

two treatments: too much versus too little

Brancusi and Man Ray contrasted

Two works. Both unreadable in their untreated state. Two diametrically opposed radically different treatments. Invasive non-reversible stain reduction versus an imagined digital reconstruction and no intervention. An instinctive proposal was made and followed for each work. Both require further research and neither treatment is considered wholly satisfactory.



Portrait of James Joyce before treatment



Portrait of James Joyce after treatment

What is real is not the appearance, but the idea, the essence of things. **Brancusi**

Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957)
Portrait of James Joyce, c. 1928
Dimensions: 76.2cm diameter x 0.5cm, 11cm deep
Material: Cardboard, bronze

Circular cardboard, with cut-out split, pulled into a shallow concave form. Bronze metal spiral resting on central metal spike, attached through the cardboard to hang as a wall sculpture. Cardboard core is degraded and discoloured. Edge abrasion with delamination and loss to the facing paper. Damage to the central hole. Tideline staining in lower quadrants either side of split. Accession to the Moderna Museet collection in 2004 as part of the Pontus Hultén donation of approximately one thousand works.

Background and Treatment

Curatorial discussions to minimise the stain were immediately initiated. The wide dark band of staining across the lower left section drew the eye, distracting from the simplicity and form which is the essence of Brancusi's work. Little was known about provenance except that it had been given to Hultén prior to Brancusi's death and the dismantling of his studio to be re-created by the Musée d'art moderne in Paris. The story behind the work is that it was a commission to depict James Joyce, a friend of Brancusi.

The treatment window was tight but took over one hundred hours of painstaking stain reduction. Light cotton-wool swabs of sodium carboxymethylcellulose (SCMC), followed with distilled water, isopropanol alcohol 'feathering' and local drying under pressure, was repeated multiple times to lift the soluble degradation products and prevent new tidelines. The aim was to minimise the stains intensity, ideally close to the untouched lesser stain on the other side of the split. Small areas were bleached with sodium borohydride, there was minor additional retouching with cellulose fibres, watercolour, and pastel dust in methylcellulose, delaminating edges were laid down and the central hole was reinforced.



Detail from before and after stain reduction

Man Ray (1890-1976)
Transmutation (Theatr), 1916
Dimensions: 44.5 x 60.5 x 0.5 cm
Material: Collage with ink, charcoal, paint, graphite on newspaper

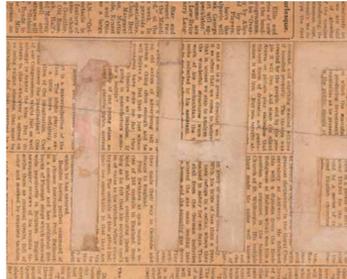
Newspaper lined to gesso painted cardboard adhered to wood layer-board. Collage components of printed and painted paper, and other media. Newspaper is discoloured with embrittlement and edge loss. Fading of media. Accession to the Moderna Museet collection in 1966 from Jean Larcade of the Galerie Rive Droite in Paris.

Background and Treatment

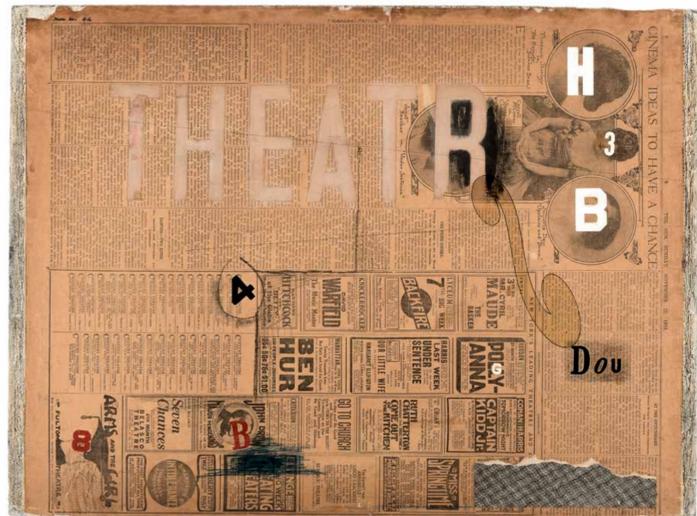
Transmutation (Theatr) is a different work today than in 1916 and is a case study in how original material, time and environment can lead to dramatic change. In the word THEATR faint isolated traces of red media can be seen. These letters were probably once all red. There are archive images from the 1970's in which the pale pink is more pronounced, and memories of those who remember the work in the 1960's confirm near complete fading on all letters.

