Making Contemporary Art

We have seen that in contemporary art, a gap has opened up between the artwork and its particular displays. Simply by looking at the display, we don’t necessarily have a good understanding of what the work is. If we see an 18th-century painting that has some paint flaked off, we know how to understand this situation: the object has suffered some damage, and in order to appreciate the work we do our best to imagine how it would have looked if the paint were intact. But if we see one of Sigalit Landau’s *Barbed Salt Lamps* with a pile of salt underneath it, without further information we don’t know what to make of this. Is the lamp always presented with salt underneath? Is salt simply allowed to fall off and collect, so that change over time is part of the work? Or is the lamp a sign of damage that needs to be fixed? Prior to answering these questions we aren’t in a position to grasp all that is relevant to the work’s meaning. Similarly, if we view David Hammons’s *Injustice Case* without knowing that the image was produced by direct printing from the artist’s body, some of the work’s resonance will be lost on us. Simply looking at the display isn’t enough: there is an epistemic gap between the display and the artwork, a gap between what we see and what we need to know.

How can we fill this epistemic gap? In this chapter, we will look carefully at how artworks are made to get traction on this question.

**Case Study: Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1991) “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in LA)**

To think more about the significance of this gap between the display and the artwork, let’s consider how it functions in a particular case. Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s 1991 “*Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in LA)” involves a pile of hard candy in colorful wrappers. The particular candies displayed on a given occasion are not essential, however: viewers are invited to consume them as desired, and gallery staff periodically replenish them, in accordance with Gonzalez-Torres’s instructions. The size of the pile is ideally determined by weight: it should add up to 175 pounds of candy. But even this isn’t definitive. Whenever someone takes candy out of the pile, the weight will be less than ideal. And, presumably, gallery staff don’t weigh all the candy when they add to the pile; they just attempt a visual approximation of the initial installation.¹

¹ I will confirm this detail prior to publication.
“Untitled” relates to the death from AIDS of Gonzalez-Torres’s lover, Ross Laycock, and the ideal weight of the pile is related to Ross’s ideal body weight. So the work, while appearing fun-loving and light-hearted, in fact explores issues of mortality and of the squeamishness and fear surrounding AIDS: since this is a portrait of Ross, we are symbolically consuming him, although many would have been reluctant even to touch him during his illness. “Untitled” and other consumable candy works by Gonzalez-Torres are also compelling in an art context, even for those who know nothing about Ross and his death from AIDS: it can be wonderful, after spending a day in a museum looking at beautiful, remote, perplexing things, to be able to pick up a piece of an artwork and lay claim to it, or, better yet, to be able to eat it and appreciate its sweetness. There is something generous about these works (and something interesting about the way they enlist the museum, usually a great protector of artworks from audiences, in this generosity). These works – often known as candy spills – also raise questions about the nature of the experience we expect and receive from art. We tend to treat artworks as great cultural treasures, but is the enrichment we receive from them, especially after museum fatigue has set in, really greater than the fleeting but real and immediate enjoyment of a piece of candy? To what extent should artists play to the viewer’s desire for a reward?

It should be immediately clear that this work is not like a traditional sculpture. Every particular physical component is replaceable; indeed, the work can survive 100% replacement of the candies. For traditional sculptures, on the other hand, every physical component is essential, and if a piece is lost it cannot simply be replaced by a look-alike.

So what kind of thing is Gonzalez-Torres’s work? It is not identical to the particular candies that are dumped on the floor the first day of the exhibition. One might think, however, that the work is identical to a particular pile of candy, where a pile of candy is

2 Anne Sautman, Self-Guide: Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2003), p. 8. In correspondence, the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation has confirmed the artist’s preference that the word ‘untitled’ be enclosed in quotation marks in the titles of his works.

3 Neither, though, is it purely conceptual. Comparison of “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in LA) with other Gonzalez-Torres works, such as the 1991 “Untitled” (Placebo), involving 1000 to 1200 pounds of candies wrapped in silver and displayed in a neat rectangular array on the floor, shows that Gonzalez-Torres gives sculptural attention to the visual details of his work, and visual appearance is part of what viewers should and do consider in appreciation and interpretation.

4 See Mark Sagoff, “On Restoring and Reproducing Art,” The Journal of Philosophy 75 (1978), 453-470, for discussion of this point in relation to the Vatican restoration of Michelangelo’s Pietà. Of course, replacement parts can supply considerable information about what the original was like; but to encounter even an excellent replica is not to encounter the original work.
a physical entity that can survive the gradual replacement of all the particular candies it contained when it was first constituted. This possibility is interpretatively attractive, in that a pile of candy is similar to a human body in this respect: human bodies are physical objects that survive the gradual replacement of their physical components. In this way, then, the construal of the work as a pile of candy would connect it to the body of Ross.\(^5\)

If the work were a pile of candies, however, the work would cease to exist whenever the pile ceases to exist. Were the curators negligent in restocking the candies on a busy weekend, the work might accidentally be destroyed. And were the museum to discard the remaining candies between exhibitions, they would have destroyed the work. But in fact, there is nothing in critical or institutional practice to support the idea that the work can be destroyed in this way, or that it is an entity with discontinuous existence. Works of this type, which involve the assembly of new materials for each display, continue to belong to museum collections, and are spoken of by critics in the present tense, even when years elapse between exhibitions.\(^6\) Moreover, regarding the work as existing discontinuously would make it out to be a very odd sort of thing indeed: a non-contiguous entity in 4-dimensional spacetime, made up of a series of piles.

Gonzalez-Torres’s work thus has a complex relationship to any particular pile of candies through which it is presented: it clearly is not identical to the pile, and it is constituted by some pile or other at most partially and intermittently, like a soul moving from body to body. To see why the nature of the work matters, let us consider four hypothetical scenarios, where things went a bit differently than they have gone in the real world.

