The Material Culture of Writing

8

ASSEMBLING THE FILE, OR, HOW CONSERVATION WORKS

Anne MacKay

FOREWORD

In early 2017, I took part in a series of strategic planning meetings for the museum where I work.[1] Staff members around the table were tasked with defining a new positioning for the institution, which would be more closely aligned with current museological debate. At one point, we were asked to present an object that would reveal an essential aspect of our work: this object, we were told, should also touch us personally and be at the core of what we believe to be important about what we do. Reflecting on my job as head of the museum's conservation team, I considered and rejected a number of seemingly obvious possibilities (museum objects, conservation test pieces, tools) before finally deciding on a conservation file. Conservators create these files as they examine, research, and treat objects, and a conservation department of any size has thousands of them, which, in our museum, may include multiple texts written by conservators over many years, along with a host of contextual information, visual references, even material fragments. The file I selected was created during the lengthy conservation treatment of a small basket, well known in the museum by its notable accession number, M1.

My object seemed a bit odd when compared with the others. It was not a discrete physical entity, but a hodge-podge of stuff, including documentation I had written, other texts, photographs, drawings, and pieces of the basket itself. Was my object even an object? And how did it describe, reflect, or locate what I do in a meaningful way? This chapter is an attempt to answer these questions, to uncover how the file—with its jostle of texts and other accumulated things—lies at the core of my professional practice and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of conservation is centered on caring for material culture, particularly its treatment and preservation, and has consequently generated a vast corpus of writing about objects. Many of these texts are widely available and can be read in books, conference proceedings and peer reviewed journals, in newsletters and popular magazines, and on web sites and blogs. The subject matter of this writing is diverse and includes the description of conservation treatment practices, studies in material culture, issues in ethical debate, critical and historical enquiry, and aspects of collections care. However, this chapter deals with a very different kind of writing that is even more central to a conservator's work: object documentation in the conservation file. This writing notes material aspects of individual objects, describes and tracks treatment interventions, and records further research on their materiality that often has historical import or an impact on future care. Containing passages of close observation and diarist narrative, its format has evolved though decades of professional prescriptions within the field that have normalized both its language and content. Although voluminous (conservators can easily write thousands of pages over a career) and an obligation of professional practice, these texts are not widely circulated, and are typically accessed only by other conservators, researchers and collectors. This circumscribed consumption, and the often quite arcane and meticulous nature of the texts, plays a role in the perception of conservation by those outside the field as something either mysteriously magical (reviving moribund objects of the past) or entirely technical (using state-of-the-art technology to "analyze" a work of art). But conservation documentation is also vital to a positioning whose bulwarks are professionalism and ethical practice, and is seen by those in the field as ensuring transparency of methodology, reproducibility of procedure, and, perhaps most importantly, accountability to the future (Rivers and Umney 396–98). Furthermore, containing the fruit of material research on objects and collections, it is a fundamental element of material culture studies, and the starting point of much writing about conservation for public consumption.

That said, the conservation file is not merely a textual record of examination and treatment. I believe it to be, and will argue here, that it is itself a rich element of material culture and a writing object that both guides and reflects professional practice. As such, it is the critical third component in a triad of constantly shifting relationships that include the conservator and the object itself. The fluctuations in this triangle are

due to the vectors of transmission and reception between conservator and object, conservator and file, and file and object, each component displaying its own kind of engagement and response. Conceiving the file as a complex physical entity with its own agency, and not merely a passive reflection of a conservator's practice or an object's materiality, recognizes its authority and clout in the active role it can assume in driving the conservation process forward.

I will start my critical look at the file by briefly tracing the early history of conservation and tracking the increasing importance of conservation documentation during the construction of the profession at the beginning of the twentieth century. Characterizing the file as material culture, I will further probe the idea of it as an assemblage, with an agentic force in the conservation process. I will then relate the story of a key museum object, M1, a basket from the Indigenous Cultures collection of the museum, from the point of view of its file that was compiled during the course of a conservation treatment. Bringing the history of conservation to the present day, I will finally describe the evolution of a more critical approach to practice, which has been deeply influenced by studies in new materiality, the marks of which can be touched, viewed and read in the multifarious contents of the file.

