

Authenticity, Misunderstanding and Institutional Responsibility in Contemporary Art
Sherri Irvin

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Abstract:

This paper addresses two questions about audience misunderstandings of contemporary art. First, what is the institution's responsibility to prevent predictable misunderstandings about the nature of a contemporary artwork, and how should this responsibility be balanced against other considerations? Second, can an institution ever be justified in intentionally mounting an inauthentic display of an artwork, given that such displays are likely to mislead? I will argue that while the institution has a defeasible responsibility to mount authentic displays, this is not always sufficient to avoid misunderstanding; the institution will sometimes need to supply auxiliary information. And even where competing considerations require mounting an inauthentic display, thoughtful museum practice can promote the audience's ability to grasp the work. The argument will be developed with consideration of artworks by El Anatsui, Lygia Clark, and Glenn Ligon.

On September 19, 1977, a concerned audience member sent a handwritten letter to the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In it, he complained that the museum had incorrectly installed Eva Hesse's work *Expanded Expansion*. He drew this conclusion because the display he encountered failed to match a picture he had seen – specifically, one of the panels was leaning the wrong way. He considered the work's 'obvious incorrect condition' to be a matter of the greatest seriousness and indicated that he had copied his letter to *Artforum*, a major contemporary art magazine.¹

In her reply, Assistant Curator Linda Shearer informed the audience member about some aspects of the work. She wrote:

The artist intended many of her pieces to be placed and arranged randomly, at the discretion of the curator or collector, as the case may be. This is indeed so with *Expanded Expansion*, as the title indicates; it can be stretched to its full capacity or compressed, like an accordion, depending on the space it occupies and the person installing it. Any irregularities that occur are entirely within the nature of the piece.

This exchange, though four decades old, exemplifies a situation that is ongoing for institutions displaying contemporary avant-garde or conceptual art. Audience members may arrive with the assumption that the artwork has a fixed nature determined by the artist's initial creative act; but contemporary artworks often defy this assumption. Many audience members will thus be predictably misled about the nature of the work unless the institution intervenes.

Because it has, among its roles, the preservation and presentation of art and the education of the public, a museum has a special responsibility to foster correct

¹ This letter and Shearer's reply are found in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's object file on Eva Hesse's *Expanded Expansion* (1969, 75.2138). The reply is quoted with Linda Shearer's permission.

beliefs about artworks. I will argue that institutions are obligated, to the extent feasible, to mount authentic displays of the artwork: among other things, mounting an authentic display staves off some sources of misunderstanding. However, for some works, mounting an authentic display is not sufficient: the institution should do more to promote audience understanding. And even where it is necessary to mount an inauthentic display, the institution can nonetheless successfully promote audience understanding by making available the right sort of experience and providing appropriate information.

1. Objects, Artworks, and Displays

I will speak of objects, artworks, and displays. By 'objects,' I refer to the physical objects fabricated, selected or indicated by the artist. By 'artwork,' I refer to the artist's creative product that is susceptible of being displayed, appreciated, and interpreted. By 'display,' I refer to an event in which the artwork is made available to the audience for experience or appreciation, typically by way of a presentation of objects.

Prior to the contemporary period, distinguishing these concepts might have seemed unnecessary: an artwork typically seemed to be co-extensive with a physical object.² Since displaying the work was a straightforward matter of presenting that object to the audience, identifying the display as a distinct event might have appeared extraneous.

In contemporary art, however, the situation is different. Some contemporary artworks are such that no physical object is essential; all the physical objects displayed are subject to replacement. Even when there are objects essential to the work, the objects alone may underdetermine the artwork: correct configuration of the objects may also be essential. Moreover, since there may be multiple acceptable configurations, the work cannot simply be identified with a more complex multi-part object with a fixed configuration.³ In addition, for reasons we can only sketch here, the artwork cannot simply be reduced to a particular display: the potential for variable displays is often thematically important to the work (as we will see below in the case of El Anatsui).

In such cases, the artwork is most readily understood as something like a universal that has displays as its instances, much as a musical work is typically seen as a universal that has performances as its instances.⁴ While we cannot offer a full argument for this picture, the distinctions among artworks, objects and displays will be operative in what follows.

2. Authenticity of Object-Based Contemporary Artworks

² Peter Lamarque discusses reasons for distinguishing the artwork from the physical object in 'Work and Object', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 102 (2002), 141-162, at pp. 146-151.

³ An example is Liz Magor's *Production*, discussed in Sherri Irvin, 'Museums and the Shaping of Contemporary Artworks', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006), 143-156.

