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**Art in the Age of Emulation:
Preservation Case Study – Jaime Davidovich’s *Foam TV***

This past fall I had the opportunity to work on Jaime Davidovich’s *Foam TV* (fig. 1). For this project, research and discussion with the owner and artist worked in tandem to arrive at a satisfactory treatment and exhibition recommendation. The result was a multi-part proposal, which included the option to replicate the work in the future.



Figure 1. Jaime Davidovich, *Foam TV* (front and back- after treatment), 1983, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Bobst Library, New York.

I will review the development and outcome of this proposal as well as addressing concerns related to replication as a preservation strategy. In particular, I will focus on how we can ensure a replicated work of art will create a valid phenomenological experience for a viewer and carry art historical meaning, rather than be disdained as a simulacrum, regarded by future generations as, essentially, a zombie of the original.

The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University’s Elmer Bobst Library provides primary resources to scholars.¹ For their Downtown Collection the library actively collects works to document the art scene in New York that centered around SoHo and the Lower

¹ Information on the Fales Library and Special Collections is available at <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/>.

East Side from the 1970s to the 90s.² Of particular interest to the library is the acquisition of personal papers and archives of writers and artists, such as Jaime Davidovich (fig. 2). Working from a loft studio at 152 Wooster Street, this Argentine-born artist was actively engaged in the Downtown scene in the 70s and 80s.



Figure 2. Jaime Davidovich, from *Surveillance*, Video, 1976, image from www.jaimedavidovich.com.

Like many artists of the time, Davidovich utilized a number of mediums, but what was reasonably his most significant work of that era was “The Live! Show.” This was a series he hosted that ran on Manhattan cable access from the mid 1970s to the mid 80s as a part of the Artist Television Network. Davidovich was a founding member of this network, which attempted to disseminate Art via the medium of television.³

Taking on the format of a late-night weekly variety show, “The Live! Show” sharply critiqued the culture of television. On this satiric program, Davidovich himself appeared as the host in the guise of “Dr. Videovich” (fig. 3). The character was a fictional doctor who graduated from the University of Buenos Aires, where he had studied how to manipulate the media with German professors and began specializing in problems of television addiction.⁴ It is important to keep in mind that this show aired before the proliferation of cable stations. Davidovich

² A full description of the Collection Development Policy is available at [Collection Development Policies](http://library.nyu.edu/collections/policies/fales_dwntwn.html), July 2006, New York University Libraries 14 March 2007 <http://library.nyu.edu/collections/policies/fales_dwntwn.html>.

³ Rodrigo Alonso, “Torn Identity,” Jaime Davidovich, Rodrigo Alonso, [Jaime Davidovich: Video Works, 1970-2000](http://www.jaimedavidovich.com/english/translation.html) (New York: Phatory Gallery 2004), 11 March 2007 <<http://www.jaimedavidovich.com/english/translation.html>>.

⁴ Alonso.

commented how at the time, “there was only the Johnny Carson show, or other network shows, or watch my show.”⁵



Figure 3. Jaime Davidovich, from *The Live! Show*, Artist Television Network 1978-1984, image from www.jaimedavidovich.com.

Recognizing that Davidovich was so deeply embedded in the Downtown art scene, in 2004 Fales acquired his personal papers, videos, and artwork. Among the artwork that Davidovich gifted to the library was the *Foam TV*. The piece is a simulated television set made of painted soft foam and decorated with “The Live! Show” button pins. Housed inside the mock TV is an actual eight-inch Sony Solid State television set. According to Fales Library, the work had been featured on the “The Live! Show” with the television set simultaneously playing video clips of the show.

Having sat unprotected in the artist’s SoHo loft studio for nearly 30 years, the object displayed moderate deterioration and damage, and was very dirty. The most pronounced damage, including cracks and creases to the foam, was related to foam degradation combined with mechanical stresses from the placement of the actual TV inside (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Jaime Davidovich, *Foam TV* (details of front and back- before treatment), 1983, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Bobst Library, New York.

FTIR analysis performed by Christopher McGlinchey at the Museum of Modern Art confirmed the foam is Polyurethane (PUR).⁶ Specifically, the Polyurethane is of the ester

⁵ Davidovich, interview, 2006.

variety, which is particularly susceptible to hydrolytic degradation.⁷ Nevertheless, the piece was fairly intact overall, with the exception of evidence that several button pins were missing.