CREATING A PROFESSION

The slow evolution from artisan to conservation professional began in the eighteenth century, with the shift from royal and private collections to the establishment of large, government-supported museums, such as the British Museum (1753) and the Louvre (1793), which in turn led to the creation of a cadre of museum workers responsible to the public (Whitehead 78–79; McClellan "Restoration Policy" 451–2). Having to answer to public and ministerial criticisms of practice, be they the condition of the works and their display, or issues of classification and collecting, forced these new institutions to defend choices that would have previously remained in the private realm. Only restorations on the most important works in major collections were documented by restorers themselves: what little documentation that survives today is more often found in the correspondence of those responsible for the collections, or in administrative reports describing the results of a procedure (McClellan, "Raphael's *Foligno Madonna*" 82–84; Massing 68). Controversies occurred both in England and in France concerning the appearance of some restored paintings, and in England these disputes led to lengthy parliamentary enquires, whose recorded testimony has

left us with a revealing picture of practice in the mid-nineteenth century: heavy-handed, inconsistent in procedure and outcome, and by and large undocumented (Anderson 450–51; Brommelle 178–79). The latter half of the century saw the publication of a number of widely read restoration manuals, which outlined procedures and explained chemical and physical interactions, producing the first indications of a shift toward a minimal standardization of practice (Forni 326–30; Secco-Suardo 331–38; Aschel 80–90). Documentation, however, generally remained an unrecognized aspect of the restoration process (Brajer ix).

During the first half of the twentieth century, changes within cultural institutions brought about what has been described as the "professionalization, specialization and the canonization of museum practices" (Meijer-van Mensch and van Mensch 33). This shift included the addition of conservation departments to museums, which ultimately led to the creation of the modern professional conservator. The twentieth century also saw the realization of a slew of international charters addressing best standards in heritage preservation (the Athens Charter, 1933; the Venice Charter, 1964; the Burra Charter, 1979; the Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994) and national codes of ethics for conservation (Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice of the CAC). Articles in the codes outline foundational ethical issues—including, for example, the standardization of practice with such fundamental concepts as minimal intervention and reversibility—that reflect a further refining of a professional discipline. Also stressed is the importance of documentation as a requirement of professional practice. For example, the *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works* contains an article in the code, and a full description in the guidelines, outlining the obligation to document, and what the structure and the contents of that documentation should be ("AIC Code").

This period was also witness to the rapid growth of science and scientific methodologies in conservation practice. As early as 1850 the chemist Michael Faraday, a member of the Select Committee on the National Gallery, looked at the effect of the highly polluted London air on the museum's collection and advised on the mitigation of the alarming rate of change of some of the art (Saunders 77). Later, a more sophisticated understanding of chemical reactions, along with advances in technology, instigated both an increase in more systematic methods in conservation treatment and a sharp rise in the use of technologies in museums (Brewer 137–208). The modern conservator slowly supplanted the artisan/restorer, as a new corps of university-trained specialists took his place. Science and technology both extended and legitimatized

conservation's position in the museum, by lending conservators a unique authority that few had the tools to challenge, and providing a way of differentiating their core competencies from those of others. Moreover, with this new paradigm, treatment came to be thought of in terms of material interactions that could be understood with analytical tools and reliably replicated (Clavir 37–38). These profound shifts gave birth to the conservator in the lab coat who no longer worked in a studio, but in a laboratory. Documentation, as a detailed, accurate, and reproducible (i.e., scientific) record of the examination and treatment of an object, was central to this new professional positioning, both defining and being defined by it (Lerner 40).

Written conservation documentation is now quite standardized, following a structured format with rubrics that both order and limit information. Sections flow logically from a basic inventory, to a more detailed material description and a report on condition. A proposed treatment follows, after which the treatment itself is described, either with a summary of procedures and materials or with a daily log of interventions. The documentation concludes with any recommendations for subsequent care that might be necessary (Krueger et al.). This format is commonly followed internationally and is taught in conservation programs (Anastassiades). Terminology has been standardized as well, and lexicons and multi-language dictionaries are available to practitioners ("Condition Reporting"). The contents of the documentation, dealing solely with material preservation issues and treatment-related processes, fit comfortably within the zones of expertise demarcated by the standard tripartite divisions (conservation, curatorial, and collections management) in museum collections departments.