⁴ There are dissenters from this view of repeatable artworks. See, e.g., Christy Mag Uidhir, *Art & Art-Attempts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Authenticity in art was traditionally understood as tied to the identity of a physical object maintained in a particular condition.⁵ However, for contemporary works subject to variable configuration, authenticity does not inhere simply in the objects: the artist has also specified rules about how those objects should be displayed, conserved, and sometimes interacted with.⁶ Moreover, many contemporary artworks are subject to replacement of the objects displayed. Concepts according to which authenticity inheres primarily in the condition of some physical object are inadequate to these works.⁷

When it comes to contemporary artworks subject to variable display, preserving a specific object is sometimes unnecessary for or even anathema to authenticity. The candy spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres are arrangements of wrapped hard candies that audience members are permitted to consume. The supply of candies is periodically replenished. No particular candy is essential; nor is the continuity of a particular pile or array of candies. The authenticity of the work, then, does not inhere in a particular object.⁸

Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit (for David)* is a collection of fruit peels that Leonard sewed up and embellished with zippers and buttons. Aggressive conservation measures are impermissible: mortality and decay are central themes of the work, and in keeping with these themes Leonard determined that the objects must be permitted to decay.⁹ While the work's authenticity does require a particular set of objects, authenticity would be undermined rather than secured by conserving those objects.

Authenticity, then, is not one-size-fits-all. For some contemporary works, standard practices of conserving a specific object are appropriate. But for others, there is no specific object, and for still others there is a specific object but no condition that may or must be maintained. Moreover, even where we have specific objects to be maintained in a specific condition, this is insufficient for authenticity: we also need to know how to display those objects. Preserving the work in its

⁵ Renée van de Vall, 'Documenting Dilemmas: On the Relevance of Ethically Ambiguous Cases', *Revista de História da Arte* 4 (2015), 7-17, at 8; Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 74-5.

⁶ Sherri Irvin, 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2005), 315-326; Carol Stringari, 'Beyond "Conservative": The Conservator's Role in Variable Media Preservation', in Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, Caitlin Jones (eds), *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Montreal: The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2003), 55-61.

⁷ Carol Stringari, 'Meg Webster, *Stick Spiral*, 1986', in Depocas et al. (eds), *Permanence Through Change*, 78-86.

⁸ For further discussion, see Sherri Irvin, 'The Ontological Diversity of Visual Artworks', in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones (eds), *New Waves in Aesthetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1-19.

⁹ Ann Temkin, 'Strange Fruit', in Miguel Angel Corzo (ed.), *Mortality/Immortality* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 1999), 45-50.

authentic state involves both treating the right objects the right way and establishing an appropriate protocol for displaying them.

As contemporary art conservators have discussed in countless case studies and theoretical accounts, securing artwork authenticity requires codifying rules the artist has specified for display and conservation.¹⁰ In addition, since unforeseeable circumstances often arise, maintaining authenticity also involves decisions about how to handle certain kinds of change.¹¹ If the objects degrade unexpectedly, or the originally designated exhibition space becomes unavailable, curators and conservators need to decide whether and how it remains possible to display the work authentically.

Where does authenticity reside, given the complexity of such cases? Conservation theory tends to treat authenticity as centrally grounded in the artist's intention, which also helps to define what constitutes integrity of the physical objects.¹² Sherri Irvin has suggested operationalizing the artist's intention in terms of what she calls the artist's sanction: the artist's specification, through outward communicative actions, of particular objects and rules for their display.¹³ Gonzalez-Torres sanctioned the presentation and replenishing of a pile of wrapped hard candies that audience members would be permitted to consume. Zoe Leonard sanctioned the display of a set of specific objects in a random array on the floor and a rule for conservation according to which they are to be permitted to decay.

Some conservation scholars have adopted Irvin's suggestion about the artist's sanction.¹⁴ But, as everyone acknowledges, the artist's explicit sanction may not settle what to do when conditions change unexpectedly much later. Conservators engage in extensive interviewing protocols to elicit information about how to handle

¹⁰ Glenn Wharton, Deena Engel, and Marvin C. Taylor, 'The Artist Archives Project: David Wojnarowicz', *Studies in Conservation* 61 (2016), 241-247.

¹¹ Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens, 'The Artist's Intent in Flux', *CeROArt* (2013), <<https://journals.openedition.org/ceroart/3527>>, accessed October 27, 2018; Jon Ippolito, 'Accommodating the Unpredictable: The Variable Media Questionnaire', in Depocas et al. (eds), *Permanence Through Change*, 47-54; Nancy Spector, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Untitled (Public Opinion), 1991', in Depocas et al. (eds), *Permanence Through Change*, 92-99; Renee Van de Vall, 'Documenting Dilemmas'.

¹² Gordon and Hermens, in 'The Artist's Intent in Flux', discuss the shifting relationship between artist's intention and material integrity in conservation practice.

¹³ Sherri Irvin, 'The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art'.