\textit{Static Pile}\(^7\): In selling the work to the museum, the artist delivers a particular 175-pound batch of candy, with instructions that, for display, the candy is to be placed in a pile in the corner of the room and should not be touched by viewers.

\textit{Vanishing Pile}: The work resembles the actual case in all respects, except that the artist’s instructions specify that when all the candies have been eaten, they are not to be replenished.

\textit{Stingy Curator}: The instructions are the same as in the actual case (the candies may be eaten and are to be periodically replenished), but the museum curator decides that visitors should not be allowed to eat the candies. Thus the presentation ends up being the same as that specified in \textit{Static Pile}.\(^8\)

\(^5\) I am grateful to Jason Southworth for this point.
\(^6\) Another prominent example is Jana Sterbak’s (1987) \textit{Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic}, each display of which requires that a dress be newly sewn from large pieces of flank steak.
\(^7\) Just to be clear: these italicized names are the names of scenarios, not artworks.
\(^8\) Ann Temkin mentions that, once the candies originally used to realize Gonzalez-Torres’s work become unavailable, “[t]he museum might stop allowing people to take the candies (explaining in a label that they would once have been allowed to do so).”
Replicable Pile: The work is like that in Vanishing Pile, except that the artist stipulates that the work may legitimately be presented anywhere, at any time, as long as his instructions are followed.\(^9\) When all the candies have been eaten, then, a new instance of the work may be constructed, just as a musical work may be performed again after a particular performance has ended.

How should we understand the work in these cases? It seems that in the Static Pile scenario, the work functions like a traditional sculpture. The artist is presenting the pile of candies as an artifact to be put on display, stored between exhibitions, and so forth. In the absence of any indication to the contrary, the candies will be treated by the institution as essential to the work, and will thus be subjected to careful storage and conservation procedures. This is because preservation of objects supplied by the artist remains the default procedure: this default can be overturned, but something has to be done to overturn it.

The work in Static Pile has to be understood differently than the real “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in LA). It does not offer the same sense of generosity; it does not challenge the taboos associated with AIDS in the same way; and rather than poking fun at the distance that institutions often impose between artworks and viewers by subverting it and allowing the candy to be consumed, it pokes fun at this distance by preserving it and directing it at an object with respect to which such distance seems completely ridiculous. The work still comments on many of the same issues, but coldly and sarcastically rather than in a playful and inviting way: since Ross has AIDS, we cannot physically engage even with his symbolic stand-in; since artworks are precious objects with which we are not permitted to engage, we cannot eat even a simple, easily replaceable piece of candy on the floor of a gallery, as long as it is part of an artwork. This version of the work takes the institutional imposition of distance as an unfortunate given, a lamentable convention that we’re stuck with, whereas Gonzalez-Torres’s actual work, rather than adopting such a defeatist mode, proposes that this distance is something art can light-heartedly shed. The nature of the commentary that the work of Static Pile would make on matters of institutional distance depends upon its essential connection to a particular physical object that will be protected and conserved by the museum.

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\(^9\) Sol LeWitt once suggested that his wall drawings function in this way: when asked, “How would you feel if someone executed a wall drawing of yours without permission but with care to follow the instructions and in an appropriate site?” he replied that he would regard the drawing as authentic and would not regard the unauthorized use as unethical. Andrea Miller-Keller (1984), “Excerpts from a Correspondence, 1981-1983,” in Susanna Singer et al., Sol LeWitt Wall Drawings 1968-1984 (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum), p. 22.
The work in *Vanishing Pile* is different, in important ways, both from the actual work and from the work in *Static Pile*. Because eating of the candies is permitted in *Vanishing Pile*, this work doesn’t maintain the sense of institutional distance present in *Static Pile*. But, whereas the actual work is characterized by inexhaustibility and generosity, and gives us a tribute in which the artist’s love for Ross is immortalized, the work in *Vanishing Pile* confronts us very firmly with the finiteness of things. Each time we take a piece of candy, we must recognize that we are hastening the work’s demise, just as Ross’s demise was hastened by his disease. Should we eat a piece and thus enjoy the full experience of the work, or should we be frugal, simply imagining what it would be like to eat one of the candies, so that the work can last longer? Who will eat the last candy, and thus consign the work forever to oblivion? Seeing the work as essentially connected to a particular physical object allows us to understand it as making a particularly poignant commentary on mortality. However, as we see by comparing *Static Pile* with *Vanishing Pile*, the close connection of the work to a particular pile is only one factor among others; works that are closely connected to the same kind of object can have quite different meanings.

Now consider *Stingy Curator*, in which the artist’s instructions are exactly as in the actual case: the pile is ideally 175 pounds, but it is permissible for audience members to eat the candies; the pile is to be replenished indefinitely. However, a curator decides, for some reason, that audience members are not to be allowed to eat the candies; or perhaps museum guards are ignorant of the instruction that the candies may be eaten, and they thus prevent audience members from approaching them.

Notice that what the audience will experience, in *Stingy Curator*, is just what they would have experienced in *Static Pile*. And the evolution (or lack thereof) of the pile of candies will also be the same as in *Static Pile*. That is, the display will be precisely the same in both cases. But should we therefore interpret the work as being different than it is in the actual case? No: the fact that a curator makes a decision to present things incorrectly doesn’t change what the work itself is or how it should be understood. It might make it harder for audience members to grasp the work, just as hanging a painting upside-down might make it more difficult for the audience to grasp the work. But it does not change what it is appropriate to say in interpretation or evaluation of the work. Only the artist can make decisions that will change the work’s properties (unless

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10 It is possible for a curator-cum-artist to constitute a new work through appropriation and (perhaps non-standard) display of items created by others, as when Garry Neill Kennedy proposed that all landscape paintings in a particular wing of the National Gallery of Canada be re-hung at his eye level. (See *Garry Neill Kennedy: Work of Four Decades* [Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2000], p. 68.) However, such interventions do not change the original work; Kennedy’s intervention, even had it been executed, did not make it the case that the original works he appropriated are now such that they must be hung at his eye level. For discussion of cases of incorrect installation, or conflict between the artist and the museum about appropriate display, see chapter 6.
the artist explicitly yields that power to others). For this reason, the work in *Stingy Curator* is the same as in the actual case, despite the fact that the presentation differs.