But while this kind of writing is central to the file, for me it does not get to the heart of the conservation process today. The restricted format and scientific gloss of the texts, while buttressing a familiar place of professional competence, impose boundaries that must be transgressed for conservators to inhabit the new territories delineated by recent work in material culture studies.

ASSEMBLING THE FILE

Assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari; DeLanda) is a social theory that describes a process wherein an arrangement of heterogeneous elements, for example objects, bodies, events, or technologies, enter into relationships to exert influence on, and to interact with, other entities. The players in an assemblage do not converge to create a unity but instead exist

side by side in changing and complex ways. Elements are independent and can be added and subtracted as necessary. This construct privileges an understanding of the world wherein social, political, and cultural phenomena are viewed as having emergent and dynamic properties, which evolve over time. Examples of assemblages can be anything from humanitarian advocacy campaigns, to popular cultural events, to the relationships between bodies and technologies (Kennedy et al. 49).

This way of understanding the social world fittingly describes the complex processes and things in orbit around the conservation process and opens a window onto the connections and energies in the conservator—object—file construct. In a kind of concretization of these ideas, the file itself can also be thought of as an assemblage, in that it embodies the things that the conservator finds herself associated with, and holds their material expression, manifesting a process that is multidirectional and open-ended. Thomas Nail notes two important concepts in the logic of assemblage: "the rejection of unity in favor of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favor of events" (22–24). The file is not an organic whole, wherein all the elements click seamlessly together, but instead contains a multiplicity of very different parts, each of which can stand on their own and may even contradict one another. Over time, as knowledge about an object evolves and conservators add elements (or find others to be no longer pertinent), the things in a file can regroup to create different emerging networks and associations that influence the conservation process. The changeable nature of the file means that it will never produce a final, definitive product, or essence, but that instead it will continue to create a string of contingent things and events. As with all assemblages, the file is better described by what it does, rather than by what it is.

Given the rhetorical power attributable to things (Barnett and Boyle 1), all the contents of the file can be understood to have equal standing and the same discursive power as the texts, creating and dispensing insight and meaning in an equally distributed way. In other words, material remnants and sketches are endowed with the same weight as the written documentation. Discussing how writing works in this context, Laura Micciche describes "agency and energy as emergent not from one site of meaning—that is the text—but from a conglomeration of source material linked in diverse, often unpredictable designs" (495). All the things in the file, and their connections, create a powerful and stimulating tool for conservation, producing a web of connection between the historical, social, and material nature of the object, and linking that to the process of conservation treatment.

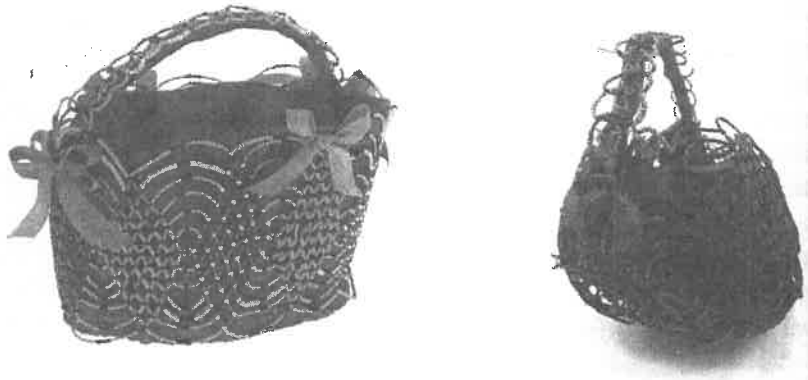

Figure 8.1. Basket, McCord Museum, M1. Before treatment (right) and after treatment (left). Photo Credit: Anne MacKay.