¹⁴ Gordon and Hermens, 'The Artist's Intent in Flux'; Vivian Van Saaze, 'Going Public: Conservation of Contemporary Artworks', *Revista de História da Arte* 8 (2011), 235-249; Sanneke Stigter, 'Through the Conservator's Lens: From Analogue Photowork to Digital Printout: How is Authenticity Served?', in E. Hermens & F. Robertson (eds), *Authenticity in Transition: Changing Practices in Contemporary Art Making and Conservation* (London: Archetype Publications, 2016), 169-178; Glenn Wharton, 'Artist Intention and the Conservation of Contemporary Art', *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* 22 (2015), 1-12; Katrina Windon, 'The Right to Decay with Dignity: Documentation and the Negotiation between an Artist's Sanction and the Cultural Interest', *Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31 (2012), 142-157.

future change; but for artworks acquired before such protocols were developed, information about the artist's sanction for such cases may be lacking.¹⁵

Even if the artist is still living and willing to participate, this doesn't necessarily resolve the situation: well after the creation of a work, the artist may have a very different artistic perspective.¹⁶ Allowing the artist to bear the sole authority to determine how unforeseen circumstances should be resolved may compromise the work's authenticity, if this is understood as residing in the artist's original creative act.¹⁷

The authenticity of the work, then, can be compromised by an alteration to the rules or to the objects that conflicts with the artist's initial sanction. If Leonard's fruit peels are conserved too aggressively or swapped out for others, the work's authenticity is compromised, much as repainting a canvas or substituting a different canvas would (in standard cases) compromise the authenticity of a work of painting.

To summarize: what constitutes authenticity for a contemporary object-based artwork depends on what the artist sanctioned in the original creative act. Authenticity of the artwork requires both treating the objects in accordance with the artist's sanction and establishing a protocol for display that codifies the rules the artist sanctioned. If too much information about the rules for display has been lost or misrepresented, the authenticity of the work is compromised, just as it would be in the case of significant damage to an essential object.

3. Authenticity and the Display

So far, I have focused on authenticity of the work itself. But I will also speak of authenticity of particular displays of the work. Authenticity of the display is a matter of sufficient compliance with the artist's sanction. Where objects have been conserved and are displayed in accordance with the artist's sanction, the display is fully compliant. Where either the condition of the objects has been compromised or the display fails to comply with the sanctioned rules for display, the resulting display is non-compliant.

Non-compliant displays of contemporary artworks are extremely common: they may occur because a viewer displaces or steals one of the objects, because an

¹⁵ Jon Ippolito, 'Accommodating the Unpredictable'.

¹⁶ Sherri Irvin, 'Museums and the Shaping of Contemporary Artworks'; Sanneke Stigter, 'Living Artist, Living Artwork? The Problem of Faded Colour Photographs in the Work of Ger van Elk', *Studies in Conservation* 49 (2004), 105-108; Glenn Wharton, 'The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art', in Bruce Altshuler (ed.), *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 163-178.

¹⁷ Steve Dietz, 'Walker Art Center', in Depocas et al. (eds), *Permanence Through Change*, 43-46, at 44; Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 91; Christian Scheidemann, *Is the Artist Always Right? New Approaches in the Collaboration between Artist and Conservator*, (International Symposium, Contemporary Art: Who Cares?, Research and Practices in Contemporary Art Conservation, New York, 9-11 June 2010; published online 2010) <<http://vimeo.com/14603693>> accessed 31 October 2018.

installer makes a mistake in following a complex set of rules, or because the object has not been or cannot be conserved in the condition specified by the artist. Sometimes, non-compliant displays are mounted because the institution decides that following the rules sanctioned by the artist would endanger either the audience or the artwork. According to widespread museum practices, displays that are not perfectly compliant can still be authentic displays of the artwork, just as a musical performance with a few wrong notes can still be an authentic, even if flawed, performance of the underlying composition.¹⁸

Authenticity of a display, like authenticity of the artwork itself, is a matter of degree. Minimal non-compliance, such as a small missing element, may have little effect on the viewer's experience. And even where non-compliance is readily detectable, the viewer may be able to understand the work and have the appropriate sort of experience, especially if the institution communicates effectively about the nature and cause of the non-compliance. More serious non-compliance, though, may mislead the audience by misrepresenting the nature or point of the work. When this problem becomes serious enough, we may regard the display as inauthentic. And after a certain point, we may decline to recognize the display as a display of the artwork at all: the degree of inauthenticity becomes so severe as to be disqualifying. These are judgment calls that depend on the context and on how severely the non-compliance affects audience experience.

The mounting of an inauthentic display does not in itself undermine the authenticity of the artwork, any more than a butchered performance undermines the authenticity of the musical work. However, if inauthentic displays are repeatedly mounted, this suggests that the institution has not in fact established an appropriate protocol for display: either the rules have been incorrectly codified, or they are not in fact being treated as rules that govern the mounting of displays. In such a case, the work requires conservation: not of its physical substance, but of the protocol. It might seem surprising to refer to this as conservation, but a good deal of the work of contemporary art conservators lies in codifying rules for display, which are sometimes referred to as the score.¹⁹ The accumulation of seriously non-compliant displays suggests that the score has been compromised.

In the next section, we will see that even if the integrity of the objects is not compromised, a seriously non-compliant display may be deeply misleading to the audience, such that it may be a display of the artist's objects but not of the artist's work. However, two further examples will show that authenticity of display is neither sufficient nor, more surprisingly, necessary to secure audience understanding: even an inauthentic display can inform viewers about the work's nature and supply an appropriate experience.