Fales was primarily concerned with preserving the documentary significance of the object, but also desired to exhibit the piece in the future as a work of art. Research into current conservation methods for PUR foam and new media began in conjunction with research into the history and artistic significance of the object. This included reviewing related materials from the artist's archive.⁸ Additionally, consideration was given to the artist's moral rights under the Visual Artists Rights Act. These steps were taken with the knowledge that, as Glenn Wharton states, "Conservators must rethink their standard methodology in the face of new materials, new technologies, and conceptually driven art. New models for conservation include active participation by artists and other stakeholders and are not necessarily motivated by the ethic of preservation of the 'authentic' object."⁹

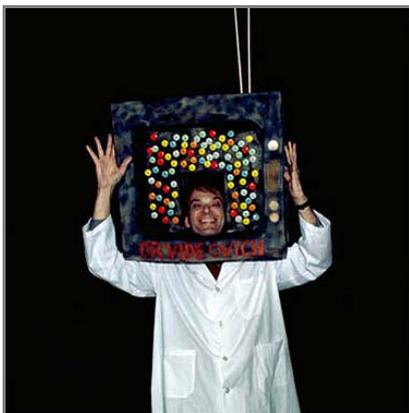


Figure 5. Photo of Jaime Davidovich from the First Artist Parade in New York, 1983, image from www.jaimedavidovich.com.

⁶ Furthermore, Christopher McGlinchey stated that the pre-polymer for foam purchased in the United States, as the artist did for this object, is likely toluene diisocyanate.

⁷ Summaries of material concerns in polyurethane foam, including degradation processes can be found in: Nancy Kerr and Jane Batcheller, "Degradation of Polyurethanes in 20th-Century Museum Textiles," *Saving the Twentieth Century: the Conservation of Modern Materials: Proceedings of a Conference Symposium '91: Saving the Twentieth Century, Ottawa, Canada, 15 to 20 September 1991*, Ed. David W. Grattan (Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1993) 189-206; Thea B. Van Oosten, "Plastic Surgery: Conservation Treatments for Flexible Polyurethane Foams: From Face-Lift to donating the Corpse to Science," *Reversibility- Does it Exist?*, Eds. Andrew Oddy and Sara Carroll (London: British Museum, 1999) 33-36; and Iris Winkelmeier, "Perfection for an Instant-Restoration of a Polyurethane Soft Sculpture by John Chamberlain," *Plastics in Art: History, Technology, Preservation. Interim Meeting of the ICOM-CC Modern Materials Working Group, Spring 2001*, Eds. Thea van Oosten, Yvonne Shashoua, and Friedrike Waentig (München: Siegl, 2002) 153-163.

⁸ Concurrent with this project, the artist's video tape collection, including all the episodes of "The Live! Show," was in the process of being migrated for preservation with funding from the NEA. However, episodes were reviewed as they became available.

⁹ Glenn Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, ed. B. Altshuler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 173.

It quickly became evident that the object had a more convoluted history than first thought when a photo was found in which the artist is seen wearing the *Foam TV* (fig. 5). As Davidovich is still living, and maintains a residence in New York, it was decided that some form of correspondence with him would be appropriate and likely necessary to formulate an adequate treatment proposal, or even an accurate condition report.

The artist was out of the country at the time of our initial contact, so Davidovich was sent an email questionnaire, to which he responded with significant information.¹⁰ He originally made the foam portion of the piece as part of a costume for the First Artist Parade in 1983. This was an event where 1300 New York artists paraded with banners and floats down Madison Avenue to focus attention on individual artists and smaller arts organizations.¹¹ In fact, the materials Davidovich chose for the piece were based on their wearability, so that it would be lightweight enough for the walk.

It was after the parade, that Davidovich incorporated the television set and turned the piece into a sculpture. He included several statements in his response that defined his intent behind the piece and his wishes for its exhibition in the future. He wrote, “This set should play excerpts of Dr. Videovich appearances on The Live! Show. In the future, if this piece has to be replaced, the photo of Dr. Videovich from the Parade should be used as reference.” He then added, “This piece has a lot of meaning for me because it represents my metaphor of the television landscape at that time (1978-1982).”