The file also signals a new territory: while the documentation texts are closely connected to the laboratory, with all its disciplinary associations and boundaries, the file moves out and beyond, incorporating other related but more distant places a conservator may encounter. The spaces where writers choose to work have been described as carefully calibrated environments that are structured to afford the things, the rituals, and the activities needed for writing practice (Prior and Shipka 219). These ESSPs, or environment selecting and structuring processes, are in the end "externalizations meant to regulate thought and affect, to channel attention and action" (228). Of course, the file is not a room or an arrangement of furniture, but is nonetheless an intangible, layered space that somehow dwells within the confines of a paper folder. Cydney Alexis refers to the writing habitat is part of an extended self, that provides not only a physical space, but also, more importantly here, "a figural stage for identity performance" (87). The file expands the territory of conservation beyond what the conservator-written texts it contains would imply.

M1 AND ITS FILE: THE STORY OF A BEADED BASKET

In 1915, David Ross McCord, founder of the McCord Museum, acquired a bright pink cloth basket from a buyer in Nova Scotia (see fig. 8.1). Less than four inches high and delicately decorated with tiny glass beads strung on garlands of horsehair, this unusual object was subsequently catalogued as M1 into the fledgling collection. Museum files from that time record that members of the Mi'kmaq community

Figure 8.2. Materials in the M1 file. Photo Credit: Anne MacKay.

had given the basket to Amelia Fitzclarence Cary, wife of the lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia from 1840 to 1846, likely as a token of friendship and respect: the fact that Amelia Fitzclarence Cary was an amateur artist, and painted portraits of Mi'kmaq individuals during her residence in Nova Scotia, lends credence to this story (Reinhart). Highly valued on acquisition, the basket was lost at some point, only to be found, unidentified and in a damaged state, during a 1971 move of collections into the current museum building. The basket remained disassociated from its cataloging until 2002, when it was recognized by a museum volunteer working in the collection. The file for M1 was created in 2011, during treatment for an exhibition of treasures from the museum's collections.

The file contains original components of the basket, removed during treatment, as well as materials used for its conservation (see fig. 8.2). The fragments in the M1 file are valuable because they permit freer access to the actual substance of the basket and are the source for both the identification of materials and a closer investigation of their macro- and microscopic properties. Materials in the file include:

- two fabric-covered wire supports from the inside, which were removed because they were weighing down and distorting the shape of the basket.
- the remnants of four silk bows from the rim, which had powdered on contact during treatment.

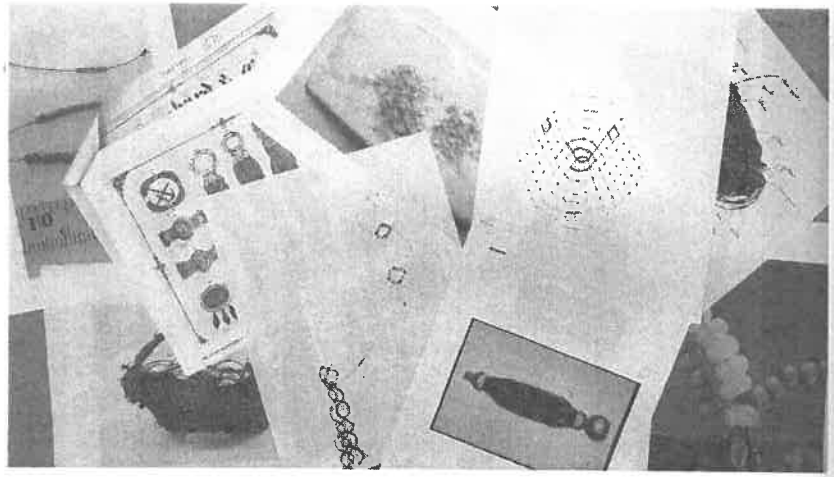

Figure 8.3. Images in the M1 file. Photo Credit: Anne MacKay.

- some of the thread originally used to attach the beaded horsehair band and the wire supports, removed during treatment and saved for comparison with other thread on M1.
- horsehair used to repair losses on the beaded band.

The file contains a plethora of images of M1 and other related objects (see fig. 8.3).

Images in a file create their own kind of story, reflecting the object's passage through time and its associations with other things. Images in the file include:

- a selection of the scores of photographs taken of the object during examination, depicting its unusual material aspects, and during conservation, showing the gradual, but striking evolution of the appearance of the basket through the treatment process. Annotated photographs detail specific condition issues or treatment procedures.
- images of historic Mi'kmaq objects and beading or quillwork patterns.
- a photograph of another museum object, a bracelet made of human hair, bearing the same unusual pattern as the beaded design on the basket.
- sketches and diagrams describing the structure of the basket and its beadwork designs. Several of my drawings piece together the logic of a damaged motif, by sketching different areas where it had been obscured because of loss and damage. Diagrams detail conservation interventions, such as the locations of removed threads or rebeaded sections.

