Relic or release: defining and documenting the physical and aesthetic death of contemporary works of art

Alison Bracker
Conservation Department
Royal College of Art
Kensington Gore
London SW7 2EU
United Kingdom
Fax: +44 (020) 7590 4490
E-mail: alison.bracker@rca.ac.uk

Rachel Barker
Painting Conservation Department
Tate
Millbank
London SW1P 4RG
United Kingdom
Fax: +44 (020) 7887 8590
E-mail: rachel.barker@tate.ac.uk

Abstract

Today, many artists produce organically comprised objects that physically demonstrate the balance between existence and extinction. Defining their life span and fitness for display remains unresolved. This paper unpacks physical and aesthetic death through two case studies that have been pronounced defunct. Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* (1970) examines de-accessioning an artwork that was structurally and aesthetically damaged beyond repair. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey's *Mother and Child* (1998) illustrates the problems arising when an owner declares a deteriorating artwork 'ruined', despite the artists' opinion that it remains effective and exhibitable. The ensuing analysis probes definitions of mortality in works of art.

Keywords

contemporary art, de-accessioning, ephemerality, felt, grass, Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, Joseph Beuys

Figure 1. Felt Suit 1970, number 87/edition 27, acquired 1998 (T07441). *© DACS 2005*

Introduction

Since the 1960s, visual culture has accepted and even espoused the notion that works of art may have an abbreviated life span. Lawrence Weiner, Sol LeWitt, Yoko Ono and Robert Morris, among others, have created works that emphasized concept over tangibility by either existing temporarily, or eschewing materiality altogether. For the past 15 years, numerous artists have produced objects similarly intended to last for limited periods of time. Yet rather than using impermanence to accentuate an object's underlying idea, many of today's artworks wield it to conceptualize and physically demonstrate the balance between existence and extinction. Mark Quinn's frozen silicone-preserved flowers, for example, play with notions of stability and longevity by exposing the compromises we make when attempting to arrest mortality. Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* delineates the moment of death, in which a shark's unmistakable power and menace – so evident only seconds before its demise – become negated in an instant, and Anya Gallaccio's flower and fruit works movingly enact temporality and the beauty of decay.

But how do we define the life span of works designed to articulate or actualize transience? How do we decide that an object is no longer fit for display? And if one of the parties involved – whether artist or collector/museum – disagrees with the other, who holds sway over declaring the work of art 'dead'?

Unless it has been wholly damaged by fire, flood or utter destruction, the nuances of physical and/or conceptual decay within contemporary materials in particular render a comprehensive response to these questions impracticable. As we shall see, however, analysing the characteristics of material and aesthetic death in works of art pronounced 'dead,' either by artist or collector/institution, illustrates how sensitive regard for philosophical, aesthetic, physical and even legal criteria effects a feasible and sensitive decision-making process. Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates how arguably defunct objects continue resonating within a collection, and within culture itself, even after their alleged 'death'.

One such work lies dormant within Tate's archive. Tate purchased Joseph Beuys's *Felt Suit* (1970), part of a multiple of 100, in 1981 (Figure 1). The suit measures 188 cm × 76 cm and comprises felt, a material Beuys often manipulated to invoke a sense of physical, spiritual, and evolutionary warmth.[1] As with all Tate acquisitions, the object was meticulously documented and, notably, flagged as an 'unusually vulnerable' item,[2] prompting Tate Conservation to implement written procedures for appropriate handling, display and storage of the work. Beuys himself did not provide Tate with instructions; when asked about *Felt Suit*'s care, he announced, 'I don't give a damn. You can nail it to the wall. You can also hang it on a hanger, ad libitium! But you can also wear it or throw it into a chest.'[3]

Beuys's apparently relaxed attitude notwithstanding, severe damage ultimately threw *Felt Suit*'s status as a viable work of art into question. In February 1989, when Tate curatorial staff again requested *Felt Suit* for display, conservators uncovered infestation by common clothes moths[4] (Figure 2). Reporting the damage to the Tate's Director Nicholas Serota, Richard Morphet, the former Keeper of Collections, informed him that the suit

> …has been eaten away extensively… the shoulders have largely gone, thus exposing the normally invisible white padding on both sides, and the body of the suit as a whole is copiously penetrated by small holes. The latter are readily visible close-to, though from a middle distance the majority of the surface of the suit gives the appearance of being intact, albeit with a strange change in overall texture.[5] (Figure 3)