4. Glenn Ligon, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*

¹⁸ Compare Nicholas Wolterstorff's notion of musical works as 'norm-kinds', which can have correctly or incorrectly formed instances. 'Toward an Ontology of Art Works', *Noûs*, 9 (1975), 115–42.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Hanna Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 30-35.

Robert Mapplethorpe was a well-known American artist many of whose works were homoerotic photographs of men, sometimes involved in BDSM practices. In 1986, Mapplethorpe, who was white and gay, made *The Black Book*, a book of photos of Black men, many of which are sexualized or homoerotic. American artist Glenn Ligon, who is Black and gay, had a complex reaction on seeing Mapplethorpe's work.

I asked myself if those photographs were racist. I realized then that the question was too limiting, that it was more complicated. Can we say that Mapplethorpe's work is documentary or fetishistic? Maybe, but at the same time he put black men into a tradition of portraiture to which they've never had access before.²⁰

Ligon responded with a work of his own, *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-3). *Notes on the Margin* involves 91 image panels appropriated by disassembling copies of Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* and 78 unique text panels of quotations from various sources. As Ligon says, his aim was to

[p]ut the work in the context of all these debates around black male representation, gay sexuality, censorship, AIDS, personal desire. Put all of that next to the work and let the viewers sort it out. And they can choose. They can not read the text and look at the photos or read the text and sort through those issues in the same kind of process that I went through when thinking about that work.²¹

He included quotations from well-known authors, cultural theorists, art historians, and artists, including Mapplethorpe himself. Some remark directly on Mapplethorpe's work, while others comment more generally on matters of race and representation. A few quotes are drawn from Ligon's conversations with friends and acquaintances.

The work is installed in four long horizontal rows. The image panels, which are larger, are installed on the top and bottom rows, and the smaller text panels are installed in two rows in between them. There are more image panels than text panels, so the positioning of the text panels does not make them appear to be commentaries on particular images: they sit alongside the images but also have a degree of independence.

The text panels have a prescribed order, and the juxtapositions of text are often striking. Consider these two pairs of texts, installed right next to each other:

The whole notion that these men are in control of their representations is tired. We know what Mapplethorpe got out of it – the photographs. What did these men get?²²

²⁰ 'Get the Picture', interview of Glenn Ligon by Marie de Brugerolle, *Documents sur L'art 7* (1995), 26-9; reprinted in Scott Rothkopf (ed.), *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews: Glenn Ligon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 78-86, at 82-4.

²¹ Nikita Gale, 'Q&A: Glenn Ligon Explores Sources, Influences, Racial Politics of His Text-Based Abstractions', *ArtsATL* (Atlanta, GA; published online 7 January 2013) <<https://artsatl.com/qa/>> accessed 29 October 2018.

²² All four of these quotations were included as text panels in Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book*. Some were taken from published sources; others were previously unpublished, sometimes drawn from Ligon's conversations about

—Lyle Ashton Harris

While we recognize the oppressive dimension of these images of black men as Other, we are also attracted: *We want to look but don't always find the images we want to see.*²³

—Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer

They were taken because I hadn't seen pictures like that before. That's why one makes what one makes, because you want to see something you haven't seen before; it was a subject that nobody had used because it was loaded.²⁴

—Robert Mapplethorpe

It didn't even occur to me that I might be attractive, or that I might be something that somebody would want to look at, or would want to photograph. And so when it happened, I thought, "Well, gee, isn't this a good way for me to at least get to see what I look like."

—Ken Moody

The series of texts gets at complex issues of exploitation and control over representation. It is inherent in the photographic project that the artist controls how subjects are represented. And, of course, the potential for exploitation is multiplied when a racial dynamic involving a white photographer shooting exclusively Black subjects is introduced. Yet, as Isaac and Mercer acknowledge, they are attracted to these images even as the presentation of Black men as an exotic, sexualized Other troubles them.

Mapplethorpe, while acknowledging that the subject matter is 'loaded', says he is drawn to create the pictures in part because of a historic underrepresentation: Black men have been depicted extensively – and in quite problematic ways – in porn, but sophisticated artistic celebrations of the Black male form have been rare in European and American art. This observation prepares us for the quote from Ken Moody, who featured in many of Mapplethorpe's photographs: 'It didn't even occur to me that I might be attractive...'. The choice to make the photographs, then, served – among other things – as an affirmation that the Black male body is a subject worthy of artistic representation. And this provides something of an answer, even if not a completely satisfying one, to the question posed by Harris in the first quotation above: 'What did these men get?'.

Mapplethorpe's work. Peter Scheldahl, *Unhidden Identities* (New York, 21 March 2011) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/21/unhidden-identities>> accessed 30 October 2018. This information is confirmed in an undated wall label found in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's object file for *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (2001.180).

²³ Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality', in Essex Hemphill (eds), *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 1991), 167-173.

²⁴ Janet Kardon, 'Robert Mapplethorpe Interview', in her *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (Pennsylvania, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), 23-29, 28.