Let us now turn to *Replicable Pile*. In this case, the artist’s instructions determine that the work is an abstract entity, since it may have more than one instance. The work is to this extent similar to works for performance, such as musical and theatrical pieces. However, since the work is a contemporary visual artwork, and most such works are singular rather than allowing for multiple instantiations, the permissibility of multiple instances becomes interpretatively relevant. Because the work can always be newly instanced after a particular instance goes out of existence, the eating of the last piece of candy loses much of the poignancy it would have had in *Vanishing Pile* (since, in *Replicable Pile*, it isn’t really the last piece). The work becomes a meditation less on mortality and loss than, perhaps, on the way in which a person’s spirit can live on and be reconstituted in different forms through the survival of those who knew and loved him. The work in *Replicable Pile* seems fundamentally more optimistic than that in *Vanishing Pile*, and this interpretative fact is closely related to the permissibility of multiple instances.

What lessons can we draw from this discussion? First, the artist’s art-making role is not exhausted by the creation of a physical object. Gonzalez-Torres’s art-making activity didn’t involve making an object, or even specifying a particular object. Instead, he determined the features of his work through acts related to presentation: by communicating instructions to the museum, giving the work a title, and so forth. Through these activities, he made it the case that “*Untitled*” involves the presentation and periodic replenishment of a (roughly) 175-pound pile of candies that can be eaten by viewers. And by these same activities, he made it the case that the artwork is not identical to or essentially connected to any particular pile. Through a different set of decisions, however, he could have made a work that was essentially constituted by a particular pile of candies, or a work that was an abstract entity, susceptible of multiple instances.

Second, there is a fit between the nature of the work and the meanings it is rightly seen as having. This is not to say that there is a single right answer to questions about what the work means. But finding meaning in an artwork is a matter of making sense of what is presented, and there are some prominent features of the work that can’t be ignored. When the artist chooses, whether implicitly or explicitly, to make a work that requires the display of a particular physical object, this makes available different kinds of meaning than if the artist had stipulated, instead, that different objects with varying features can be presented. Artworks can have different kinds of connection to physical objects, and this, like other elements of a work’s form, is a resource artists can use to imbue their works with meaning. Acknowledging differences in the works’ nature allows us to acknowledge important differences in their meanings as well.

Third, there is the gap: simply by seeing a particular display we don’t know which work we are encountering, and so aren’t in a position to recognize the relevant meanings.
The Artist’s Sanction

The three lessons of our case study are intimately connected. Simply by seeing the display, we don’t know what work we are encountering; and we need to know the nature of the work in order to fully appreciate the meanings that are available to us. But if the work’s nature helps to determine its meaning, we need to know where that nature comes from. A straightforward answer is that the work becomes the kind of thing that it is through a process of making. Artworks are made by artists, and artists are responsible for determining the nature and features of their works. So let’s explore this process of artmaking.

The making of a visual artwork is often thought of as a process of fabricating a physical object; and, indeed, this is often central, as when Sigalit Landau shaped her barbed-wire lampshades and immersed them in the Dead Sea. But thinking about contemporary art reveals that the process of making is more complex than this. In addition to making or selecting some physical object, structure, event, process, or state of affairs, the artist often specifies details of presentation, which may include acceptable venues and physical configurations. As we saw in chapter 1, even works in the traditional genre of painting are partly constituted by the specification of an acceptable configuration: every traditional painting has an orientation that counts as right side up (as was highlighted by Georg Baselitz when he stipulated that his paintings were to be hung such that their representational content was upside down). The artist may also specify certain properties related to the meaning of the work, such as the title; and this will constrain how it is appropriate to interpret the work. I describe this determination of the work’s properties through the artist’s acts of artmaking as the artist’s sanctioning of certain features of the work.

The artist’s creative activity of sanctioning can place greater emphasis on physical fabrication, can focus on instructions, or can involve a balance of the two. In chapter 1 we saw examples all along the spectrum between physical fabrication and specifying of instructions. David Hammons’ Injustice Case (1970) was created primarily through meaningful acts of physical fabrication, when Hammons took a direct print from his own bound and gagged body and placed it over a US flag. In making the Barbed Salt Lamps (2007), Sigalit Landau fabricated particular objects, but she also sanctioned a detail of their conservation. Liz Magor spent weeks fabricating the newspaper bricks of Production (1980), but equally important are her sanctions about how the bricks are to be displayed, allowing for some variability but also placing limits on what is acceptable. And at the far end of the spectrum, Lawrence Weiner, in making A WALL BUILT TO FACE

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11 This is not to say that simply giving the work a title is sufficient to imbue it with particular representational content. Whether or not the artist has made a picture of, say, a banyan tree will depend partly on our conventions and practices for decoding pictorial representations, partly on what banyan trees actually look like, and so forth.
THE LAND & FACE THE WATER AT THE LEVEL OF THE SEA (2008), didn’t fabricate an object at all; he simply sanctioned that a particular set of words is to be inscribed so as to be visible to the viewer.

Not all sanctioning of artwork features is done explicitly. Established artistic genres involve conventions that determine some of the work’s features. For example, an 18th-century painter did not have to declare that all future paint flaking is irrelevant to the nature of the artwork. Instead, historical paintings fall under a strong convention to the effect that when arms break off sculptures and paint flakes off paintings, we do not come to see them as armless-artworks and flaking-artworks, or interpret their subjects as armless humans or landscapes punctuated by strange, irregularly shaped patches of emptiness. Ordinarily, unless the artist explicitly stipulates otherwise, damage to the objects the artist created is not interpretatively relevant: it does not change what the work means, though it may make it difficult to recognize some aspects of the work’s meaning.

