techniques can be established and recorded. In turn, by ensuring the material properties of artworks are fully understood through academic and scientific research, conservators can make informed decisions on suitable conservation approaches. Through working and collaborating with colleagues and key stakeholders via an interdisciplinary approach, not only is the knowledge input maximised but a greater weight and authority is given to the decisions made, and balanced outcomes are achieved.

Without doubt the role of the conservator is changing and expanding, particularly in the area of contemporary art. A much greater focus is now required on documentation, particularly in instances where 'change' plays an integral part in the meaning of an artwork. Conservators must accurately record artists' intentions relating to future conservation and presentation of artworks in order to establish suitable boundaries. Conservators must be prepared to meet the ever-changing needs of contemporary art by thinking outside the box, particularly in instances where standard and traditional conservation approaches are inappropriate. Most importantly conservators must now, more than ever, be fully informed not only on the material values of works they are

dealing with but the visual, conceptual and historical values also, in order to ensure that these important values are being equally maintained.

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