Initial examination disinclined interventive treatment proposals – the newspaper is embrittled and entirely adhered to the secondary supports. Reglazing and minor housing improvements were made.

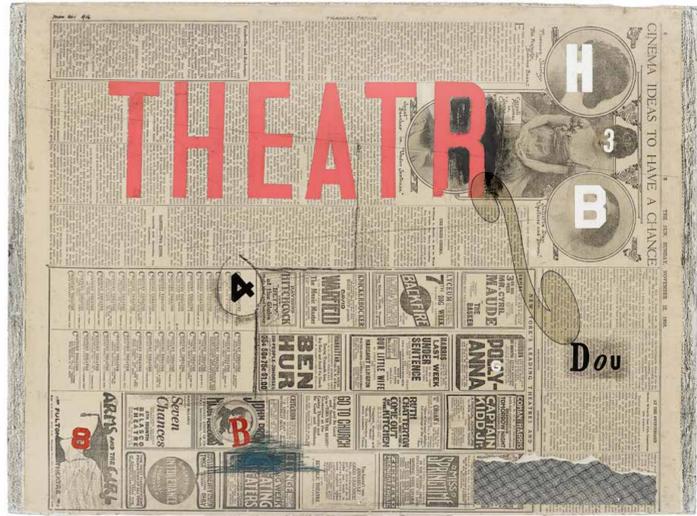
Yet the radical changes the work has undergone led instantly to a desire to see the work in its pristine state. Digital reconstruction would be able to create an imagined earlier aesthetic. Through Photoshop losses were in-filled, the tone of early newsprint was matched, and the colour balance of all components was altered. The letters of THEATR were made red, based on possible fugitive pigments and dyes, for example rose madder and alizarin crimson, and Man Ray's colour palette.



Detail of faded media on collaged letters



Transmutation (Theatr)



Transmutation (Theatr) – Digital reconstruction, imagined earlier appearance

AFTER

1 paper conservator 36,000 thousand works of art on paper

In busy institutions the challenge to find solutions under time pressure is constant. Treatment began before the works were adequately researched which is far from ideal. Brancusi was required for a touring exhibition and subsequent installation in the permanent galleries, and the Man Ray could only be briefly examined and photographed before loan. Sporadic research continues on both works.

The backstory of the Brancusi is somewhat romantic. No information was forthcoming on accession and curatorial collaboration was constricted, but stain reduction proceeded. How had the stain happened and when? For many years the work hung in Brancusi's studio which was notoriously dilapidated, with an earth floor, and it is likely that damage occurred during the building's deterioration. Would definite knowledge of this have stopped interventionist treatment? An interpretation of the work is of Joyce's intellect - the cardboard body will perish but the penetrating metal spiral of thought is immortal. How do sometimes conflicting artist intents and curatorial desires connect with conservation issues? How the work was to be hung was unknown. After trawling through photographic archives one image seemed to provide the answer (fig.1), showing the spirals direction and angle for the sculpture. The positioning of the stain, if water damage came from contact with the floor, also supports this. However Man Ray's own photograph of Brancusi came to light and depicts a small section of the Portrait but angled differently (fig.2).

The Man Ray digital reconstruction was based on intuition and aesthetics, for example colour comparison with *The Black Tray* (1914). Analysis of the remaining colour traces would be ideal but requires resources not readily available. Would the use of FTIR help provide a more satisfactory imagining? Further material analysis needs to look at the wood layerboard which could be an early artists board produced in New York before the development of plywood and particle board. How *Transmutation (Theatr)* and its digital reconstruction can be presented is also unclear. It is not unique that research continues but if we wait until all the information is in then it can become unlikely that any treatment would proceed.

Of course, there will always be those who look only at technique, who ask 'how', while others of a more curious nature will ask 'why'. Personally, I have always preferred inspiration to information. **Man Ray**

INSTINCT

I want just the flash of its spirit. **Brancusi**

Does instinct have a role in conservation treatment planning? A decision on the proposed handling was formed almost instantaneously for both of these objects on first encountering them. As the Brancusi was unpacked the first thought was to diminish the stain, and un-framing the Man Ray was coloured by the feeling there was not much that could be done. Through personal experience and informal discussion it is not unusual that an idea of a treatment can be decided very quickly, almost unconsciously. A watercolour that is felt directly can be washed and one that even before testing feels risky. These instant proposals are always cemented, or not, by more rigorous thought, testing and practical considerations but how much do they subconsciously influence the final decision and result? Conservation ethics require constant questioning during the entire treatment process but can our decisions objectively override the initial instinct, or should it be trusted?

