

The Value of Choices:

The DIAL Project

Raffaella Tartaglia

This article explores the genesis of value in art and the evolving role of conservation in managing value itself, using the DIAL (Digital Index of an Artwork's Life) as a case study. Situated within the frameworks of sociology of art and reception theories, it begins by drawing on Ernst Gombrich's insights and incorporates diverse scholarly perspectives to understand how the value of an artwork is defined, preserved, and transformed over time. The text highlights the impact of human factors from the moment of an artwork's creation to its fruition, emphasizing the critical importance of reflective and adaptive conservation practices.

Referring to Sanneke Stigter's observations, this article acknowledges the significant contributions of various theoretical models and advocates a more conscious and diversified approach to art analysis and conservation. In this context, the DIAL serves as a prime example of how technology can be leveraged to safeguard the integrity and significance of artworks, ensuring their legacy for future generations.

Theoretical Insights

Recognizing the impossibility of exhaustively covering all issues related to the genealogy of value in art, we align with Gombrich's position: He asserts that art, regardless of its historical context, is a primordial response of humanity to certain societal dynamics, and he firmly emphasizes the importance of critics, historians, and cultural mediators for the survival of art itself. He states: "there really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists – men and women, that is, who are favoured with the wonderful gift of balancing shapes and colours till they are right [...]. Artists, we trust, will always be born. But whether there will also be art depends to no small extent on ourselves, their public" (Gombrich 1951, 446). Thus, Gombrich ascribes a generative function to artists but does not confine it exclusively to them.

Since value is determined by a wide range of elements, understanding how it can be artistically, esthetically, and socially defined – and

thus preserved – requires assessing the entire process of its creation and consumption. This means considering the artistic object both as a product of society and as a social function. The discussion of art, therefore, centers on aspects like its essence, value, role, and purpose within a perpetually changing social reality, as “over time and space, art changes, and so does humanity; humans change art, just as they do literature, sciences, religions, etc., and art changes humans: a sign of how, in a social context driven by fervent thirst for knowledge, the existence of a reciprocal relationship between art and society is felt as necessary” (Verdi 1977, 363).

Various approaches seek to comprehend the intricate art-society synergy: Art historians usually place the concept of style at the forefront for interpreting artistic phenomena as responses and expressions of societal issues. As Meyer Schapiro suggests: “the style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artists and the broad outlook of a group are visible” (Ackerman 1978, 154), interpreting style as an expressive medium conveying social, moral, and artistic values. In contrast, sociologists do not prioritize the esthetic outcome. Rather, they look at how the relationships between art and society have been structured, focusing on the functions attributed to artworks, the figure of the artist, the market, the context, and the audience. Although it is not possible to explore this subject in depth, it can be affirmed that the value system determining the artistry of an object depends on the criteria and discriminations arising within society at a given time. Depending on the chosen line of thought, the artwork can thus be understood as either a production of forms subordinated to their creator or as a production of forms that subordinate the creator. What occurs in both cases is a communicative process: The artwork communicates a message to an audience, inducing changes in the public sphere, tastes, esthetic standards, and behaviors within the market.

This interplay highlights the complexities of defining the status of art, whether it is tied to the product itself or to its creator. Is art what it declares itself to be? Critics often advocate the declaration of artistic nature based on the assurance of the name the artwork is associated with, yet this is not always a sufficient condition. For instance, Harold Rosenberg defines contemporary artworks as *anxious objects* (Verdi 1977, 368) whose status remains imprecise, subjected to a constant tension seeking recognition of their artistic nature. Hence, if we consider some of the reception theories that have driven the sociological debate (e.g., Mukařovský, Schmidt, Eco), we can define the entire artistic production as the result of a coopera-

The Value of Choices

tive realization in which the value no longer refers to mere objects, but to a system of actions governed by specific conventions that ensure the communicability of the objects themselves (cf. Tota and De Feo 2020). From this perspective, one can argue the impossibility of assigning any kind of absolute value to an artwork, because it will merely be a relational attribute arising from the dialogue between the author and the consumer, conferred by social conventions regulating that very dialogue.