Because of artistic conventions, it is not necessary for the artist to explicitly sanction every one of a work’s features either by giving the object certain characteristics or by saying something about whether the work has this or that feature. If it were, then no work would ever be completed, because an infinite number of possible features would have to be ruled out. The artist’s sanction determines the artwork’s features in the context of conventions that specify default artwork boundaries.

Many such conventions are defeasible. It is perfectly open to a contemporary artist to stipulate that the flaking of a painting is a bona fide feature of the work. In 1957, the Japanese Gutai artist Saburo Murakami created a series of Peeling Off paintings which are such that the flaking paint is interpretatively and evaluatively relevant.12 when we consider what the work accomplishes, we should consider such things as the statement that is made by embracing the flaking of the paint, and the beauty or ugliness of the surface that emerges as the paint flakes. By sanctioning that the peeling of the paint is internal to the work, rather than being bracketed off as damage, Murakami made that element relevant to our appreciation of the work.

There are a few important things to note about the artist’s sanction. First, not every statement made by the artist serves to sanction features of the artwork. I distinguish between the features of the work and its meanings. The meanings a work can have are constrained, but not wholly determined, by its features. Part of our response to a work is interpretation, which aims to make sense of a work by attributing themes and meanings to it. Insofar as interpretation must be responsive to the work’s features, the artist’s sanction will place some indirect constraints on interpretation, just as an artist places constraints on interpretation by applying paint to canvas in a particular arrangement: we are not free to ignore the work’s features as we interpret. The role the

The artist’s sanction plays in constraining interpretation, on my view, is an indirect one, mediated by its role in determining certain of the work’s features. The sanction does not establish the ultimate meaning of those features or of the work itself. And when artists make statements about the themes or meanings of their work, we are not bound to accept them; we can assess whether those statements make sense in light of the work’s actual features.\(^{13}\)

It is also possible for an artist to try but fail to establish a sanction about something that does fall within the domain where sanctioning is possible. If the artist’s preference regarding configuration of the work is not expressed clearly, or is mistakenly expressed to a museum visitor who happens to resemble the curator, then no sanction has been established. And if the artist makes contradictory statements, or expresses preferences that would be dangerous or impossible to carry out within the framework of the institution, it may be necessary to rely on art world or institutional conventions to resolve the issue of what we should take to have been sanctioned.\(^{14}\)

This relates to the relationship between the artist’s sanction and the artist’s intention. The artist does not sanction a feature of the work simply by having an intention regarding that feature. In addition to possessing an intention, the artist has to do something about it: to act or communicate in such a way that there is a reasonable expectation of uptake, typically by the people responsible for creating displays of the work. Creating a reasonable expectation of uptake involves a few conditions: the artist has to communicate with sufficient clarity, and has to communicate to the right people, typically curators and conservators (or through channels that are designed to get to those people). But this does not mean that the artist must secure actual uptake for a sanction to have been established. As we saw in *Stingy Curator*, the failure of a curator to execute instructions that the artist has clearly communicated does not mean that the artist failed to sanction the features of the work. It means only that the work is being inappropriately displayed.

### Contemporary Artworks and Norms

Visual artworks have often been thought of as straightforward physical objects. As Jerrold Levinson says, a painting “is composed of matter, is at one place at one time, and is subject to a familiar range of causal interactions with other physical objects.”\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) Some such cases are discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

\(^{15}\) Jerrold Levinson, “The Work of Visual Art,” in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 129-37, at pp. 135-36. To be clear, Levinson does not hold that a painting or other “physical artwork” is a *mere* physical object: rather, it is “a physical object-as-intended-or-projected-for-a-
But when we attend to the artist’s sanction, we find that things are more complicated. An artist might make a work that is composed of matter, as in *Static Pile*. But artists can choose, instead, to make works whose connection to any particular matter is far looser, as in Gonzalez-Torres’s “*Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in LA)” or Weiner’s *A WALL BUILT*, neither of which has any fixed physical components. A performance artist may choose to make a work that is closely connected to an event rather than to a collection of matter: Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* involved many objects, including a gun and bullet, but the work was not simply composed of those objects. And when it comes to works of internet art like Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ *CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA* (2003), it doesn’t seem that the work could be composed of matter: it could be realized by way of a wide variety of physically different systems of information storage and retrieval, as long as they allow for the creation of the right kind of display.

With regard to many contemporary artworks, then, we can’t use a particular physical object or array to anchor our understanding of the work. And even when a particular physical object is crucial, inspection of the object alone can’t answer all of our questions about how the object is related to the work. We don’t know, simply by looking at a pile of candies, whether we are dealing with “*Untitled* (Portrait of Ross in LA)” or the distinct works of the *Static Pile*, *Vanishing Pile* or *Replicable Pile* scenarios. There is, thus, an epistemic gap between the display and the artwork: we can’t know, just by looking at the display, what work it is a display of.

To fill this epistemic gap between the display and the artwork, we need fuller information about what the artist has sanctioned. Encountering the display gives us some, and typically quite a lot of, information about this, since the features of the display are a product of the artist’s sanction. But an encounter with a display doesn’t tell us which of its features are essential and which optional. If we observe change over time in the display, we don’t yet know whether that change is part of the work or extrinsic to it, to be bracketed as damage.

What is missing, when we attend only to a set of objects or a display, is an understanding of the *norms* that the artist has sanctioned. These norms are what connect objects, events and displays to artworks. When it comes to object-based works, the norms are what allow us to take the physical material the artist has supplied and generate appropriate displays.