The file contains numerous texts, including the conservation documentation, email correspondence with other conservators, manuscript

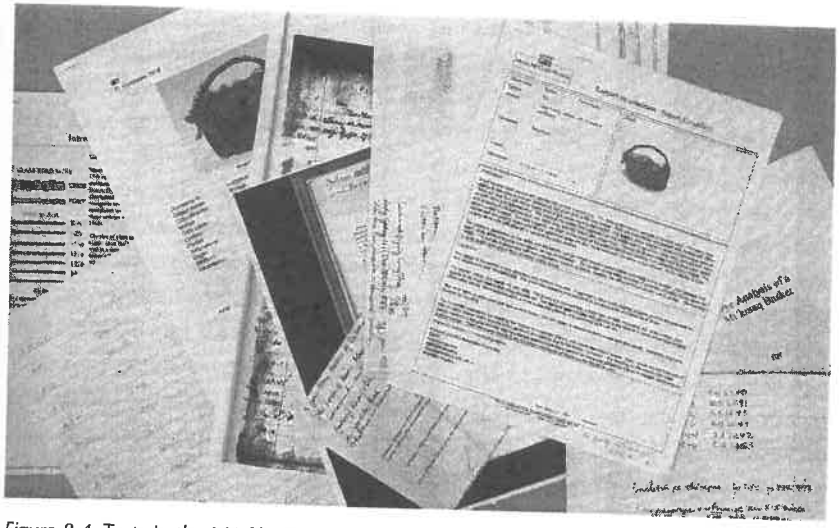

Figure 8.4. Texts in the M1 file. Photo Credit: Anne MacKay.

notes, bibliographic references, web page print-outs, and photocopies from books and journals (see fig. 8.4).

Texts in the file include:

- the conservation documentation.
- current Museum catalogue information, with a photocopy of the original 1915 entry identifying the basket as a gift to Lady Falkland.
- a manuscript list of museum objects of Mi'kmaq origin, with dates and storage locations, all of which incorporate horsehair in the beaded decoration, to be examined for comparison with M1.
- a manuscript list of references to books, historic magazines and journal articles.
- notes to self, to-do lists.
- printouts from web sites that investigate Victorian whimsies and hair jewelry, which were consulted for more information on published Euro-Canadian styles and patterns at the time.
- an analytical report on the identification of the dye of the fabric, which identified it as synthetic and not in use until the 1880s, providing a crucial piece of information about M1's constituent materials.

Understanding the M1 file as an assemblage that works, rather than a fixed entity, allows us to reconceptualize it and bring it into a closer relationship with the conservation process. Interesting clusters appear, grouping and regrouping, when cutting transversally across the contents of the file. For example, one such cluster contains the cloth remnants, the museum catalogue entry identifying the basket as a gift to Lady

Falkland at some point between 1840 and 1846, and the analytical report on the dye identifying it as Basic Violet 10. These contradictions between object, text, and technology raise fundamental questions regarding the dating of the basket and its ascribed historical significance as a link between Lady Falkland and members of the Mi'kmaq community, and have repercussions in the world. The photograph of a bracelet with a similar pattern and website printouts depicting nineteenth-century hair work call our attention to a connection that could be made with the basket to the world of Euro-Canadian fashion and nineteenth-century women's past times, underscoring the deeply hybrid nature (Phillips 259–60) of the object. Photographs of the object, before and after treatment, documentation texts, and sketches of a new support system to replace the removed wires, describe a new iteration of the basket, arrived at through the conservation process.

Despite the virtual character of much of its contents, a paper file was created for this complex treatment. The file needs to be in a physical state to be able to function well as an assemblage, in that its material nature emphasizes the fact that it as a life of its own, and will change over time. Touching on the material contents in this way unlocks new doors to reflection. It is that accumulation of things, to be flipped through, handled, or spread out on a table, which affords the associations and disjunctions so fruitful for thinking through an object. Moreover, the physical file makes the absence of something more apparent. For example, the M1 file does not contain any comparable examples of Mi'kmaq beading (strange!), as none have yet to be found.