Clearly, the order of the text panels has been carefully designed to allow specific ideas to create context for each other and to position speakers from different perspectives in dialogue. Ligon is clear about the importance of the order of elements. 'The Mapplethorpe pages', he says,

have an order from the page numbers the photos appear on. The quotes have a more elusive narrative, but one that roughly follows the evolution of my thoughts about Mapplethorpe's work and a gradual acknowledgement [of] my own investments in and ambivalence about the critique of the photos. The quotes don't form captions to individual photographs, but run as a separate but related narrative to the narrative logic of [the] *Black Book*.²⁵

The recognition of this carefully constructed narrative prepares us to understand the significance of a mistaken display. When *Notes on the Margin* was lent to another institution, the text panels were not installed according to Ligon's most recent instructions; Ligon found the order of text panels to be severely mistaken and noticed instances of duplication. This occurred despite the fact that the borrowing institution was very diligent about many details of the display, corresponding with the Guggenheim and with Ligon about physical spacing of the image and text panels.²⁶

I won't delve into the complex history that likely contributed to the incorrect display. For our purposes, there are two important points to note. First, the display in question is not an authentic display of Ligon's work: indeed, there are good reasons to reject the idea that Ligon's work was on display at all. The narrative is essential, and a display involving severe misordering of the text panels is one in which that narrative is absent. Second, when audience members encounter such a seriously mistaken display, they are likely to be deeply misled about the work's nature and point, since they lack access to one of its central elements.

Of course, the institution's obligations here are obvious: display the work correctly. But as we will see, some other cases are more complicated.

5. El Anatsui

El Anatsui, a Ghanaian artist based in Nigeria, has created a remarkable body of wall-hung sculptures consisting mainly of caps from liquor bottles connected with copper wire. These works look like large tapestries, and they are often installed with dramatic folds that make a striking contribution to the display.

The artist is usually responsible for the main visual elements of artwork displays, so it would be natural to assume that Anatsui has made the choices about orientation and draping. In fact, though, the only display instruction is that installers are free to choose how to hang the objects: which side is up, whether and how to fold and drape, whether to let part of the object spill onto the floor, and so forth.

²⁵ E-mail from Glenn Ligon to Nancy Spector, May 7, 2002. Quoted with the permission of Ligon and Spector.

²⁶ Evidence for these claims is found in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's object file for *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (2001.180).

Some works have multiple panels or detachable parts, and the installation team decides where and how to attach them.²⁷

Anatsui's choice to let installers determine the particulars of display is grounded in practical, aesthetic and theoretical considerations. From his base in Nsukka, Nigeria, Anatsui needed to be able to travel with or ship his works to gain access to the international contemporary art market. It must be possible to fold the works and put them in manageable crates. As he says, 'I think the nomadic aesthetic developed as a result of the need to address a certain problem; to create works that are packing, storage and transportation efficient or friendly'.²⁸ Anatsui wants his works to be exhibitable in a wide variety of spaces, whether modest or grand: by folding, installers can condense the work to fit a smaller space.²⁹

Anatsui's labor-intensive works are produced in a collaborative workshop: he may have 30-40 assistants helping him for long hours every day, creating blocks of liquor bottle tops and wire. Once the blocks are ready, it may take months for a 5- to 6-person team to assemble them into the final tapestry. Anatsui recognizes that the members of his workshop make creative and aesthetic contributions. He observes that the work

develops organically and in most cases in unpredictable ways. [The assistants] are more a part of the process; they are not all the time just hands. Working this way, I have got to understand both the material and the different touches or styles of each assistant. It is like conducting an orchestra of musicians each with particular performing skill.³⁰

Given the active involvement of his assistants in the construction of the tapestries, it is perhaps natural that the constitution of displays should be seen as a collaborative project as well. He wishes for installers to experiment and engage their own creativity, not simply to follow a set of instructions or replicate an earlier display. This combination of interests and concerns led Anatsui to embrace the idea of nonfixed form, which he connects directly to the nature of the artist's role and relationships. '[H]uman relations are not fixed, you know. They change from time to time, they are dynamic.'³¹ He wishes for his work to invite and express this same

²⁷ This is extensively documented in Lisa M. Binder, *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You About Africa* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010); Susan Mullin Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (New York: Prestel, 2012); interview with El Anatsui by Kate McCrickard in *El Anatsui 2006* (Cape Town: David Krut Publishing, October Gallery, 2006), n.p.

²⁸ Interview with El Anatsui by Kate McCrickard in *El Anatsui 2006*, n.p.

²⁹ Anatsui discusses this in an undated interview with Chris Noey of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, found in the object file for *Dusasa II* (2007), 2008.121: '[A]part from the fact that you can crease it, you have this idea of ... changing the size, as well. [You can] make it smaller by putting in more creases...'

³⁰ Interview with El Anatsui by Kate McCrickard in *El Anatsui 2006*, n.p.