Figure 2. Whole image of Joseph Beuys's Felt Suit 1970, number 45/edition 27, after moth damage 1989 (ex-T03323). © DACS 2005

Figure 3. Detail Joseph Beuys's Felt Suit 1970, number 45/edition 27, showing felt infested with moth pupae, larvae and frass. © DACS 2005

Senior Curator Sean Rainbird responded that it was crucial to have 'an accurate conservation assessment' of the work, even at the expense of its condition entering into the public domain.[6] As Beuys had died in 1986, conservators no longer had the option of contacting him for guidance. Tate therefore consulted external textile conservators, and researched examples of other museums' strategies for Beuys's felt objects. Upon receiving news of a successful result from fumigation,[7] Tate conservators treated *Felt Suit* with methyl bromide gas, removed the moth detritus, and placed it in a storage container fitted with Vapona strips. They then left it untouched but monitored in store, in the hope that 'textile conservators might eventually discover a suitable consolidant for such a severely deteriorated fabric'.[8]

Despite *Felt Suit*'s widespread damage, Tate did not consider the work defunct at this point. Morphet advised Serota that he did not 'recommend destruction of whatever remains' and, in fact, asserted, 'appalling though the loss of our example is, it is extraordinarily eloquent in its present state. Eroded and horizontal, it gives a powerful sense of Beuys' presence….'.[9] Derek Pullen, Head of Sculpture Conservation, confirms that 'there was no discussion…ever of disposing of it altogether'.[10] Rather than pronounce *Felt Suit* dead, Tate considered its possible restoration. However, the unfeasibility of this option quickly became apparent. Tate's consultation with external textile conservators had already revealed that an appropriate consolidant for seriously deteriorated textiles did not yet exist, and that 'any consolidant used…would alter the original colour, texture and appearance of the suit'.[11] Notably, Beuys's use of grey was precise. He declared, 'With the greyness of felt I produce an anti-image. I evoke a world which is translucent and clear, maybe even transcendental, a very colourful world'.[12] By introducing a consolidating adhesive, the artist's intentions for the material and its colour would have been compromised, and the material's potential for evocation extinguished.

Additionally, the estimated costs for restoring *Felt Suit* were prohibitively high, greater than the replacement cost. And the necessary work would have been so invasive that Rainbird concluded, 'if we did reconstruct it…it would be

effectively reconstructing the work'.[13] Therefore, Tate ruled out restoration. Having also excluded disposal as an option, the status of the suit remained in limbo.

In 1994, however, artist Jana Sterbak forced the issue of *Felt Suit*'s status within the collection. Sterbak proposed using the work as part of her installation for the 1996 exhibition 'Rites of Passage'. The Director tentatively agreed, stating that the artist could show the suit in a vitrine. Senior Curator Frances Morris advised Sterbak of Tate's conditional approval, but added, 'in order to make it clear that the suit is damaged and not a work of art, we will formally de-accession the suit so that it will effectively belong to our archive'.[14] Significantly, this marks the first recorded instance of de-accession entering Tate discourse surrounding *Felt Suit*. As we have seen, Tate had heretofore demonstrated a reluctance to nullify the work, for both practical and philosophical reasons. Furthermore, UK law severely limits public collections from disposing of works, unless 'their condition has deteriorated to such an extent as to render them "useless" '.[15] Although the work had suffered serious deterioration both physically and conceptually, because of its inability to invoke the notions of warmth and protection intrinsic to Beuys's use of felt, its 'uselessness' had yet to be determined. On the contrary, Serota maintained that *Felt Suit* could make an 'extraordinary contribution to [Sterbak's] installation and to the exhibition as a whole'.[16]

Serota consulted Heiner Bastian, Joseph Beuys's former secretary, and asked him to view photographs of the work. In a letter to the Director, Bastian announced, 'The *Felt Suit* by Joseph Beuys is completely destroyed'. He went on to dismiss any possibility of the work's future exhibition by declaring, 'The suit was always meant to be a suit in perfect order without any wear and tear. It is unfortunately a total loss'.[17]

Tate now began its move towards formal de-accession. Serota contacted Eva Beuys, the artist's widow and executor of his estate. He explained the situation, and informed her that the museum had 'with regret, decided to seek the permission of the Trustees to de-accession the work'.[18] In response, Eva Beuys asserted droit moral over the work, proclaiming,