These statements, while being very clear, nevertheless, begged further questioning. A significant concern was that Davidovich mentioned nothing about the *Foam TV* being used on “The Live! Show”. Ultimately the brevity of the response was limiting, which underlined a drawback to the questionnaire format. Short of the potentially off-putting tactic of giving a page requirement for their responses, there is no real way to elicit further information from an artist in a one-off type interaction like a questionnaire. Thankfully, when Davidovich returned to New York, he was open to meeting in person to discuss the piece further.

The artist was an incredibly generous person with his time and thoughts (fig. 6). Consequently, the personal interview was extremely productive and helped clarify the exact

¹⁰ Quotes and information regarding the artist in this and the next paragraph is from Jaime Davidovich, email interview, November 1, 2006.

¹¹ Eleanor Blau, “Parade of 1,300 Artist is ‘Love Letter’ to City,” *New York Times* 28 Sept. 1983, late city final ed.: C24.

history and refine our understanding of his *Foam TV*.¹² Most surprisingly, the interview revealed that the piece, though it was directly related to “The Live! Show,” had never actually been featured on the show as costume or sculpture, as was previously thought.



Figure 6. Photo from interview with Jaime Davidovich, Nov. 17, 2006, at the Conservation Center, IFA, NYU.

Davidovich explained that when he first constructed the piece and used it as a costume, it functioned as part of a performative action related to the missing button pins. During the parade, he took the pins off the television and gave them to people he passed, while mentioning his show and making comments to the effect that, “More art should be on television.” Taken out of context, this could be seen as mere advertising, but it became evident during the interview that the action was understood by Davidovich to be significant, and in line with his greater artistic process. Later, after adding the video element, Davidovich displayed the work as a sculpture in several exhibitions.

Davidovich recalled that at the time he was creating and modifying the work, he was rebelling against an influx into the art world of new figurative and video artists. These new artists were presenting extremely commodifiable, consumerist works that fit in with an elitism that was then present in New York. He stated, “All the artists doing conceptual art, performance art, minimal art, etc., they were just forgotten and this new invasion of artists came into the art world. And I felt so strongly like many other artists. We were working against that same gallery system. So I [said] that we will go all the way, take artists into popular culture, bypassing the galleries and all that.” In line with these views, Davidovich at the time favored a raw, unrefined aesthetic, which is evidenced by the *Foam TV*.

Additionally, the artist related that he is comfortable with a continued dual existence for this piece, and condoned presenting it as either a costume or a sculpture. For him, either mode is capable of relaying the message and history of the piece. Having been influenced by

¹²Following quotes and information regarding the artist, unless otherwise specified, are from Jaime Davidovich, personal interview, November 17, 2006.

conceptualists such as Kosuth,¹³ for Davidovich the real significance of the piece, and indeed all his pieces, tend to lie in the concept and conception, rather than any “aura”-possessing object, to borrow a term from Benjamin.¹⁴

Related to Davidovich’s outlook on art is his current view of preservation. While he does want his pieces to live on, Davidovich reiterated during the interview that this desire is not in contradiction with replication. Moreover, he had just recently recommended replication as a preservation method for several of his older works in another collection.

Before I continue, I would like to clarify several terms I have been using. By *replication*, I simply mean the copying of a part or a whole work of any medium. More specific terms related to or within the scope of replication are, *duplication*, *reproduction*, *migration*, and *emulation*.¹⁵ A duplicated work is a clone with no loss of quality from one version to another. A reproduction is a copy of an original master that results in a loss of quality, such as a copy of an analogue video master. To migrate an artwork involves upgrading equipment and source material. A disadvantage of migration is that the original appearance of the artwork will probably change in its new medium. To emulate a work is to devise a way of imitating the original look of the piece by completely different means. Emulation is a term taken from the computer industry. And though this method is generally not used for sculptural materials, it can be appropriate in particular situations.

Though the artist has a free and easygoing manner towards replication and emulation, Fales, as the owner, would ultimately determine what would be acceptable. However, the discussion with Davidovich opened several doors for treatment, preservation, and exhibition strategies. The final strategies were created in consideration of the interview, research into PUR foam and new media conservation, review of primary sources relating to the artist’s work, and

¹³ Alonso.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936),” *Modern Art & Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Eds. F. Frascina and C. Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 217-220.

