

## **Present as Object, Absent as Artwork: The Conservation of *Transformations Instables***

Or

### **Waiting for the Gaze: Conservation and Participation in *Transformations Instables***

The Flemish Community Collection in Vilvoorde holds *Transformations Instables*, a Plexiglas work made by Francisco Sobrino in 1962.

It is a work conceived to exist in relation to the viewer: a work that activates through the observer's movement, that changes form according to the distance, the angle, and the psycho-physiological condition of the person looking at it. In the absence of this relation, it remains in a potential state: present as an object, but not fully activated as an artwork.

Its placement in storage therefore raises a question that exceeds the individual case and bears more broadly on the conservation of contemporary art: what happens to a work conceived to exist in relation to the viewer when it is withdrawn from the gaze and placed in a controlled space for its preservation?

Unlike kinetic or installation works discussed in conservation literature for the role of movement, display, and viewer participation, *Transformations Instables* is a static work that produces optical effects through the perceptual relation with its observer. For this very reason, it represents a particularly compelling case for reflecting on the complexity of conservation that cannot be reduced to the protection of material alone.

Francisco Sobrino (1932–2014), born in Spain and trained in Argentina, moved to Paris in 1958, where he deepened his study of the Phenomenology of Perception and Information Theory at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Together with Horacio Garcia Rossi, Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, Joel Stein, and Yvaral, he founded GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel) in 1961, one of the most active groups within the New Tendencies, alongside ZERO, Gruppo N, and Gruppo T. Known under the designations of New Tendencies, Kinetic Art, Programmed Art, and Op Art, from the late 1950s through the late 1960s, these artists built a dense transnational and transdisciplinary network. Their experimentation ranged from the construction of static, kinetic, and environmental works that, with close attention to light and space, placed the viewer's perception and their interactions with the work at the centre.[1]

Within this shared framework, however, the forms through which viewer participation is activated differ from work to work. As in *Transformations Instables*, held in the depot, or in the *Torsions* (from ca. 1959) series by Antwerp-based artist Walter LeBlanc, the works are static, but the ocular movement of the observer, or their movement through space, generates perspectival play. Works such as Grazia Varisco's *Schema Luminoso Variable* (1961–68) are instead motorised kinetic objects capable of continuously producing new geometric configurations. Others required the manual activation of the viewer, such as *Rilievo*

*ottico-dinamico* by Gruppo N (1962), through to immersive environments like the *Programmed Room* by Group Zero for the exhibition *Kunst Licht Kunst* (1966) at the Van Abbemuseum.[2]

Through the integration of technology, Gestalt psychology, Information Theory, Design, and Pedagogy, these artists aimed at constructing a shared phenomenological language: an objective, non-hierarchical, and accessible visual system that requires no prior competence to be experienced. The complexity of these movements rests on a common social, and perhaps utopian, principle: the authors design models whose interplays of light, movement, and optical illusion function to destabilise the viewer's perception, compelling them to break out of the passivity produced by mass society. Through aesthetic experience, the aim is to render the viewer more capable of selecting and deciphering external stimuli, and therefore more conscious of the world around them.[3] This occurs through an active experience of the work, one that involves the viewer and makes them an integral part of the creative process.

The importance of viewer participation is such that it displaces the figure of the artist as individual genius, desacralising authorship and operating through collective work defining themselves as "aesthetic operators" or "aestheticians."[4] The works were conceived as research experiments or prototypes whose aura was called into question by the use of industrial materials and the production of multiples, in favour of a more democratic art.[5]

Umberto Eco spoke of this experiments as ‘‘open work’’: a scientifically programmed work that, through the subjective interaction of the viewer, becomes "open to an unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste or perspective, or personal performance." [6] As Davide Boriani likewise observed, "without the user the work does not give out signals, it does not exist." [7] The work's existence in reality is fully realised only through the visitor's observation; without this participation, the work remains incomplete, deprived of an essential part of its meaning.

