



Tate Modern Switch House, Level 2 display featuring *Equivalent VIII* (1966) by Carl Andre, Photograph © Tate, London 2017

What happens when a work like *Equivalent VIII* (1966) is presented enclosed within protective barriers?

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The challenges of contemporary art

Contemporary art imposes challenges to the practices of institutions, in response to which the roles of conservators and curators need to be redefined. The contemporary artwork is not an autonomous object, it is rather a series of elements that demand from museums an involved practice of re-enactment. In this new context, standard museum practices – most notably the use of protective barriers, on which I here focus – can damage an artwork rather than safeguard it.

As many scholars have explicitly noted, the borders of a contemporary artwork can extend far beyond the borders of the object that is being exhibited.¹ Many contemporary artworks, for instance, extend to and incorporate within them the surrounding space. It follows that in such cases an interference with the artwork's surrounding space constitutes an interference with the 'body' of the artwork.

What happens then when a work like *Equivalent VIII* (1966)², by Carl Andre, is presented enclosed within protective barriers? The use of physical protective barriers is a phenomenon that is rarely the subject of museological discourse; it is also a ghost issue – as there is no evidence of barriers in the official installation photographs of museums.³ However barriers are omnipresent inside museums and, as the case of *Equivalent VIII* can make evident, they can dramatically affect contemporary artworks; although external devices, they can become internalised by the artwork and destroy it.

The effects of protective barriers: the case of *Equivalent VIII*

Equivalent VIII, part of the Tate collection since 1972, is a case of an artwork where 'the object is not self-contained but depends on its relation to the surrounding space.'⁴ Andre works throughout his practice with the same elements: industrial material in primary forms; the situating physical space; and the presence of the audience. Nothing is to be imposed in-between these three elements. This becomes explicit in 1976, in the occasion of the '200 Years of American Sculpture' exhibition at the Whitney in New York, when *Twenty-Ninth Copper Cardinal* (1975) was installed with a rubber mat between the object and the gallery's floor; prompting Andre to declare that the object had lost its art status and was reduced to scrap material.⁵

It is clear, then, that in presenting *Equivalent VIII* within protective barriers the artist's intent is violated. The object no longer constitutes an artwork, it is instead an illustrative device and a relic referring to an artwork that it once was. It is also evident that this type of presentation doesn't conform to the spirit of minimalism that mounts an 'attack on the prestige of both artist and artwork'⁶ and calls for 'an activation of the viewer's space and unfolding experience'⁷: the actual display of *Equivalent VIII* within barriers rather *corrupts* the relationship between the artwork and the audience.

We can summarise this effect in four points:

- The relationship is no longer a one-to-one since the institution makes itself present in-between the two, imposing its own narrative.
- The artistic, aesthetic and historic values of the artwork are eroded, while its monetary value is stressed, with the barriers creating a throne for the artwork and the audience being segregated from it.
- The audience is put in an uncomfortable position of constituting potential danger to the object.
- The relationality between the work and the audience is broken and a false autonomy is forced on the object; the role of the audience is reduced from an active component of the work to a passive observer of a form.

Although barriers can often turn artworks to spectacle, it should thus be clear that in the case of minimalism – where the work employs the most primary of elements and is stripped away from any illusion – objects are designed not to fit, in any way, in a frame of spectacle; behind the barriers, their otherwise evocative and complex reduction appears simply as actual scrap.

Relationship to my research

The case of protective barriers is used here to illustrate the complexity of the challenges conservators and curators face when working with contemporary art. These challenges perplex the traditional divisions of professional roles and demand institutional changes. Decision making in relation to the use of protective barriers is a territory where the jurisdiction of conservator and curator cross in complex ways and one where the authenticity, status and different values of the presented artwork are at stake.

In my PhD research as part of NACCA⁸ I investigate the role of conservation beyond the material dimension of artworks, as well as the institutions' responsibility of safeguarding the conceptual integrity of artworks. From this perspective, I look at the roles of conservators and curators and how they are adjusting in order to meet the challenges posed by contemporary art. I examine decision making processes, institutional procedures and collaborations as well as the developments in professional training and ethics. I consider how decisions are reached and justified in the process of designing and installing the exhibition, how the demands of different stakeholders are negotiated and how these processes are documented in the museum's records.

- 1 For instance, Heinrich 2015 (for example pp. 89–91) and Buskirk 2003 (for example pp. 14, 47 and 55).
- 2 *Equivalent VIII* was first presented in 1966 at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. After the initial presentation the object was destroyed and it was remade in 1969 with firebricks being used in place of the sand-lime bricks used for the original object. Since 1972 the work is part of the Tate collection.
- 3 It is important to note that Vivian Van Saaze has stated that: 'In the same manner as documentation may guide decisions in conservation, also gaps in documentation or blind spots may influence practices.' In Van Saaze 2013, p. 107.
- 4 Buskirk analysing minimalism, in Buskirk 2003, p. 24.
- 5 Buskirk 2003, p. 27.
- 6 Crimp 1993, p. 16.
- 7 Buskirk 2003, p. 138.
- 8 New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network project funded by the European Union (for more information please visit: nacca.eu).

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