Preserving Values: The DIAL

Transitioning to the context of contemporary art conservation, we acknowledge that the artwork ceases to be a *unicum* confined within the bounds of its original meaning and instead presents itself as a dynamic and ever-changing discourse. With every shift in time, space, or environment, the artistic tradition through which the work is perceived changes, consequently altering the esthetic function of the material artifact.

As a result, a focus on the relational nature of value is critical to its effective management. Hence, one realizes the imperative to reevaluate the role of conservation itself: Starting from an understanding of the significant mutability that the work incurs over time, conservation is called upon to find different ways to address these changes and preserve the intrinsic value of the artwork, along with all the implications it carries.

Typically, contemporary artworks rely on a system of objects and actors that include both the author and the spectator, and they are often characterized by their sensitivity to the place and time in which they are installed. In these cases, the interest of preservation mainly lies in their value, which becomes an intangible heritage, preserved through a conservation practice based on three fundamental principles: the preservation of meaning, the inclusion of all actors engaging with the artwork, and a careful documentation of all the changes the artwork undergoes over time. The DIAL, Digital Index of an Artwork's Life, is based on these foundations (Stigter 2019, 289-295). It is a project funded in 2017 within the scope of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research program (NWO), led by Sanneke Stigter of the Department of Conservation and Restoration at the University of Amsterdam in collaboration with the Kröller-Müller Museum and Wiel's Simple Solutions. The software is intended as a support tool for museum professionals to encourage reflection on the impact of decision-making processes on the artwork's life cycle. About the relationship between value and preservation, Stigter says:

I think what conservators should do is look at all different kinds of values that are attributed to the work through time, but also by different stakeholders. So, someone who acquires the work, what value does it add to a collection, for instance? And you, as the one responsible, how do you weigh these values? What is more important to you over another value, for instance? And I think, what this idea of the DIAL makes clear is that *it is us*, people, who attribute values to the artworks. And we were used to thinking of the artwork as having intrinsic values. And of course, a work has – some people would say – *agency*. It has a certain appearance that, because of our own cultural context, we read in a certain way, and therefore the object has agency itself. But it is within a system that is culturally determined. And we have pre-knowledge about a work. We have pre-knowledge about a certain use of materials that links the object to a certain time. [...] So, teasing out all these values is, I think, the task of the conservator and the aim that I have with the DIAL is to make that explicit. So, what values do you choose to preserve at the cost, perhaps, of other values? (Stigter 2021, audio 00:22:04.)

Therefore, the main goal of the DIAL is to educate about responsibility, increasing awareness of how various professionals influence artwork through the decision-making processes inherent in their work interactions. This applies to all the figures within the museum chain, such as the collection manager, photographer, director, curator, and restorer. Interpreting artworks as ongoing processes empowers curators and conservators to reveal and safeguard the inherent essence of the artwork. This proactive task considers artworks as co-created with the museum, even when professionals strive for a neutral approach.

Ethical conservation usually calls for a restrained method and limited interventions, but this isn't always possible. Even with traditional works, achieving complete objectivity is unattainable as each decision inevitably carries consequences. Decision-making ties closely with personal inputs influenced by cultural, social, and political factors. Therefore, the same artwork can undergo shifts in interpretation based on constructed representations and the individuals involved in its life cycle.