> It is with some difficulty that I state – in the name and from knowledge of Joseph Beuys – that for reasons to do with copyright and individual rights *Felt Suit*, belonging to the Tate Gallery, must sadly never be shown again in any location, on any occasion and in any context, however constituted, including for the purposes of study.
> …For historical purposes it should continue to be recorded that the Tate Gallery possesses such a '*Felt Suit*'. For that remains an asset of the Tate Gallery.[19]

Droit moral, the artist's moral rights, remain non-transferable and in effect throughout copyright. As executor, Eva Beuys maintained authority over the exploitation or display of Beuys's work and controlled the artist's right to object to any distortion, mutilation or other derogatory action in relation to the work that would prejudice the artist's reputation.[20] Her statement, coupled with the provision within the 1992 Museums and Galleries Act allowing disposal of significantly deteriorated works, provided Tate with substantial legal support for *Felt Suit*'s de-accession.

Conservators familiar with Beuys restorations uphold the decision to de-accession. Christian Scheidemann recounts,

> If a damage was unavoidable, he would have accepted it. With the *Felt Suit* we have to deal with an edition. The edition would carry a mission - and that was to keep the body temperature of the respective person and to keep him spiritually active. The suit was not about the decay…he was not at all interested in the uncontrolled decay - unless it was unavoidable.[21]

Hiltrud Schinzel concurs, stating that Beuys upheld standards of appearance for his works as part of his wider effort to raise public respect for art.[22] In the end, Tate removed *Felt Suit* from the collection on 10 February 1995 and placed it in its archive. Jana Sterbak borrowed a *Felt Suit* from another collection for her installation. Tate acquired a second suit from the edition in 1998.

Can we, at last, classify *Felt Suit* as dead? Seemingly, as a work of art, the piece is defunct physically and conceptually. Nevertheless, Tate staff remain disinclined to declare it dead altogether. Serota has re-affirmed the museum's intention not to destroy the work,[23] while Morphet described it as 'an accession with a history but no object',[24] an intriguing interpretation that assigns it, and removes it from, narrative simultaneously. Pullen regards the work as 'dormant', and counsels, 'there is still a lot of information in that piece.[25] Even Eva Beuys maintains that Tate's *Felt Suit* 'still exists as an object'.[26]

Figure 4. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, Mother and Child, 1998. By kind permission of the artists

It would appear that, although the work is no longer part of Tate's collection, its remnants are suspended in conceptual and physical limbo. All parties agree that this carcass remains a powerful homage to an iconic artist, and acknowledge that it continues to function, albeit on an ancillary level. Though categorized as an 'archived object', it is stored and monitored alongside the rest of the collection within an insect-controlled environment. Like a recently unearthed archaeological artifact, it maintains an essence of its raison d'être, but no longer functions as such. Although Beuys himself contended that 'all conservation is a form of self-comforting and self-deception, since all matter is destined to turn into dust', he also averred that, 'what is indestructible is the spiritual substance' of the work.[27] That spiritual substance arguably infuses Tate's archived *Felt Suit*.

Beuys's claim deftly delineates what lies at stake in attempts to define the mortality of Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey's *Mother and Child* (1998) (Figure 4). Comprising a special stay-green grass resulting from cross breeding a rye grass with a Welsh meadow fescue resistant to heat, frost and drought (but, crucially, not yet to light), the work's extensive fading has provoked debate over its life span. In contrast to *Felt Suit*, however, the issue is not whether the work's material decay thoroughly compromises it, for the artists use grass precisely to invoke its organic properties, including decomposition. Rather, determining *Mother and Child*'s mortality centres upon ascertaining whether the work continues to evoke its 'spiritual substance' despite its decay.

Ackroyd and Harvey ventured into the process they call 'photographic photosynthesis' in 1991, using ordinary rye grass. By projecting images onto grass grown vertically from seed in monitored light conditions, the artists encourage or restrict chlorophyll production to achieve tonal variations. As the grass matures, the image emerges in hues of green and yellow and, when dried, endures for approximately three weeks. Yet the desire to prolong their works' longevity led the artists to the Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research (IGER) in Wales, and their development of stay-green grass, which retards senescence (yellowing) and, under very low light levels, inhibits photosynthesis. Stay-green now allows the artists to achieve photographic imprints that, in theory, preserve their tonal modulations for years.