EVOLVING A PROFESSION

Just before the turn of our current century, it seems that the world became filled with objects, with materials and materiality, and especially with things. The material turn, as it has been called,[2] brought our attention to the stuff of our existence, which was then examined from a myriad of viewpoints, both in popular and academic writing. We traced object lives, situating them within the narrative arcs of global trade and consumerism, as well as in the micro-histories of individuals and communities (Gosden and Marshall). Stable objects mutated into unpredictable things, springing free from their long confinement as the passive half in an imbalanced relationship with a domineering subject (Brown 4). Brokenness became a valued state, revealing a gap or an open door to a deeper understanding of materiality and material interactions theretofore masked by an opaque and unmarked surface

(Jackson 221). And along the way, dull as dishwater matter got invited to the ball, and emerged, dance card full, vibrant and lively (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 3).

This new attention to materiality from a (mostly) academic cohort felt to me a bit like a surprise flank attack on territory long assumed secure from acquisitiveness or even passing notice. Although conservators are traditionally considered experts on the physical nature of objects and collections, we now share this terrain with other critical voices whose interests have inevitably deepened our own reflection on our positioning, processes, and outcomes. The more voices added to the debate, from across the spectrum of the humanities and social sciences, the richer, although at times destabilizing, this ground becomes.

Listed below are four ideas about conservation that resonate deeply with issues in material culture studies and that I have found to be revelatory for my practice. Furthermore, they all can be related, in one way or another, to the assembly of things in the M1 file.

CONSERVATORS ENGAGE DIRECTLY WITH THE LIFE OF AN OBJECT

Object biography reveals the way objects can be the material starting point for a deeper understanding of the social, political, or historical dimensions of our world. Igor Kopytoff's seminal article on the cultural biography of things has shown that tracing an object's use and its vectors in space and time provides a rich understanding of its social import, its multiple roles and divergent meanings (87–90). Objects also live lives through their material being: they are made, they physically evolve, and eventually (unless extraordinary measures are taken) they disintegrate and disappear. Conservators work on the body of the object in ways that have significant impact both on our understanding of it and on its continued existence in time, making the act of preservation an important chapter in its biography. This is not a new idea and a number of classic conservation texts use the notion of a life cycle to explore the ways in which conservation is situated within the life of the object (Brandi 61; Baldini 355).

Conservators of contemporary art, who deal with complex artworks, have pushed the idea of object biography further, taking into account events such as the obsolescence of integrated technology or the rapid deterioration of unstable components, which are not controlled by the human subject. This has necessitated certain practices—the reconfiguration of installations, the migration or emulation of out-of-date technological elements of a work, or the wholesale replacement of parts of an

object—that challenge our understanding of what should be considered original, or authentic (van de Vall et al. 1). The idea of alteration either as something inscribed in the artwork's on-going materiality or as something imposed by a conservator has filtered through to other specialties in conservation and has made conservators think more critically about the use of words like conservation or damage, and to opt at times for terms like different iteration or change.

M1's file speaks to the object's biography in several ways. In the most basic sense, the dye analysis report, providing a *terminus post quem* of 1887 for the pink fabric refutes our century-old understanding of its past life. It throws our beliefs regarding its significance, and by extension, my understanding of what was to be recovered during treatment, into a state of profound questioning. Other elements in the file speak more directly to conservation processes. For example, the conservation photographs, supported by the written documentation, show an almost undecipherable object regaining legibility through treatment. This new iteration reflects our fascination with M1's shifting story and our desire to see it today in a state befitting its complex life and current status as a museum treasure. Finally, drawings made to decipher the original designs of the damaged beading reveal an ingenious twinning of motifs on the handle and the sides of M1 not evident at first glance. The basic pattern of these two parts of the basket is the same, but the motifs appear different, because of variations in the number of garlands in each band and the sequencing of bead colours. Looking toward M1's future, this observation provides a new basis of comparison with other objects and offers an important marker for future paths in the investigation of its story.