³¹ Undated interview with Chris Noey of the Metropolitan Museum of Art transcribed in the object file for *Dusasa II* (2007), 2008.12; also included here: *El Anatsui Installing 'Between Earth and Heaven'* (published online 6 August 2008) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7UBvknG8c4>> accessed 31 October 2019.

dynamism. 'I don't believe in artworks being things that are fixed. You know, the artist is not a dictator.'³²

Anatsui's invitation for creativity in installation has not always been taken up. The British Museum once hung *Woman's Cloth* in a static arrangement with no folds or draping, as if it were just another woven tapestry for display rather than a contemporary sculptural work.³³ This may have been conditioned, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, by a tendency to see Anatsui as an 'African artist', where 'African artists' are assumed to produce traditional craft artifacts rather than participating in broader contemporary art practices.³⁴

Moreover, Anatsui notes, 'Sometimes museums prefer to replicate the same thing over and over', particularly for touring exhibitions where works are installed quickly and pass through many hands.³⁵ Installers sometimes copy photographic precedents in installing Anatsui's work, as is common practice for many other installation artworks. The work may, then, reveal tendencies of the institutions it passes through: a willingness to be bold and experimental, or an inclination to treat objects in a conventional fashion.

Anatsui's rules for display result in variability, sometimes dramatic, in displays of his works. The rules also affect the works' prospects for meaning. As Anatsui says, his works realize a *nomadic aesthetic*, which 'is about fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy, as well as giving others the freedom, or better still, the authority to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point, a datum'.³⁶

The rules and the resulting variability of displays, then, are essential to some aspects of what the work expresses. As curator Yukiya Kawaguchi notes, the rules for display show through in the aesthetic impact of Anatsui's work.

A distinctive element of his recent work, I feel, is freedom from any kind of power. His recent works feel very soft and gentle, neither aggressive nor authoritative, as is often the case with contemporary artworks of European and American artists. I think this quality is deeply connected with his theory of the nonfixed form.³⁷

The feeling Kawaguchi describes is grounded in a combination of visual experience and knowledge about how displays are produced. Even if viewers don't get to see two or more distinct displays, the knowledge that Anatsui allows installers to hang his works in a wide variety of ways allows them to appreciate the work in its fullness.

While some museums have resisted, others are both eager and competent to respect the rules sanctioned by the artist. The traveling exhibition *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works* by El Anatsui, which traveled to five US venues, was expressly

³² 2007 interview with Anatsui quoted in Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 104.

³³ Christopher Spring, *African Art in Detail* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), 21.

³⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Discovering El Anatsui', in Lisa M. Binder (ed.) *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010), 63–73, at 69.

³⁵ Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 107.

³⁶ Interview with El Anatsui by Kate McCrickard in *El Anatsui 2006*, n.p.

³⁷ Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, 82.

designed to realize Anatsui's concept of nonfixed form, as indicated on the web site for the exhibition at the Bass Museum of Art:

As the exhibition travels, each installation of Anatsui's artwork will be quite different. The artist encourages museum staff to 'sculpt' each metal piece as they install it, and so the works are condensed, expanded or reshaped to fit the space and sensibility of each institution.³⁸

Any display of Anatsui's object is authentic, including the static display at the British Museum and the copycat displays mounted by some institutions: this is an implication of leaving installation decisions up to the installers. Simply mounting an authentic display, however, is not enough. No display (even those very creatively mounted) is sufficient to inform the audience about Anatsui's nomadic aesthetic. Audience members need background information to be aware of the rule Anatsui sanctioned and to grasp the aesthetic and interpretative implications of the work. The Bass Museum's public statement not only expresses institutional willingness to comply with the rules Anatsui designed for his works, but also gives the audience crucial information about these rules that will enrich their experience.

6. Lygia Clark, *Bichos*

Finally, I will discuss a case in which there were reasons to mount displays that are seriously non-compliant, to the point of being inauthentic. However, we will see that an inauthentic display can do an excellent job of conveying the work's nature and making available the kind of experience the artist designed for the audience.

The *Bichos* (critters) made in the 1960s by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark are sculptures made from hinged sheet metal. The hinges allow the objects to take on many different configurations, and Clark designed them to be manipulated by viewers. She regarded the interactive relation as essential to the work:

Each *Bicho* is an organic entity that fully reveals itself within its inner time of expression....

It is a living organism, a work essentially active. A full integration, existential, is established between it and us.

There is no room for passivity in the relationship that is established between the *Bichos* and us, neither from them nor from us.

What happens is a body-to-body between two living entities.³⁹

The permission for viewers to manipulate the *Bichos* is central to Clark's understanding of them. As critic Guy Brett says, the artist 'fought a constant battle for people to be able to continue to handle and play with the sculptures after they had passed into public and private collections. They were never intended to be merely looked at'.⁴⁰ However, the objects are fragile (and now extremely valuable),

³⁸ Bass Museum of Art, *Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui* (Miami, FL, 11 April 2014) < <https://www.bassmuseum.org/art/gravity-and-grace-monumental-works-by-el-anatsui/> > accessed 31 October 2018.

³⁹ Artist's statement translated by Licia R. Olivetti and reprinted in Cornelia Butler and Luis Pérez-Oramas, *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 160.