There are several different kinds of norms that an artist may sanction. We have already discussed norms of *conservation*, as when Sigalit Landau specifies that fallen salt is not *certain-regard-or-treatment*” (p. 135). His view thus makes room for the idea that artmaking involves work of intending or projecting, in addition to physical fabrication. Often not a perfect product, though: there are many ways for things to go wrong. Audience members may damage or steal physical components of the work, and curators or conservators may execute the display in ways that conflict with the artist’s sanction (sometimes for good reasons). Such cases will be dealt with in chapter 6.
to be reattached to the *Barbed Salt Lamps*. Such norms have increasing prominence in contemporary art, which is often characterized by the use of non-standard materials that degrade over time. They also play a prominent role in works with technological components: since these components are destined for obsolescence, and replacement or repair will eventually become impossible, decisions must be made about whether and how the works will weather such changes. Does a work cease to exist when a particular functioning component is no longer available? Or is it permissible to migrate the work to another sort of technology, preserving the qualities of the display to the extent possible? These questions will be discussed further in chapter 5.

There are also norms of *configuration*. Zhan Wang’s (2006) *Urban Landscape: Beijing* involves norms for assembling a set of stainless steel kitchen implements into the right sort of structure to create a representation of Beijing. Clearly, correct configuration is crucial to the work, which otherwise would be just a collection of pots and pans.

The amount of variability between displays that is permitted by norms of configuration can vary dramatically: some sets of objects may have to be configured exactly the same way for every display, while others may be subject to dramatically different arrangements. Colombian artist Maria Fernanda Cardozo’s (1992) *Cementerio – jardín vertical (Cemetery – Vertical Garden)* is an installation artwork involving a wall drawing and hundreds of stems of white artificial flowers protruding from a gallery wall. The norms of configuration for this work exhaustively stipulate the placement of every single hole into which a stem of flowers will be placed; Cardozo has even supplied a physical template that is laid over the wall. The norms also specify the way in which the flowers should be turned once inserted into the whole. Other works, though, permit far more variability.

Norms of *interaction*, too, play a prominent role in contemporary art. Gonzalez-Torres’s “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in LA*) involves a norm of interaction such that audience members can take candies from the pile. In chapter 1 we saw a number of works involving norms of interaction. Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* involved a norm permitting audience members to interact with a set of presented objects and with the artist. Jason Rhoades’s (2003) SLOTO: *The Secret Life of the Onion* involves a norm such that curators are to assemble “onions” and ride around in a children’s carnival train before placing the onions on a shelving unit. Micah Lexier’s (1995) A work of art in the form of a quantity of coins equal to the number of months of the statistical life expectancy of a child born January 6, 1995 involves a norm such that curators and audience members are to transfer a coin from one box to the other on the 6th day of each month.

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17 Interview with Peter Boswell, Senior Curator, Miami Art Museum, July 2010; Registrar’s file and conservation record for *Cementerio – jardín vertical (Cemetery – Vertical Garden)*, registration no. 2002.7, Miami Art Museum.

18 For instance, the norms of Ann Hamilton’s (1988/1996) *Untitled (the capacity of absorption)* simply require that most of its elements be configured in a way that appears random. Interview with Peter Boswell, Senior Curator, Miami Art Museum, July 2010.
A subspecies of norms of interaction consists of norms specifying that the display is to be left alone, which we might call norms of non-interaction. Such norms may not be explicitly stated: there is a longstanding convention that works in galleries and museums are not to be touched, and a norm of non-interaction typically serves as a default. Thus, as long as Sigalit Landau doesn’t supply explicit instructions that audience members are permitted to touch her Barbed Salt Lamps, a norm of non-interaction applies: she does not have to do anything to activate it. Simply by creating a work in a context where the norm of non-interaction is the default, she sanctions the relevance of that norm to her work, unless she does something to deactivate it.

With regard to norms of conservation, the default is in favor of preservation, at least when it comes to object-based works: the objects supplied by the artist will be preserved in their original condition unless the artist explicitly specifies otherwise. It’s important to note that these defaults are context-specific and may be restricted to particular art forms. Conservation of technology-based works is sometimes governed by a different default, typically with emphasis on preserving the experience available to the viewer. This norm may allow for the migration of a work from one technology to another when the particular physical medium the artist supplied cannot be maintained as part of the display. And such defaults may change over time. As contemporary art evolves to become increasingly interactive, there may come a time when norms of non-interaction are no longer the default, at least for certain kinds of artworks. And the default of preservation for object-based works may already be eroding: conservators increasingly regard it as preferable to collect specific, fine-grained information about the artist’s conservation preferences rather than making assumptions about how the objects should be treated. A great deal of work has been done to establish best practices for the collection of such information.20

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19 See, for instance, “A Preservation Guide for Technology-Based Artworks” issued by the Canadian organization DOCAM (http://www.docam.ca/en/about-cons.html), which draws a distinction between authenticity, which requires the original format, and integrity, a narrower notion having to do with the viewer’s experience and the concept underlying the work. The Guide suggests that a work’s integrity may sometimes be preserved through migration or emulation in a different format; in other cases, it may be best to accept that the work can no longer legitimately be displayed. It is also worth noting that it is common for institutions to make exhibition copies of film and video works in order to safeguard the master supplied by the artist; display of an exhibition copy is, in many circumstances, regarded as fully authentic display of such works.

20 See, for instance, the detailed guide related to acquisitions produced by Matters in Media Art, a project of the New Art Trust, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Tate (http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/matters-media-art/acquisitions). Other major research networks and projects dedicated to developing best practices for installation and new media artworks include DOCAM,
A final sort of norm we should mention is the norm of inclusion, which specifies which physical objects may, or must, be presented in the display. Norms of inclusion range from restrictive to permissive. The most fundamental norm for a traditional work of paintings is that this very object must be displayed. For Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled”, on the other hand, the norm is that objects like this (belonging to a certain kind of wrapped hard candy) must be displayed.