¹⁵ These terms and definitions are from *Variable Media Network*, The Variable Media Network, April 2007 <<http://www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html>>. The meaning and significance of these terms and relevant case studies were discussed at length at the conference, “Preserving the Immaterial: A Conference on Variable Media,” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 30-31 March 2001, and at the symposium, “Echoes of Art: Emulation As a Preservation Strategy” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum 8 May 2004. Transcripts of these events are available online at the Variable Media Network website, as is the related publication, A. Depocas, J. Ippolito, & C. Jones eds., *The Variable Media Approach: Permanence through Change* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications and the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2003).

ethical considerations. At this time I will skip the treatment strategies that do not directly relate to replication and exhibition.¹⁶

Four different exhibition approaches were determined that met owner, artist, and conservator requirements. With all of these options, the object's full history as both costume and sculpture should be noted in conjunction with its display.

The first option presents the piece in its current configuration, as a sculpture incorporating time-based media. The current monitor, which still works (fig. 7), would be connected to a video player, showing clips from "The Live! Show".

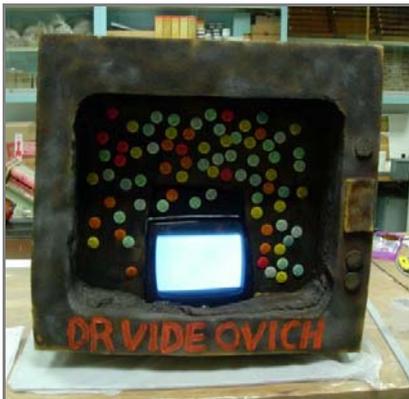


Figure 7. Jaime Davidovich, *Foam TV* (power on-during treatment), 1983, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Bobst Library, New York.

The display of the work in this manner has certain associated logistical concerns and dangers. To begin, a now very outdated 8-pin adapter would have to be located to connect the black and white television to a video player. Once the monitor is running, it will then produce heat that will accelerate the degradation of the foam. Also, the tape being used will degrade each time it is played. As such, display in this manner should ideally be limited to singular events, such as for video or photographic documentation.

¹⁶ The treatment that was actually performed was minimal, consisting mainly of surface cleaning, and the construction of a permanent housing that would provide adequate support for the foam elements. In addition, a guideline for monitoring the piece, –checking for worsening damage or off gassing– was given to the owner. Recommendations for future treatment were then presented to the owner: (a) as the foam's deterioration worsens, consolidation is suggested with a mixture of Impranil DLV in combination with Tinuvin B75 delivered by a nebulizer, which has recently been tested on PUR-ether foams by Thea van Oosten, Olivier Beringuer, and Aleth Lorne and there is potential for its application to this object's PUR-ester foam; (b) to improve appearance, the cracks at the back can be filled with PUR-ester foam, ideally of the same prepolymer; (c) if the distortions to the foam from mechanical stresses worsen, separation of the foam element may be necessary. The artist never adhered the foam to the monitor and it was always meant to be removable. However, removal of the foam element in its current state may cause damage, and once the foam is removed, it likely will not be possible to place it back onto the original TV. Since this step will limit presentation choices and shift the piece's meanings, future exhibition desires need to be determined beforehand.

An added aesthetic concern is that Davidovich is unspecific about the exact clips that are shown. Unless a pre-existing clip video can be located in his archives, a new selection would have to be edited and compiled on video. This will take a good deal of artistic license on the part of an editor.

A second strategy is partial reproduction and migration to varying degrees of the sculpture's mass-produced media parts. The least modification would be to use reproduced analog tape copies of the show for editing and exhibition needs. Further modification could include digital migration of the videos, which would allow compatibility with more current playback technologies. Unfortunately, this migration will inevitably have a different visual quality than the original analogue video.