⁴⁰ Guy Brett, 'Lygia Clark: in Search of the Body', *Art in America* 82 (1994), 56-63, at 61.

and the institutions and private collectors who own them generally do not permit them to be handled during exhibition, for good reason: the objects could be seriously damaged or destroyed.

It's important to recognize the magnitude of what is lost with this restriction. The kind of experience Clark designed for us is not available. To revisit some of her own language, we do not experience a full existential integration with the works; we are forced into passivity in our encounters with them; and a sense of the work as a living, expressive entity is not available to us. Our sensory experience of the works, when they are displayed on a pedestal or under a vitrine, is truncated: we can't feel the temperature and texture of the metal in our hands, experience the movement and flexion of the material, hear the sounds of contact between surfaces.

We can't learn about the objects' potentiality or experiment with their possibilities for form and expression. We can't engage our agency or explore our creativity and expressiveness. We can't experience what curator Luis Pérez-Oramas describes as their tendency to 'question the physical certainty of the user as they are at all moments at the brink of collapsing'.⁴¹ When we look at Clark's statements, as well as the aims and priorities manifest throughout her body of work, we can recognize that a non-interactive presentation of the *Bichos* dramatically truncates the aesthetic experience she designed for the audience member.

Institutions have tried several strategies to convey what it would be like to interact with the *Bichos*. The Walker Art Center has posted a video of curator Peter Eleey manipulating a 1960 *Bicho*, allowing us to see a few of the forms the work can take and to see and hear the transitions between them.⁴² Because Eleey is interacting with the work spontaneously and begins with the *Bicho* folded down to its flattest form, some of the shapes it takes on are pedestrian. The video closes with a view of the work on display under a vitrine, carefully styled to show off one of the more dramatic sculptural arrangements in its repertoire.

Other institutions have made replicas available for the public to manipulate. In a 2012 São Paulo retrospective, at least a dozen replicated *Bichos* were presented for viewer manipulation, while the originals were displayed on a taller pedestal just behind so that audience members could easily glance up from their play and see them. In 2014, the Museum of Modern Art in New York displayed three replicas in a separate gallery next to a room containing dozens of original *Bichos*. The originals were grouped together on pedestals with no interaction permitted, while the manipulable replicas were displayed on low, accessible pedestals in a different gallery space. As one reviewer described it, 'MoMA has appealingly recreated a number of these for us to play with, while Clark's originals wistfully look on from their sacred plinths.'⁴³

⁴¹ Lygia Clark, *Bichos (as a group)*, (New York, undated audio clip) <<https://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/388/6732>> accessed 1 March, 2018.

⁴² Peter Eleey, *Bicho by Lygia Clark* (Walker Art Center, 6 May 2009) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Cq2OVD7dvA>,> 1 March 2018.

⁴³ Ariella Budick, *Lygia Clark, Museum of Modern Art, New York* (Financial Times; 13 May 2014) <<https://www.ft.com/content/c1eea3c8-d6cc-11e3-b95e-00144feabdc0>> accessed 1 March 2018.

To what extent do these solutions restore the viewer's ability to have an experience sufficiently close to what Clark designed for us? Knowing that the objects are governed by a rule for interaction is a crucial first step: without such knowledge, one does not yet even understand what the works are. A video that shows someone interacting with them provides some information. But given Clark's understanding of the works, being able to engage one's own agency and body in direct interaction is crucial. To observe someone else manipulating the objects is like seeing a reproduction of a painting in a catalog: it is not a sufficiently direct form of experience.

To make a few replicas available for manipulation is helpful. This approach allows the viewer to have the sort of experience Clark envisioned with these few objects. This approach doesn't go far enough, however, because it doesn't sufficiently respect the distinctiveness of the objects: it tends to suggest that three can serve as stand-ins for dozens of unique works, and that once one has experienced these, one can project oneself into experience of the others as well. But since each object has a unique profile of behaviors and potential forms, interacting with one may give us only a very vague and incomplete sense of what it would be like to interact with others.

In addition, the static displays of the original *Bichos* tend to have a triumphal quality: each has been manipulated into a dynamic, upward reaching form that seems to have been selected on the grounds of visual appeal. But people who have manipulated these objects frequently speak of the experience in terms of collapse (as we heard from Pérez-Oramas earlier), refusal and failure:

Clunky and awkward, they refuse to lie flat but don't really stand up, either.⁴⁴

They sort of fight back.⁴⁵

The dialogue between *Bicho* and 'beholder' is at times exhilarating, at times frustrating, but it always undermines the notion that one could ever be in control of the other.⁴⁶

You push the *Bicho* one way and it resists, another and a whole part of the sculpture flops over, swinging around with a flap and bang.⁴⁷

[I]f one does not work with the logic of the beast's interlocking parts, it will refuse to hold the appropriate shape; indeed, more than this, it will very

⁴⁴ Jessica Dawson, *Hands-On Art at the MoMA: Please Touch the Replicas of Lygia Clark's Work* (Wall Street Journal; 8 May 2014) <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/hands-on-art-at-the-moma-1399598061>> accessed 31 October 2018.