The Importance of Norms

We’ve seen that artists sanction the features of their works through a combination of selecting or fabricating objects and communicating instructions. The artist’s sanction thus generates norms for creating displays and for dealing with the objects that are associated with the work. In this section, we’ll think more about the importance of these norms and entertain an alternative position according to which considering them, when we appreciate and interpret the artwork, is unnecessary.

There are several reasons for thinking that norms are of crucial importance in contemporary artworks. First, artists and art institutions treat them this way. This practice has emerged out of historical developments that happened throughout the 20th century and are continuing now. Artists commonly regard the specifying of such norms as part of the process of creating their works, and as we have already noted, many works come with detailed diagrams and installation instructions. Indeed, some works, like Weiner’s (2008) A WALL BUILT, are reduced to norms, with scarcely a material component to be found. Consider these remarks by Roy A. Perry, then Head of Conservation at Tate:

A Sol LeWitt wall drawing is re-created with new material each time it is exhibited. Each version is a unique “performance” of the work that will vary from showing to showing within the parameters set by the artist. The materials may be unique, variable, or replaceable, but in all cases [of physically ephemeral works] it is the artist’s instructions that are the constant, conservable core of the work.21

Curators and conservators, especially in well-funded institutions, prioritize the collection of information related to these instructions from artists, and their decisions about treatment of the work are extensively shaped by what the artist has said about conservation and display. There is a large theoretical literature about this, developed by

INCCA, Inside Installations, PRACTICs, and the Variable Media Network. For further discussion, see chapters 4 and 5.

art critics, curators and especially conservators. For instance, the Canadian organization DOCAM, a leader in research on the documentation and conservation of media artworks, says the following about acquisition of technology-based works:

The documentary process should include an audio or video interview with the artist to ensure that the museum has gathered the requirements regarding the eventual needs for migration support or evolving technology. It is essential that the artist provide a detailed description of the concept and meaning of his or her work, which will prove useful to avoid compromising the artist’s concept or the desired behaviour of the work when having to make decisions about modifying it....

Thus, we have artists supplying extensive documentation and instructions related to the display and conservation of their works, institutions placing a high priority on collecting such information, and conservators expressing the view that the artists’ instructions are central to the work and must be followed in order to maintain its integrity. All of this is strong evidence for the centrality of norms in contemporary art.

Here is a second line of evidence. The norms expressed by the artist typically relate to matters that affect the viewer’s experience, sometimes quite significantly. The norms expressed by Gonzalez-Torres allow us to take and consume the candies in a display of his work. The norms expressed by Weiner have the result that displays of A WALL BUILT may be vastly different from one another. The norms expressed by Cardozo have the result that displays of Cementerio – jardín vertical will have very specific aesthetic features related to the arrangement of the artificial flowers, and that they will closely resemble each other. The fact that these norms originate with the artist and shape the viewer’s experience is another strong reason to think that they are of importance in our understanding of the work.

Third, as we have seen in relation to Landau’s Barbed Salt Lamps and Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in LA), normative features are interpretable: just like physical features, they are a resource that the artist can use to shape the meaning of the work. I’ve argued that Landau’s Barbed Salt Lamps would have a somewhat different meaning if the salt were to be reattached. And if Gonzalez-Torres had made a work with candy that viewers weren’t allowed to consume, it would be a completely different work with meaning potential quite different from that of “Untitled”. For this reason, when we entertain the idea of swapping out the actual norms of a work – as we did in relation to “Untitled” – for different norms, holding the material elements constant, intuitively we seem to have a different work, or at least a different version of the work that is subject

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to a different range of interpretations. In many instances the whole point and purpose of the work would be altered. Artists recognize this, and it figures in their rationale for decisions related to the norms of their work. For instance, after two years of collaboration with a conservator to devise conservation procedures for Strange Fruit, Zoe Leonard “surprised herself and found that she recoiled at [conservator] Scheidemann’s hard-won results. She realized that the appearance of decay was not enough for her, the metaphor of disappearance was insufficient.” The work could not have the full resonance she intended for it if the fruit peels were aggressively conserved against decay.

Moreover, taking norms into account frequently yields a richer and more satisfying experience of the work. Considered simply as a pile of candy on the floor of a gallery, “Untitled” is inert. The thoughts it is most likely to give rise to are thoughts about the bankruptcy of contemporary art. Is the artist, and indeed the whole art world, making fun of us by dumping an ordinary pile of candy on the floor and claiming that it is art? But when we consider that the artist specified that we may eat the candy, this changes the terms of our engagement with the artwork and the institution, and it sheds light on the usual distance between artwork and audience, and the institution’s typical role in protecting artworks from us, treating the audience as a danger rather than a crucial partner. Even before we consider the meanings related to the loss of Gonzalez-Torres’s lover to AIDS, the norms specified by the artist can be highly evocative and thought provoking.

Of course, this isn’t always the case. Sometimes artists don’t know when to stop, and they give their works features that make the works worse rather than better. This is just as true of the specification of norms as it is of physical fabrication. But if it’s true that considering the norms specified by the artist frequently provides us with interpretative resources that make for a richer experience, then that is another reason, combined with everything that has been mentioned above, for recognizing the importance of these norms.

The case of Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” reveals that we can’t escape from the norms in any event. To disregard the norm that the candy may be eaten is to treat the work as subject to a norm of non-interaction, as in Static Pile. Similarly, to ignore the norm related to falling salt in the Barbed Salt Lamps is to treat the works as subject to a norm of restoration.