The DIAL seeks to serve as a tool to promote thinking so as to heighten awareness among professionals about their influence. It offers an analysis of an artwork's behavior, aiding in comprehending past transformations and predicting future alterations. The data generated by the software provide insights into how museum practices affect artworks. This not only unveils the biographical history of a work but also enables professionals to adapt their decisions based on the knowledge gleaned. About the impact of choices on the meaning of an artwork, Stigter admits:

The Value of Choices

When you are working with artworks that don't exist behind the scenes, but only come to life in the gallery, when you install them, they make it so obvious that *it is you*, [...] your hands are in it, you buy the material, you choose a site in consultation with a curator or the director or whoever. [...] And I looked for a way to make that explicit, but also to activate an extra, an additional sensitivity for this responsibility that people who work with these artworks have, by asking them what their role is going to be in the character of the artwork, in the instant where they work with it. [...] So, you ask the people responsible to really deeply think about what they think the artwork went through. What the behavior of this artwork has been according to them. And you do that at the moment when you install it. So, this requires thoughtful thinking beforehand. And this moment then also is the moment where you take a step back and think twice. So that's the whole idea, that being reflective about your own actions (Stigter 2021, audio 00:01:31.)

Evidently, the awareness of one's impact on the artwork also comes from deep theoretical reflection. In fact, the research supporting the development of the DIAL relies on three theoretical models that emerged in response to the needs of managing complex artworks: the variable media approach (VMA), the biographical approach, and the autoethnographic method. Specifically, the focus on enhancing awareness in the decision-making process, which the software aims for, stems from the last of these. The VMA shapes its research for contemporary art preservation around an attempt to construct an approach independent of specific mediums. This method emerged due to technological advancements that threatened the longevity of certain artworks (cf. Depocas, Ippolito, and Jones 2003). The idea is to study objects not on the basis of the materials they are made of but on the behaviors they can exhibit, which have been identified as contained, installed and performed. A contained behavior, for instance, is observable in artworks in which expression coincides with form. In this category, there is often a preference for conserving the original materials. Conversely, so-called installed artworks are composed of assembled elements and are subject to substitutions and modifications. Hence, the conservation approach adapts to the needs. Last, artworks categorized as performed require direct action in the exhibition space to manifest.

The DIAL involves the user in classifying the artwork on a behavioral scale at a particular moment. The inputs entered then determine an evolutionary line of the artwork that can oscillate over time among different categories. This main factor links the VMA to the biographical approach, as Stigter affirms:

The behavior index combines the idea of attributing behavior with the idea of a cultural biography, which considers the work's life story to determine its identity. This approach accepts that art changes over time and provides insight into the socio-cultural background that may affect the artwork. (Stigter 2017, 2.)

It emerges that the artwork alters its behavior based on how it is interpreted and managed. Specifically, by tracing its exhibition history, it is possible to compare a specific historical moment and the behavioral range associated with that period. Assuming that an artwork is displayed outside its original context, this relocation might lead to a behavioral change, consequently affecting the very meaning of the artwork. In such a scenario, the risk lies in an ontological shift. The fusion of these two approaches exposes the existence of certain values beyond the mere physical presence of the artwork, rendering ineffective any conservational strategy reliant on the material aspects. However, this does not entirely resolve the dilemmas faced by conservators because the biographical approach serves as a tool to identify external influences but doesn't offer guidance on managing them.

As a result, theoretical models from the social sciences are being employed, one of which suggests the existence of a cultural biography that can be analyzed using an autoethnographic approach, fundamentally acknowledging subjectivity in decision-making processes. Autoethnography, as a conservational approach, proposes a process-based evaluation, highlighting the personal input of professionals in installation and conservation treatments. It emphasizes the cognitive processes guiding choices and demands critical awareness (Stigter 2016).

In Conclusion

Once it has been established that every artwork, particularly complex ones, undergoes inevitable changes, conservation clearly assumes the role of managing them. To that end, the index at the core of the DIAL project challenges the notion that an artwork's behavior, much like its value, is solely intrinsic, revealing instead its susceptibility to external influences. Through its dual reflection mechanism – first during data input and then in its presentation – the DIAL effectively navigates the fluctuations in value, meaning, and behavior that artworks undergo. This not only underscores the culture industry's acute awareness of the complexities underlying value formation but also demonstrates how innovative conservation approaches can enhance our comprehension and management of these dynamics.

The Value of Choices

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