⁴⁵ Curator Connie Butler, quoted in Dawson, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Yve-Alain Bois, 'Lygia Clark, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Paris', *Artforum* 37 (1999), 116-117, 134.

⁴⁷ Sal Randolph, 'The Uses of Art: Little Beasts', *The American Reader* (undated) <<http://theamericanreader.com/the-uses-of-art-little-beasts/>> accessed 1 March 2018.

Randolph is speaking of an experience of manipulating replica *Bichos* in a 2014 exhibition at the Jewish Museum.

noisily collapse in a heap, underscoring the participant's failure to enter into a satisfactory relationship with it.⁴⁸

When the objects are all arranged in forms that are read as sculpturally satisfying, this highlights certain aims, values and experiences to the exclusion of others. Since only the outcomes of 'successful' manipulations are shown, the fact that these configurations are the product of a challenging interaction recedes into the background. As one critic notes, 'There is no hint that something surprising and lively might happen in the hand, might happen between you and the beast'.⁴⁹ To the extent that interaction is acknowledged at all, the displays suggest that the proper end of such interaction is to wrest from the *Bicho* the most visually appealing configuration. Most fundamentally, this kind of display implicitly reinstates the very notion of fixed form that Clark, like Anatsui, was concerned to repudiate.

The São Paulo display, with a much higher ratio of replicas to originals, is more satisfying: it foregrounds the interactions, literally placing the de-activated objects in the background. This presentation suggests, correctly I think, that Clark's *Bichos*, as artworks, are not really on display; the objects on the inaccessible pedestal are, rather, relics.

We are forced, I think, to conclude that a display in which one cannot interact with Clark's original *Bichos* is not, in fact, an authentic display of her work. Clark wanted the audience to continue to have direct access to the objects she created, not merely to copies. Thus, very few contemporary viewers have encountered authentic displays of Clark's work, though many more have seen the original objects and have interacted with replicas.

However, a carefully conceived inauthentic display can do an excellent job of conveying the spirit of the work and making the right kind of experience available to the audience. It seems clearly better to provide the audience with some form of access to a fragile work, even if not an authentic display, than to refrain from showing it altogether. Exhibits that allow interaction with replicas are far better than those that simply show the original objects with no interactive component: and, as we have seen, the more replicas the better, because the individual personalities of the works are elided when a few are positioned as stand-ins for all. Moreover, greater diversity in display of the original objects would be valuable in overcoming the tendency to default to standard visual modes of appreciating these works. Showing some of the objects flat, or in collapsed or 'failed' compositions, would help audience members connect their experiences of interaction with replicas to the full range of potential of the objects.

Compelling considerations, then, can prevent institutions from mounting authentic displays even of a work that it would, in principle, still be possible to display authentically. This is an unfortunate situation, but thoughtful exhibition practices can still go a long way toward giving the public knowledge of and experiential access to such works.

7. Institutional responsibility

⁴⁸ Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2014), 53.

⁴⁹ Randolph, 'The Uses of Art', n.p.

We may derive several lessons regarding the responsibility of the institution. Most obviously, the institution should, where feasible, mount authentic displays of the artist's work. As we saw in the case of Glenn Ligon, authenticity of the display is not simply a matter of showing the objects the artist has supplied, but also involves following rules for displaying those objects correctly. Failure to follow the rules can result in a display that is seriously misleading.

However, mounting an authentic display may not be sufficient to ensure audience understanding. Because El Anatsui cedes the authority to determine the configuration of the display to the institution, any display of the work is authentic. However, some displays do better than others in conveying what is distinctive about Anatsui's artistic practice. The best strategy for securing audience understanding is likely to be a combination of (a) mounting a display that both differs from earlier displays and conveys the prospect for the objects to be folded and draped and (b) conveying auxiliary information about the artist's practice, as the Bass Museum did. The need to go beyond simply mounting an authentic display is especially acute because Anatsui's work contravenes standard assumptions. Even now that variable display is common, the artist is usually heavily involved in determining the parameters for display. Audience members, even those relatively well informed about contemporary art, are likely to arrive with the assumption that the artist has determined many aspects of the configuration. The institution thus has a special responsibility to convey that Anatsui's works employ a different approach.

On the other hand, not every inauthentic display must mislead. A good display of Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, which makes high-quality replicas available for interaction and displays the original *Bichos* in a full range of configurations, can do an excellent job of conveying the nature and point of the work. Even where the obligation to protect the objects overrides the obligation to display the work authentically, it remains possible for the institution to meet its further responsibility to foster audience understanding of the work.

Audience members, too, have their responsibilities. If they are to have a prospect of understanding these works, they must engage with displays attentively and thoughtfully and consume the auxiliary information that is provided. The more contemporary art they experience, the more likely they are to be sensitive to the possibility that, say, Anatsui did not determine all aspects of the display. But because each of these works is governed by custom rules that are particular to it, rather than by general display conventions that govern most or all works of the period, even a well backgrounded audience member may need specific information about the work to apprehend it fully. This is why my discussion has focused on the obligations of the institution: if the institution does its job, it is much easier for audience members to do theirs.