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25 A norm of restoration doesn’t mean that we reattach the salt at all costs. It does imply that if we aren’t able to physically restore an object without causing further harm, such as discoloration, we do our best to mentally bracket the loss as damage rather than treating it as internal to the work.
A final point is that while normative elements have become highly salient in certain strands of contemporary art, they are also relevant to works from earlier historical eras. So there is historical continuity in the relevance of norms; it just wasn’t as obvious until artists in the 20th century started pushing the limits on normative elements. There are norms of inclusion, configuration and conservation for pre-20th-century paintings, as we discussed earlier: a particular object must be displayed, it has a correct orientation with a top and a bottom, and it is to be maintained, to the extent feasible, in the state it was in when it left the artist’s studio. Historically, these normative elements were largely a matter of convention, and it was straightforward to infer the normative features of the work from its physical features: if you could detect the representational content, then you knew automatically which way the painting should be hung. In the last hundred years, there has been a loosening of the conventions and defaults that determined these norms in earlier eras. Artists have created avenues to intervene in the norms. But it was already the case, before this movement began, that norms specifying correct orientation were quite important to works of painting.

**Art without Norms?**

I have been arguing that our encounters with artworks rightly involve considering norms that the artist has specified. This argument will continue to receive support throughout the book, and the implications for appreciation of contemporary art will be developed explicitly in chapter 8. But some will be skeptical, thinking that norms have little or no relevance for viewers. Here, I will engage these concerns, hoping that I can entice the skeptic to keep reading as the argument unfolds.

One compelling skeptical position will distinguish between two distinct roles the norms may be thought to play: their role for institutions and professionals responsible for displaying and conserving artworks, and their role for viewers. The skeptic might accept that norms are binding on professionals – they are required to mount correct displays – but hold that audience members need only consider and respond to the display; the fact that it is the product of one set of norms rather than another is not the viewer’s business to sort out. After all, we often aren’t given information about these norms: for instance, the wall label for one of Sigalit Landau’s *Barbed Salt Lamps* does not say that fallen salt is not to be reattached. Isn’t that a sign that such norms are not relevant for appreciation?

This skeptical approach reduces a work of art to its display, suggesting that the work is and should be, for the viewer, only what is accessible through consideration of a specific display. Let us consider some implications of this approach.

Beginning in 1979, the Canadian artist Gerald Ferguson created over 100 *Maintenance Paintings*, described as “a series of paintings in a variety of sizes and colors, on standard supports, using latex paint, installed in a reasonable manner and whose reinstallation
and maintenance (re-painting) is at the discretion of the end user.”\textsuperscript{26} These works involve a norm of interaction: namely, the owners of the works are permitted to repaint them. In a later statement, the artist said, “If someone bought a green painting, for example and felt it would look better white, they could repaint it. That would be aesthetic maintenance.”\textsuperscript{27}

This body of work challenges longstanding historical practices of treating the painted surface, with marks made by the original artist, as precious. There are a number of ways we might understand Ferguson’s move: as a demystification of the artist and a democratization of art; as a slackerish refusal to bother making a surface that is worth preserving; as an ironic sendup of such refusals made by others\textsuperscript{28}; as an exploration of the limits of interactivity in art; or as an invitation to loosen our grip on the idea that artmaking is principally about fabrication of objects, for instance.

Notice, though, that if we ignore the norm of interaction associated with the Maintenance Paintings, none of these understandings of Ferguson’s works are available to us: for all we have now is a display of a painted surface. The display might involve either an “evenly colored monochrome surface” originally painted by Ferguson\textsuperscript{29} or a surface repainted by a collector. But from the perspective of the skeptic, that surface is all that can matter to us: as long as whoever is mounting the display has done their job in following the artist’s norms, the norms themselves are of no further interest. The facts that the surface is susceptible of being repainted, that it may already have been repainted and that displays at different times may differ dramatically from each other all become irrelevant. The artwork becomes, then, just another monochromatic painting (unless a collector chooses to paint it polychromatically).

Reasonable people may disagree about the value of Ferguson’s maneuver: some may think it is a clever probing of the artist’s role, occurring around the time that appropriation artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince were borrowing images created by others and presenting them as their own work, testing the limits of what one must do to count as an artist. Others may find the permission to repaint the work undesirably gimmicky. But neither of these thoughts is available to a viewer who

\textsuperscript{26} This wording is from the label affixed to the back of each Maintenance Painting.


\textsuperscript{28} Ferguson considered a subset of the Maintenance Paintings created for a 1982 exhibition “to be ‘bad’ painting” whose “appearance reawakens in the viewer responses conditioned by the emotionally charged Abstract Expressionism of the 50s, and, by extension, much of the Neo-expressionist activity in vogue today.” Press release for the exhibition Gerald Ferguson Maintenance Paintings, May 18 - June 5, 1982, Mercer Union: A Centre for Contemporary Art.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. This description applies to the early work; the Maintenance Paintings exhibited in 1982 were not monochrome.
disregards the norm of interaction altogether: all such a viewer can do is ask how satisfying a body of monochromatic paintings is in the art-historical context of the early 1980s. This surely is one thing we should consider in assessing Ferguson’s works, but we hamstring ourselves in considering their significance if we ignore the fact that, in addition to painting surfaces, Ferguson has enjoined us not to treat these surfaces as sacred.

This is not to say that the norms are all that matter. In studying what actually happened to the works, we may learn some interesting things about the force of the conventions associated with painting and the ease or difficulty of suspending them. A 1984 exhibition catalog notes that Ferguson condones – even appreciates – the fact that, to his knowledge, none of the numerous paintings sold from the series has been overpainted. It would seem that the new owners are treating the works as traditional art by electing to accept disrepair rather than “maintain” the original perfect surface of the paint. But these decisions are not inappropriate to Ferguson’s own motives and perceptions, nor are such ironies unanticipated. Maintenance was done later on some of the paintings, but even this showed a reluctance to interfere with the original surface. One collector, Bruce Campbell, contracted with Ferguson himself to repaint Maintenance Painting No. 30 in 1994; the process included the affixing of a new Maintenance Contract to the back of the painting.