CONSERVATORS AND OBJECTS INTERACT WITHIN COMPLEX SOCIAL NETWORKS

Actor-network theory (ANT) provides a way for conservators to better understand and further conceptualize this biographical process. ANT sees social interaction as a collective activity, influenced by a host of entities or actants—people, objects, technologies, and so forth—whose agency is described through their interconnections (Latour). ANT gives the nonhuman as much importance as the human in these networks, and in doing so undermines automatically held assumptions about how the world around us is constructed and how systems function. As Bruno Latour states, while things do not have intentionality, they do enter into causal relations. "In addition to 'determining' and serving as a 'backdrop' for human action, things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on" (72). Reflecting on the interactions that occur during conservation in terms of ANT has been fruitful in both reconsidering the relationship of the conservator and the object and in distinguishing other significant actants (van Saaze 147–48). ANT takes into account the complexity and the dynamic quality of any conservation process, where a conservator's input is only one of many forces at play.

M1's file contains an impressive array of things that have exerted influence on the conservation process. The object's material hybridity, whatever the actual history of that may be, put me, as a conservator, in touch with a variety of actants, all present in its file. Nineteenth-century Indigenous communities and Euro-Canadian settlers (and today's members of these communities, drawn to the object through its thought-provoking qualities), researchers, scientists and museum workers, as well as pieces of historic jewelry and Indigenous beaded or quilled objects, are all elements in M1's networks. In a more intimate way, the presence of different hands is clearly displayed on the body of the basket. Photographs of the sewing on the fabric reveal amateurish construction and hasty stitching, while the beading is inventive and skillfully done. This evidence corroborates conflicts in the dating of the synthetic dye (late nineteenth century) and the tiny beads (early to mid-nineteenth century) and supports the idea that the basket was made by at least two different people at two different times.

Our own narratives and beliefs about M1 also impose themselves as actants. Even though we know that the basket was never a gift to Lady Falkland, this story still clings to the object and makes an appearance in the file, lending a notion of anterior richness and significance to an object whose actual history remains shrouded in mystery. Moreover, current interest in the transcultural object (Phillips 16–17) as emblematic of the colonial relationship between Euro-Canadians and Indigenous peoples is a key element in promoting the basket to its current status as a museum treasure and in pushing forward its conservation treatment. Finally, as the conservator who undertook this treatment, I must acknowledge that, in enacting my role, I am not outside these things, processes, and beliefs but, instead, have also been caught up in the web of M1.

WEAR, DAMAGE, AND DECAY ARE CRUCIAL SIGNPOSTS IN A CONSERVATOR'S WORK

Steven Jackson's proposal of "broken world thinking" as a way to counter the "productivist" slant of much current reflection about technology

is particularly interesting for conservation (221). According to Jackson, focus on novelty, development, and design has blinded those who deal with technology to the real and significant forces of breakdown and repair: "Breakdown disturbs and sets in motion worlds of possibility that disappear under the stable or accomplished form of the artifact" (230). Thinking about repair as something that is generative and productive, provides rich fodder for reconceptualizing conservation practice. According to Jackson, broken world thinking has "no automatic preference for stasis over change" (233) but instead favors the practice of "articulation"—an activity, like conservation, that occurs in time and attempts to fit together the numerous forces in motion around it.

Valuing breakdown (damage, deterioration) for its positive effects, and repair (conservation treatment) for the ways in which it is creative and generative, shifts conservation discourse away from classic tropes about recovering the original and locating the authentic to a different conceptualization of practice. That conservation actually adds to the world by producing something new and is not simply seeking stasis or a return to a former state is an important element in a more critical approach to received ideas regarding the authenticity of the object. According to conservator Salvador Muñoz-Viñas: "Conservation does not pursue authenticity . . . conservation is done because we do not like the authentic state of some objects . . . because what authentically is does not suit our needs, our tastes, our expectations" (37). This language is interesting and unusual for conservation: Muñoz-Viñas drops the veil of scientific neutrality and admits to liking, and to having needs, tastes, and expectations. Conservation is not about freezing the present, or recovering the past, or worrying about the needs of those amorphous future generations. Treatment as articulation reinforces the idea that conservation—in recognizing the disjunctions and creating the connections that help to make objects work for us anew—produces something inextricably part of our present.