For Sobrino, this principle translates into the rejection of classical composition in favour of a neutral approach and a non-hierarchical system, aimed at opening the work to the viewer and drawing them closer. From the early 1960s, he produced works in transparent or smoked Plexiglas, exploiting its apparent fragility and luminous effects to create structures composed of simple geometric forms. As in *Transformations Instables* superimposition or juxtaposition continuously generates new configurations through the interaction of space, light, and the observer's movement without a direct physical manipulation. The optical effects are generated by simple mathematical principles, elementary geometric forms, and industrial materials, with the intent of reconfiguring the space and time between the two. Depending on the viewer's movement, distance, and psycho-physiological condition, infinite aesthetic combinations and different perceptual responses are produced. As a result, the work stimulates the retina and destabilises the viewer, opening infinite possibilities of vision.[8]

If viewer participation is not an accessory element but a necessary condition of the work's existence — if, as T. Scholte argues about the importance of being display: “the installation

only comes into being as work of art through the process of being installed.[9] — then what, exactly, are we preserving when we store *Transformations Instables* in a depot?

The depot guarantees the material survival of the work over time and ensures its transmission to future generations. Yet in the case of *Transformations Instables*, this gesture introduces a constitutive tension: to preserve this work means, simultaneously, to suspend its activation and withdraw it from the collective dimension for which it was conceived.

The question concerns not only matter, but also the artist's intention and the way in which the work relates to the viewer, to space, and to light. An excessively object-centred reading, risks diverging from the philosophy of the New Tendencies movements themselves, which did not conceive of the artwork as an autonomous object closed in on itself.

This reflection becomes still more compelling when we consider the works of the New Tendencies as instruments of collective activation. The utopian intention of these artists attributed to the works a function that was not exclusively perceptual, but formative and social. The suspension of the social activity conceived by the artist is replaced by the social function of the depot, which guarantees the work's material conservation and its transmission over time.

To preserve a work presupposes penetrating the artist's intellectual universe in respect of their original idea. As Cesare Brandi observed, "restoration constitutes the methodological moment in which the work of art is recognised, in its physical being, and in its dual aesthetic and historical nature, in view of its transmission to the future" [10], so conservation is not a neutral procedure, but an operation of study and critique.

These are questions at the beating heart of contemporary conservation. Stigter formulates them for conceptual art: "How can one preserve a concept when there is material to work with? Should this be done through keeping the material, even when it no longer conveys the message?"[11]

The works of the New Tendencies have been studied from a conservation standpoint primarily with regard to their kinetic moving components and their related participatory function. As Reinhard Bek points out: "How do we incorporate artist intent into the preservation of kinetic works when such art is both performative and sculptural?"[12]

In Sobrino's case, the static work generates movement through the optical effect perceptible according to the conservative conditions of the material's structure, rather than through mechanical movement.

A second level of complexity thus emerges, intertwining with the first dilemma: plastic as a material to be conserved.

Plastic represents one of the most complex fields in contemporary conservation. It is a relatively young material compared to the long history of artistic techniques. One cannot expect conservators to have accumulated the same centuries of experience with its

behaviour as exists, for instance, for oil painting, bronze, or marble. Knowledge of these materials developed through centuries of practice, error, and repetition; what has survived over time is also what proved most durable. Plastic has little more than a hundred years of history, even as it has become increasingly central to contemporary artistic production. Many works made with industrial materials are today exhibiting forms of degradation that are drawing the attention of the scientific community. [13]

The difficulty of conserving plastic material lies in the multiplicity of polymeric structures: each type, defined by its specific chemical composition, reacts and degrades differently. The loss of the physico-chemical properties of polymers can cause yellowing, discolouration, or loss of glossy finish, primarily due to heat, light, humidity, and atmospheric pollution. Therefore: "If the work originates as a study of the effects of light, colour, and space, any alteration to its surface properties such as brilliance, opacity, or colour, can irreversibly modify its appearance. Even minor damage can compromise the work's response to light and render it visually illegible".[14]

Furthermore, works in transparent plastics are easily compromised and have low tolerance for impact; a fracture can irreversibly undermine the original effect. Restoring transparent materials presents the same difficulty as reconstructing broken glass, requiring intrusive and high-risk interventions.[15] Preventive conservation therefore becomes essential.

In an exchange of correspondence, Delia Sobrino, who manages Francisco Sobrino's estate, described a conservation challenge linked to the adhesive that bonds the Plexiglas components together: itself likely an industrial material, it exhibits small white bubbles, compromising both the stability and the appearance of the works. [16] Any intervention with chemical solvents would risk further damaging the structure without prior in-depth analysis of the material. For these fragile works, targeted conservation is indispensable.