Another collector, the artist and curator John Murchie, did maintenance on a few of the paintings himself:

When I repainted the walls of our living room a light grey, I used the same paint on the four edges of each painting. The “painting surfaces” themselves remained bright green. Sometime later I told Jerry [the artist] who seemed none too pleased although I deduced that more from body language etc. than anything he overtly said.

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, which owns eight of the works, has never repainted their surfaces.

This history is revelatory: the owners of the Maintenance Paintings, and even their creator, have treated them as precious surfaces whose allure (and perhaps monetary

30 Peggy Gale, catalog essay for the exhibition Gerald Ferguson: Works 1978-1984, October 4-November 11, 1984, Dalhousie Art Gallery, p. 3.
31 Email correspondence with the collector, Bruce Campbell, July 17, 2012. Campbell explains that he chose to have Ferguson maintain the painting “as [a] very deliberate and specific conceptual addendum[,] evoking the original sales contract without compromising the integrity of the artist’s hand,” framing the patron as an investor while also alluding to “the dialectic of artist as worker / labourer.”
32 Email correspondence with John Murchie, July 18, 2012.
value) would be destroyed by an intervention on their surfaces by someone other than the artist. This tells us something interesting about our conventions of preserving and revering material art objects: their psychological and institutional force is non-trivial. But, again, the works can prompt our reflections on these matters only if we take the norm of interaction into account.

I don’t suggest that this is a devastating argument against the skeptic. But it does show that disregarding the norms will impoverish our encounters with many works. There is also some instability in the position that those mounting displays are bound to obey the norms but that the norms are irrelevant for viewers. There is tension inherent in allowing that Ferguson’s canvases may be repainted, yet denying that this information is relevant to viewers. Consider the experience of a viewer who encounters a group of the Maintenance Paintings, including those that were painted gray on their edges by John Murchie and others that were not maintained in this way. Viewers, seeing the objects, will apply the conventional assumption that their appearance is the product of the artist’s choices and direct activity. They may wonder: why did the artist choose to paint the edges of some of these works and not the others? What effect was he trying to achieve? What is the point of drawing attention to the narrow surface, perpendicular to the front of the canvas and to the wall, that we typically ignore? These are the sorts of questions that we ask in appreciating art, questions that are geared toward understanding what the artist was up to. But in relation to the Maintenance Paintings, these questions can be answered only by recognizing that the appearances of some of the objects may be the product of Ferguson’s choice to transfer his authority to others. If we ignore this fact, our theories about why the works differ in appearance will be spurious.

What of the fact that we aren’t always given relevant information about the norms? The norms we have been discussing fall along a spectrum in their significance to the work. The norm of interaction for the Maintenance Paintings is central; to ignore it is to render oneself incapable of understanding the fundamental point of this body of work. Sigalit Landau’s Barbed Salt Lamps, on the other hand, foreground a set of visually striking objects that Landau took great pains to fabricate through a complex and evocative process. There is a great deal to appreciate even if the viewer is not aware of the norm according to which the objects are not to be restored following salt loss. That norm, however, does alter the significance of the artist’s actions in making and displaying those objects, and it does so in a way that contributes to the work’s meaning. Rather than seeing the norm as irrelevant to the viewer’s understanding of the work, then, we should regard it as desirable for the institution to supply this sort of information to enable fuller appreciation.

I’ve suggested that a skeptic who thinks that norms are relevant to institutions should also see them as relevant for audience members: they shape how it is appropriate for us to understand what the artist has done in making a given work, and thus fuel appropriate responses to the work. But a more thoroughgoing variety of skepticism
might tie the rejection of norms to a broader orientation about art. On this sort of skeptical view, we may and should encounter artworks on our own terms, with no need for pesky art theorists or, especially, philosophers to tell us how to do it and what we’re doing wrong. The skeptic of this variety might observe that when we take a long historical perspective on artworks, their fluidity is salient: they change physically, societies adapt them to their own cultural purposes, and they have different resonance for audiences at different times. Moreover, audience members, like whole societies, will respond to works on the basis of particular encounters and idiosyncratic tendencies. Each audience member has different knowledge, tastes, background experiences and inclinations. We encounter the display as it is and as we are, and this may involve particular desires, blind spots, preoccupations and goals. We will address the artwork in whatever way provides the most satisfying experience for us. And there is no need for “shoulds” in this process.

To respond to this more thoroughgoing skepticism, I suggest that there is a difference between appreciation of an artwork, as such, and appreciation of the affordances of life in general. I’m not opposed to the idea of people trying to have whatever kind of experience will satisfy them and fulfill their needs. But if I decide to watch a 3D movie without the special glasses because I enjoy the blurry overlapping images, my experience of that work, as the particular work that it is, has been compromised. If I choose not to attend to the norm of interaction for Ferguson’s Maintenance Paintings because I simply like to look at objects and do not wish to consider supplementary information, I will not have had a full encounter with the Maintenance Paintings, as the particular works that they are. This is not to say I have done something wrong: there is no inherent human obligation to appreciate an artwork as the kind of thing that it is. But I will nonetheless be in a poor position to understand the work fully or to make well-founded claims about some aspects of it.

In a sense, appreciation of contemporary art is a kind of cultural game. The rules can change over time, and the nature of the rules may be under debate at a particular moment. But ultimately they are a product of the social practices in which this game is embedded. I am arguing that, given the current state of the social practices that shape the nature of the game, norms sanctioned by the artist are the sort of thing that viewers do and should consider in their encounters with contemporary artworks.

No one is obligated to play this game: and it’s fine if people want to use the objects of contemporary art to play different games, just as someone might use chess pieces to play checkers. The point of this book is to offer a picture of what the game is now, of what contemporary artworks must be given the role they play in the game, and of moves that it makes sense for institutions and viewers to make given the state of the game.