Migration could be taken further by replacing the monitor, allowing modern connectors to be used as well as potentially alleviating mechanical stresses and heat to the foam. Unfortunately, a new monitor will probably be in color and may have a flat panel screen since rounded, cathode-ray tube screens are increasingly difficult to find.¹⁷ It cannot be ignored how drastically the visual quality of the video images and the physical appearance of the entire piece will change with a flat plasma screen. The final decision on this tactic must be made with specific exhibition goals in mind. For example, if the exhibition were geared toward a documentary overview of the artwork's historic context, then exhibiting the original monitor would be preferred. However, if the exhibition focused more on the piece's overarching conceptual meaning, it may be more acceptable to replace the monitor and retain the original for archival purposes.

As a third option the object can be displayed in its former incarnation as a costume. In this instance, the foam element would be removed from the monitor and displayed with the lab coat the artist wore during the Artist parade, which is also at Fales. Again, this decision is incumbent upon the goals of the particular exhibition for which the object is being considered; for in this costume mode the piece shifts towards a status as a performance relic.

Finally, in the event that the object deteriorates to the point that it can no longer be displayed, a completely emulated and migrated replica could be made.¹⁸ The artist specified that

¹⁷ The deadline set by Congress to end analog broadcasting February 17, 2009 will likely make new cathode ray television sets with curved screens unavailable for purchase soon.

¹⁸ Such a replica could be made at any time, but taking this step earlier would mean that there would be a more intact original to refer to during the replica's construction.

substitution of the PUR foam with a similar, but more archival material would be acceptable, though it is important that the replicated work maintain an unrefined, raw aesthetic.¹⁹

For this particular work, it may seem like a drastic preservation strategy to assign a fully emulated replica the authoritative role of the original, especially because the foam in this work was cut and formed by the artist's own hands. And it becomes even more difficult to accept a full replication of a piece that is so improvisational in appearance. Which then brings us to the question, beyond a need-based justification, is it art historically appropriate to present viewers with a replica of a work that so clearly shows the artist's hand? (fig. 8)



Figure 8. Jaime Davidovich, Image from *The Live! Show*, Artist Television Network 1978-1984, available at www.jaimedavidovich.com.

I would like to answer this question by looking at the *Foam TV* in the framework of Davidovich's practice, and the larger cultural and art historical context of mid 70s to the mid 80s. In a sense, we can think of the *Foam TV*, sculpturally, as a memorial to the broadcast experiment called "The Live! Show".²⁰ The existence of this satiric show at that time directly corresponds to a contemporaneous cultural discussion of television as a medium. And, if in 1977 media scholar Marshall McLuhan could cameo in *Annie Hall*, it must have been a popular discourse indeed.²¹

Influenced by McLuhan's seminal writing, *Understanding Media*, for cultural theorists, television as a means of communication became a shining example of the Postmodern Era's increasingly simulated reality, or hyperreality. In the 80s, when Baudrillard wrote on postmodern

¹⁹ Davidovich mentioned in the interview that he had bought the foam from a store on Canal Street. Foam stores for some reason proliferate on Canal Street, just east of SoHo. These stores are filled floor to ceiling with new and old foams, and the effect of being in one is akin to drowning inside a sofa cushion. Though the artist does not consider the source significant, it would be possible to replicate the piece by going down to Canal Street to purchase commercial PUR foam.

²⁰ For Davidovich, the need for such a satire to be broadcast on television was imperative. He stated, "So that was the idea. To, instead of doing a critique or satire of television and put[ing] it in a museum or an art gallery, I said no, if you're going to do a satire of television, you have to put it on television." Jaime Davidovich, personal interview, November 17, 2006.

²¹ *Annie Hall*, dir. Woody Allen, United Artists, 1977.

spaces in *America*, he gave convincing evidence that our recent culture had become one wherein the copy has claimed priority over the real.²²

Simultaneous and related developments can be seen in art and the field of art history. Michael Camille notes that since the 1960s, “artists themselves returned to the repressed term “simulacrum” and revived it as a crucial concept for interrogating postmodern artistic practices and theories of representation.”²³ And Davidovich is no stranger to this movement (fig. 9). In a monograph of the artist’s video works, Rodrigo Alonso notes that media’s construction of reality has been a continuous dialogue throughout the artist’s oeuvre, particularly in works tied to television.²⁴ In his own words, Davidovich noted in his 1986 manifesto, *State of the Art: The Failure of Video Art*, that the reason number 35 why video art failed was, “because the over-reality of TV is too powerful.”²⁵