Hearing of Ackroyd and Harvey's collaboration with IGER, American collector Howard Stein invited them to participate in Santa Barbara Museum of Art's 1998 exhibition 'Out of Sight: Imaging/Imagining Science'. Stein enquired into the cost of obtaining a new work but, as Ackroyd later admitted, 'we hadn't considered them at all saleable at this point, so we worked out a figure that we thought it would cost us to grow it and make it'.[28] On the basis of this conversation, the collector believed he was purchasing the work. The artists, on the other hand, assumed that Stein was commissioning them for a work that they intended to destroy subsequently. They therefore used the heretofore untried stay-green grass to create *Mother and Child*.

The artists grew the 6″ × 4″ portrait from a photograph taken by Harvey, featuring Ackroyd and the couple's 8-month-old daughter, Adele. It was one of two works that the artists sent to Santa Barbara where, as Howard Stein observed, it 'was well-placed, because it's an interesting piece'.[29] In real terms, this means that the gallery displayed the work under direct light, hastening its fading. Only then did Ackroyd and Harvey learn that, whereas stay-green blades 'retain their chlorophyll much more effectively than regular grass, the effects of…processes such as oxidative bleaching gradually occur and over time contribute to an irreversible loss of image'.[30] As a result, *Mother and Child*'s image began to recede without disappearing entirely, enacting and deferring death simultaneously.

Ackroyd and Harvey had by now realized that Stein considered himself the

owner of *Mother and Child* and, believing it was 'good to have a piece out there in the marketplace', did not demur.[31] Deciding against an insurance claim – 'given the nature of it, I don't see how you can.…We didn't expect anybody to have that kind of responsibility'[32] – Stein consigned the work to storage. Meanwhile, the artists grew other versions of the work for exhibition, and began cultivating the idea of showing two versions of different vintage. The opportunity to do so presented itself during their 2001 residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (ISGM) in Boston, inducing the issue of *Mother and Child*'s mortality (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, 3 × Mother and Child. By kind permission of the artists

When curator Pieranna Cavalchini contacted Stein to borrow the 1998 version of *Mother and Child* for 'Presence', the exhibition marking the conclusion of the artists' ISGM residency, he reportedly replied, 'What do you want that for? It's ruined'.[33] Indeed, the fading rendered Ackroyd barely discernible, yet Adele's image persisted. Nevertheless, Stein agreed to the loan, his version juxtaposed against one that was freshly grown. The contrast between the two versions heightened the poignancy of the earlier work's decay, arguably evoking its 'spiritual substance'. The late curator Carole Kismaric visited the exhibition and apparently concurred. She urged Stein to revise his thoughts about the work's condition, advising him, 'you don't know what you've got here. It's not ruined. Just hang on to it'.[34]

Stein has retained the work, but remains doubtful of its aesthetic status. He disclosed, 'I think it's in the back end of the vault and so it's really buried there, and to me it's dead, because part of it is gone'.[35] The artists disagree. As Ackroyd observed, 'there's a point where the image is imperceptibly there, or possibly not quite there…The material is dead, but is it less compelling for that?'.[36] Furthermore, Harvey contends that the image will never be lost completely. Although they have grown and dismantled subsequent versions of the work, they refuse to recant the original. 'There is beauty in growing as there is also beauty in fading', notes Heather Ackroyd. 'It arouses all sorts of emotions and thoughts about time, memory, loss, and, of course, possession'.[35] By performing its evolution from seed to embedded image to ghostly trace, the faded *Mother and Child* actualizes the impossibility of possessing a moment, an image, time.

Nearly seven years on, Ackroyd and Harvey continue to explore the potential of stay-green grass. IGER is currently experimenting with introducing the

naturally occurring anti-bleaching properties of some plants into stay-green, thereby fortifying its resistance to light. While they uphold the efficacy of the original *Mother and Child*, the artists maintain a flexible attitude towards the collection and conservation of their work, acknowledging the prospect of re-making, issuing editions, and developing detailed instructions regarding their works' care, possible renewal, and life span. Sadly, permanent collections have, so far, purchased photographs of the work only. A commitment to acquiring the grass works themselves would initiate a vital and belated reconsideration of how collections can intelligently accommodate ephemeral works that, physically and conceptually, refuse to stagnate.

