Uncovered and Unconventional: 
Preserving Works on Paper and Photographs on Open Display

The Rise of Open Display
While the inherent fragility of paper has typically underscored the necessity for enclosed display, the format of the frame, quintessentially emphasizing the preciousness of a work of art, is often problematic or even undesirable for contemporary works on paper. As the boundaries of materials and format in Contemporary Art keep expanding continuously, art on paper break free of the confines of frames and vitrines.


Thoughts on Collaboration
Get involved - early! Protecting uncovered and unconventional works on paper during times of installation, exhibition, travel and storage requires interdisciplinary collaboration. Best results are achieved if conservators are involved early in the process, when a work is first considered for acquisition, display or loan.

We should not assume artists have all the answers! Sometimes artists are stretching the boundaries of what is possible in a gallery situation. Conservators need to look beyond standard practices, but dialogue and compromise is important, too. Younger, inexperienced artists often appreciate advice and guidance.

„Open Display“: Paper Conservator Survey
In 2008, 23 paper conservators in museums and private practice were asked to contribute their experiences with works on open display.

Problem Solving
Dust! Light! How do we deal with the inherent vice of open display?

The nature of damages through exposure to light, as well as dust (and touching-induced grime accumulation) is incremental and not immediately obvious. A room-spanning installation is especially vulnerable to this.

Current research at the Kunsammlung focuses on the preservation options for Thomas Hirschhorn’s Intensif-Station (2009). The installation comprises 20 collages, 5 large sculptures, various pieces of furniture and medical equipment.

The walk-in environment covers roughly 200 square meters and consists of 5 compartments connected by a passage. The artist designed these rooms to be reminiscent of an emergency room: walls clad with green fabric, floors covered with polyvinyl chloride (PVC), his sculptures placed patient-like in the compartments complete with monitors, chairs for visitors, and empty water bottles. Taped to the walls of each compartment are a number of collages.

The images and text fragments in the collages originate from magazines or the internet, and are printed and/or enlarged in the studio on commercial laser copy paper. Sheets of paper are often adhered together with self-adhesive tape. Red marker pen and ball point pen have been used to write and paint around the images. Mostly, the paper elements have been covered with a thin plastic foil (fotolits wrapping material).

LITHT! All this is presented under harsh „operating” light — suspended from the ceiling a total of 6 fluorescent lights! Collages taped to the top of the walls are exposed to up to 800 lux. Even at the furthest distance from these light sources, artworks are exposed to lux levels of roughly 300 lux. The UV values are much higher than recommended, too, at ca. 60W/μm².

The printed paper elements are affected by color shifts; the marker and ball point pen elements are fading. Some are bordering on the illegible by now. Thus we now have to deal with the consequences of exposing the works in the installation to such extreme illumination. When contacted by the conservation department about the fading in the collages, the Thomas Hirschhorn expressed his wish to rework them.

DUST! During the four years of continued presentation of Intensif-Station maintenance interventions are carried out on a regular basis, as signs of wear are contrary to the clinical appearance the artist intended. Crumpled, dirty or delaminating packing tape is replaced by the conservators when necessary, made possibly by clear instructions from the studio and extensive documentation after the work was purchased. Dust and grime accumulating on the surface of the sculptures poses a problem, however. Large areas have been covered with clear plastic foil, which has then been covered in spray paint. Finding means of removing dust safely from the statically charged surfaces is currently under investigation.

If you take care of a Hirschhorn-environment or Hirschhorn-collages at your institution, please contact us!

The object undergoing stabilization treatment in the paper lab prior to the loan.

The artist created the the Cardbird Series in collaboration with Gemini G.E.L. They are made out of corrugated cardboard, tape, steel staples, photo-offset lithographs and screensprnts.

The Rauschenberg studio was contacted regarding the display options of the work. Bob Rauschenberg always wanted the Cardboards and cardboard-realted works installed directly on the wall… We feel that these works should not be shown in a plexi box.

The object undergoign stabilization treatment in the paper lab prior to the loan.

A mock-up of Cardbird II was created and used in a trial installation. In accordance with the studio guidelines, the object is affixed to the wall with roo-fing nails.

Cardbird II presented uncovered at the De Young Museum in 2009.

The object undergoing stabilization treatment in the paper lab prior to the loan.

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