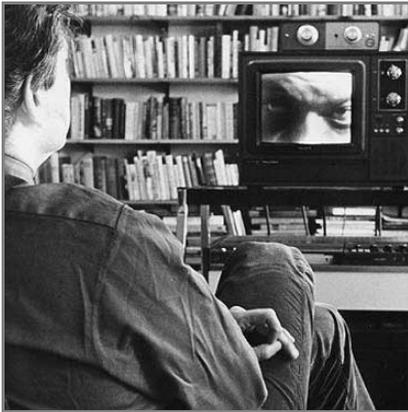


Figure 9. Photo of Jaime Davidovich viewing video of self, image from www.jaimedavidovich.com.

Whether you call it over-reality or hyper-reality, this concept is central to the cultural and theoretic milieu of the *Foam TV*. Furthermore, this piece, Davidovich’s “metaphor of the television landscape,” is itself a simulacrum in foam that houses its own referent --the ultimate medium of our *hyperreal* world--, television. Whether or not we despair our “culture of the simulacrum,” we see that for a work like *Foam TV*, a replica can be considered a culturally accurate artifact to leave for posterity, and one could even argue that it is almost more apropos than the original itself.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 1988). Originally published in French as *Amérique* (Paris: Grasset, 1986).

²³ Michael Camille “Simulacrum,” *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 35.

²⁴ Alonso.

²⁵ Jaime Davidovich, “State of the Art: The Failure of Video Art Manifesto” *Ars Electronica Festival-Catalog 1986* (Part 02), Ars Electronica Catalogue Archive, April 2007

<http://www.aec.at/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9300>.

The discussion up to now has been the justification for creating a replica. I would like to add a final note on the conservator's responsibility to the actual process of replication. It is a given that materials chosen, methods used, and the inevitable *caricaturization* of the original,²⁶ however minimal, will reflect current movements in art, conservation, technology, and the culture as a whole. These consequences must be understood, embraced, and documented to allow the viewer and scholar to properly understand the original through the replica.²⁷

Since the 18th century, when Winckelmann birthed western art history and made his Cain the Roman copy of Greek originals, art historians have pieced together lost originals from copies of all types. And it was always with a sigh that the original could not be seen. In recent decades, the copy is being reassessed by art historians in a postmodern dialectic that displaces the disdain.

Similarly, artists and restorers have historically made copies of artwork for myriad reasons. Now for modern conservators of contemporary art, the act of creating replicas has a new dialectic as well. And in this updated process it is incumbent upon the replicator to leave adequate documentation in the form of artist interviews, reports on materials and processes, and finally, a close copy.

Ultimately Davidovich's *Foam TV* will fail. No amount of consolidant can halt time. The foam will crumble, the Sony TV will cease to work, and the original videos will degrade. When that moment does arrive, rather than having then to relegate the work to the death of the deaccession,²⁸ methods of replication can be attempted.

In the final tally, if the *Foam TV* is determined to be culturally significant enough in generations to follow, a replicated piece can and will be accepted by those wishing to study or view it. But we must remember that when we replicate a piece, we not only salvage the past, we also define our present. So our task of leaving a thorough replica is doubly meaningful.

²⁶ Essential to what I mean by caricaturization, is the idea of the "period eye" as defined by Michael Baxandall in *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The person constructing the replica cannot help but see with a "period eye." Even the artist himself recreating his own work will be seeing it through the filter of hindsight. Thus the way we see an object *now* will be emphasized in the replica, and will necessarily be different from the original.

²⁷ For example, to Chinese painting collectors and scholars, assessing the quality of the copy and its accuracy in conveying the truth of the original has historically been and still is a crucial skill to develop. For replicated works in contemporary art, one would likewise need to develop an "eye," by reviewing numerous case studies.

²⁸ An instance in which the only viable option for a degraded PUR-foam object was deaccession is discussed in Thea B. Van Oosten, "Plastic Surgery: Conservation Treatments for Flexible Polyurethane Foams: From Face-Lift to donating the Corpse to Science," *Reversibility- Does it Exist?*, Eds. Andrew Oddy and Sara Carroll, (London: British Museum, 1999) 33-36.

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