The paradox closes in on itself: if the material degrades, the optical effects on which the viewer's perceptual experience depends are compromised. The work no longer produces the same visual variations, nor does it activate the same engagement. But if we keep it in the depot to protect it, we withdraw it from the perceptual relation and the social purpose for which it was conceived.

Taking into consideration the words of Giovanni Colombo, a member of Gruppo T and a key figure of the New Tendencies on the restoration of *Strutturazione Pulsante* (1961), offers a precedent. The artist declared that the replacement of certain parts was acceptable, provided the intervention restored the work's movement through substitution without altering its technological level. In this way, according to the artist the conservation must privilege the maintenance of the work's function over an absolute defence of its material integrity.[17]

There is no solution that resolves this tension. What emerges from the case of *Transformations Instables* is that its importance resides neither in materiality alone nor in the artist's intention alone.

The most recent research favours an open, interdisciplinary approach, constructed case by case: study of the artist's intention through documents, manifestos, interviews, and correspondence; scientific analysis of materials; rigorous documentation of every

intervention. Matter and concept, the integrity of the object and its participatory function, give rise to a productive tension, one that acknowledges that every conservation decision is already, inevitably, a critical interpretation of the work. This text is itself an example of how the discipline of conservation is, and must be, in continuous transformation: dynamic, transdisciplinary, attentive to art history, to past and present society, to context and to the artist's intent.

For now, *Transformations Instables* rests in the depot, waiting to return to the light — and to find again the gaze without which it does not fully exist.

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[1] Matthieu Poirier, ed., *Francisco Sobrino* (Paris: Dilecta, 2020).

[2] Francesca Pola, ed., *Walter Leblanc* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2017) ; *Kunst Licht Kunst* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 1966) ; Margit Rosen and Peter Weibel, eds., *A Little Known Story About a Movement, a Magazine and the Computer's Arrival in Art* (Karlsruhe: ZKM; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

[3] Vergine, Lea. *L'arte cinetica in Italia*. Rome: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 1973.

[4] Emanuele Quinz, "From Program to Behavior: The Experience of Arte Programmata in Italy, 1958–68," in *Practicable: From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, ed. Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 91–111.

[5] Marta Previti, "Multiplied Works: Seriality and Anonymity in the Cine-visual Research of the 1960s," *Venezia Arti* 30 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.30687/VA/2385-2720/2021/07/007>.

[6] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1962), trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

[7] Davide Boriani, quoted in Lea Vergine, *Arte programmata e cinetica, 1953–1963: l'ultima avanguardia* (Milan: G. Mazzotta, 1983), 80.

[8] Poirier, Matthieu, *Francisco Sobrino*. Parigi. Dilecta, 2020.

[9] T. Scholte, "Introduction" in *Inside Installations: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks*, ed. T. Scholte and G. Wharton (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 11.

[10] Cesare Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, trans. Cynthia Rockwell (Florence: Nardini, 2005), 48.

[11] Sanneke Stigter, "Between Concept and Material: Working with Conceptual Art: A Conservator's Testimony" (PhD thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2016), 7.

[12] Reinhard Bek, "A Question of KinEthics," in *Keep It Moving? Conserving Kinetic Art*, ed. Rachel Rivenc and Reinhard Bek (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2018), 6.

[13] Odile Madden and Tom Learner, "Preserving Plastics: An Evolving Material, a Maturing Profession," in *Conservation Perspective*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2014), 4–9.

[14] Oscar Chiantore and Antonio Rava, *Conserving Contemporary Art: Issues, Methods, Materials, and Research* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013), 46.

[15] Anna Laganà and Rachel Rivenc, "Less Is More: Exploring Minimally Invasive Methods to Repair Plastic Works of Art," *Conservation Perspectives* (2014): 16–17.

[16] Delia Sobrino, email correspondence with the author, 16 march 2026.

[17] Valentina Grillo, "Conservare l'arte contemporanea", *Luxflux* 11 (2004): [pagine se disponibili].*Luxflux*, accessed [04/04/2026],  
<http://www.luxflux.net/conservare-l%E2%80%99arte-contemporanea/>.