The idea of internalised unconscious processes in the mind stems from antiquity yet the concept of automatic processing and instantaneous choice is at the forefront of contemporary cognitive psychology. Influences from subliminal perceptions, automatic reactions, unconscious feelings, skills and habits all combine to lead to intuition. For instance in the detection of art forgeries by gut feeling, and in the comparison of fast emotional thinking with more deliberative and rational thought in decision making.

The human brain automatically registers information faster than conscious thoughts. This is dependent on the acquisition of procedural knowledge, often cited, albeit questioned, is the 10,000 hour rule of practice to gain a degree of mastery in cognitively demanding fields. Practical experience is essential for skill development.

The personality of the decision maker is also a factor – how balanced is the field between logical versus instinctual conservators? Many work in comparative isolation within institutions with pressures of time and resources – does this stimulate or stifle creative thinking and effective work?

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are. **Anais Nin**

SATISFACTION

From the Latin *satis* and *facere* – to do enough.

Fulfilment, gratification, assurance beyond question

Satisfaction in conservation is an interesting concept. Neither the Brancusi or the Man Ray treatment is considered entirely satisfactory by the author and they continue to be sources of self-query.

Should the stain on the Brancusi have been left as it was? Its deforming immediacy is reduced but was this justified? Conversely the treatment could have gone further – an idea to cover the quadrant completely with a facing paper was discussed but rejected, for now, as 'too interventive'. Has the aesthetic relationship between form and content, appearance and essence, been better connected through stain reduction?

Is there really nothing to be done to the Man Ray which remains powerfully discoloured, and how should it be presented? Currently housed in a heavy wood frame the work becomes more of a shadow. The frame has long accompanied the work but its origin is unknown. Museum policy preserves original frames but at what cost? Providing museum visitors with an idea of how the work may have looked is interesting but should the digital reconstruction be presented with the work when exhibited, or as an information hand-out or wall text? A full-size educational collaged facsimile is being made, printed onto newsprint, painted and mounted to board. Could this be exhibited or does that decrease the useful life of the object further. Should the work be left to speak for itself – a brief exposure, a ghostly impression comparable to the artists' Rayograms? When does the increasing use of facsimiles and digital reconstructions go too far?

The fear of not being, or seen to be, satisfactory can lead to inaction, waiting for some theoretical future point when an ideal treatment option and technique will present itself. Is this more satisfactory? The temporary very often becomes permanent and the risk of no treatment in the foreseeable future has an added urgency with the already limited useful life of many deteriorating modern materials.

Theories are patterns without value. What counts is action. **Brancusi**

Summary – More Questions than Answers

The author has presented these two case studies as they are little known early works of two modern masters. Brancusi and Man Ray were both preoccupied with representation and manipulation – the question of how to look at an object, exercising control over how their works were shown. These two treatments, concerned primarily with appearance not stabilisation, represent the extremes of the opposing principles of intervention and preservation. They highlight the near impossibility of finding a coherent philosophy connecting such different coexisting approaches in one institution. Initial reactions to the treatments are invited and comments on alternatives are welcomed. Further feedback on others experience of instinct in conservation treatment planning is of great interest. A more generous availability of unsatisfactory treatment reports and results is desired. A recent IADA conference 'If I had only known' (2014, Amsterdam) took this standpoint but it ideally would be a more regular and natural part of conservation.

Thank you. May 2015

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fig 1. View of Brancusi's studio, taken by Brancusi c. 1933

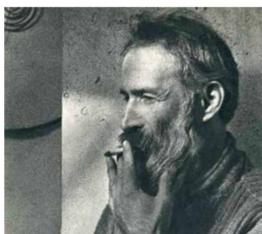
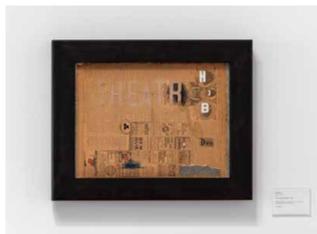


fig 2. Brancusi with Portrait of James Joyce in background, taken by Man Ray c. 1920



Portrait of James Joyce as exhibited with The Newborn II, by Brancusi



Transmutation (Theatr) framed



Brancusi and Man Ray having a toast

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