Conclusion

Felt Suit and *Mother and Child* reveal the need for enlarged debate about the future of collections policy for objects of finite life span. At present, there is a growing schism between objects purchased by permanent collections, for whom stability poses the key question, and the more idiosyncratic pieces produced for temporary exhibition. Because acquisition inherently involves 'capturing' a historical moment in an artist or movement's lifetime, museums often perceive changes in artistic intent or in the material itself as a threat to the work's historical significance. But by compressing artworks to their historical import, we run the risk of negating and neglecting objects whose aesthetic status depends upon their activity in particular, and of reifying or reducing contemporary objects to relics more generally. If, as museologist Elaine Heumann Gurian contends, museums of the future will rely upon cultural memory more than physical evidence,[38] then reconciling with defunct objects such as *Felt Suit*, and materially and conceptually active works such as *Mother and Child*, will empower their resonance within collections and, more widely, culture itself.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Royal College of Art Research Development Fund, and to Derek Pullen and Sean Rainbird of Tate for their support. We extend thanks to Heather Ackroyd, Dan Harvey, Christian Scheidemann, Ines Schlenker, Hiltrud Schinzel and Howard Stein.

Notes

1 Schellmann, J and Klüser, B, 1980, *Joseph Beuys: Multiples, 5th edition*, Munich, Verlag Schellmann and Klüser, np.
2 Booth, P, no date, 'Conservation structure and condition report', Tate Sculpture Conservation.
3 Schellmann and Klüser, np.
4 Don Sale, Tate Gallery Conservation Department record of examination, 15 February 1989, Tate Sculpture Conservation.
5 Richard Morphet, letter to Nicholas Serota, 17 February 1989, Tate Archive.
6 Jackie Heuman, Internal Memorandum to Alexander Dunluce and Sean Rainbird, 4 October 1989, Tate Archive.
7 Sean Rainbird, letter to Roy Perry, 21 February 1989, Tate Archive.
8 Jackie Heuman, memorandum to Alexander Dunluce, 1 November 1989. Tate Archive.
9 Morphet.
10 Derek Pullen, personal interview, 11 October 2004.
11 Heuman, 4 October 1989.
12 Tisdall, C, 1987, *Bits and Pieces: A Collection of Work by Joseph Beuys from 1957 to1985*, Edinburgh, Richard DeMarco Gallery, 39.
13 Sean Rainbird, interview with Rachel Barker, 13 September 2004.
14 Frances Morris, letter to Jana Sterbak, 18 January 1994, Tate Archive.
15 National Museum Directors' Conference, *Too Much Stuff: Disposal from Museums*, London, Imperial War Museum, 2003, 17. See National Heritage Act, 1983, Section 6(3)(b), and the Museum and Galleries Act, 1992, which covers Tate.
16 Nicholas Serota, letter to Heiner Bastian, 17 November 1994, Tate Archive.
17 Heiner Bastian, letter to Nicholas Serota, 6 December 1994, Tate Archive.
18 Nicholas Serota, letter to Eva Beuys, 31 January 1995, Tate Archive.

19 Eva Beuys, letter to Nicholas Serota (translated from German), 9 February 1995, Tate Archive.
20 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, 9 September 1886, art. 6bis, S. Treaty Doc. No. 27, 99th Cong., 2d Sess. 41 (1986).
21 Christian Scheidemann, e-mail to Alison Bracker, 31 October 2004.
22 Dr Hiltrud Schinzel, e-mail to Alison Bracker, 24 October 2004.
23 Nicholas Serota, letter to Eva Beuys, 11 May 1995, Tate Archive.
24 Richard Morphet, letter to senior curators, 19 May 1995, Tate Archive.
25 Pullen.
26 Beuys letter.
27 Christian Scheidemann, unpublished interview with Franz Joseph Van der Grinten, 1993. E-mail to Alison Bracker, 31 October 2004.
28 Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, personal interview, 19 October 2004.
29 Howard Stein, personal interview with Alison Bracker, 24 August 2004.
30 Ackroyd and Harvey, *Sunbathers*, www.geneart.org/ackroyd2.htm, accessed 28 August 2001.
31 Ackroyd and Harvey, interview.
32 Stein.
33 Ackroyd and Harvey.
34 Ackroyd and Harvey.
35 Stein.
36 Ackroyd and Harvey.
37 Mary K Miller, 'Web bit 7-1: photosynthesis art', www.harcourtcollege.com/lifesci/aal2e/student/resources/webbit/webbit7-1.html, 28 August 2001.
38 Elaine Heumann Gurian, 'What is the object of this exercise?' www.anu.edu.au/hrc/publications/hr/issue12001/article04.htm, 6 November 2004.