During M1's treatment, it was only through the close observation of damage and deterioration that a pathway could be found back to an accomplished form of the object, which was unknown at the beginning of the process. This articulation involved juggling scraps of evidence, removing some parts and adding new ones, to generate a slowly reconstructed whole, one that created a version of the object that we like and that serves our purposes. The M1 file lays bare the sutures inherent in this process, as opposed to the seamlessness of the basket's presentation in a conserved state. Bits of ribbon and thread, photographs of losses in the beading, and detailed written descriptions attest to this state of

disrepair. Brokenness revealed a moment of openness and potential in M1 that disappeared after treatment, a moment that, however, is realized and maintained in the texts and things that comprise the file.

DYNAMIC MATTER IS THE VITAL STARTING POINT FOR A CONSERVATOR'S UNIQUE CONNECTION WITH THE WORLD

New materiality draws our attention to the stuff of things, to the brute materials of which everything is composed. Thing-power materialism and vibrant matter circle back to the core of material culture and speak to the agency that is found in the most basic components of our material world. Tim Ingold asks us to take a step back from the congealed entities that have traditionally been seen as emerging from historical or scientific processes, to engage with the primal dynamism of matter itself, stating "materials . . . do not present themselves as tokens of some common essence—materiality—that endows every worldly object with its inherent 'thingliness,' rather, they partake in the very process of the world's ongoing generation and regeneration." (9). Here, materials are in flux; they do not merely exist but occur. Jane Bennett echoes these ideas: "Thing-power materialism figures materiality as a protean flow of matter-energy and figures the thing as a relatively composed form of that flow" ("The Force of Things" 349). Bennett's things engage forcefully in the world: they are cheeky and cunning; they are movers and shakers (359–60). In describing an ecology of matter, Bennett emphasizes the close networks of human and nonhuman entities, activated and described by the "energetic forces" flowing through them.

Energetic forces, vibrant matter: these concepts have particular resonance for conservators who have long felt the contrariness of objects in their opacity under examination and their stubbornness in treatment. The intimacy of the conservation process is one of its salient features, and being in close contact with the substance of an object, wrestling with its physicality, is truly a humbling process of give and take. Here the material casts off its muteness and engages; thing-power and matter-energy are not constructs for reconfiguring the social but are concretely felt in a quotidian way.

M1 is an object whose matter (keratin chains, silica lattices) and materials (horsehair, glass beads, fuchsia dye) sang an epic tale of being and becoming. The basket pushed back, forcing me to draw its damage, to examine it microscopically, to track every clue, in order to uncover a treatment path. M1 took the lead: text and image in the file describe procedures done slowly and in reaction to the responses of the basket's

materials. Horsehair, samples of which are in the file and can be handled, was used to repair the sections that were broken or lost in the beaded horsehair band, even though using the same material would make conserved sections more difficult to locate in the future. The perfect aptness of this material—its thinness, strength and springiness—meant that nothing else would remotely work. I was struck by the marvelous fineness of the beads, about one-half the size of the oldest replacement beads at our disposal, and less than one quarter the size of today's seed beads. While they would have been exceptionally difficult to string with a needle and thread, they slipped with ease onto a length of horsehair, which was then arched and elegantly integrated into the weave of the band.

CONCLUSION

If conservation is really an act of articulation or a conservator's way of participating in the fit of the object in the world, then the file is the hinge that describes that relationship. Materials and materiality are resolved in a very real way within the file, establishing links between the substance of objects and their social and historical lives. Objects cannot undergo treatment otherwise. This breakdown of the standard binary opposition of the tangible and the intangible, through an unbroken chain of association from objects out into the world of ideas, is integral to a closer positioning of conservation with other fields of study.

The file itself is an essential tool, even a prerequisite, for conservation practice today. It is deeply rooted in the creation of a discipline and the gradual professionalization of conservation over the course of the last century. Especially in the museum setting, the file has highlighted the imperative to track and record interventions that change the nature of the object. The written documentation in the file, in both its form and language, connects with many widespread notions about the scientific nature of conservation, its deep focus on the material, and its concern with certain ethical principles and guidelines. However, a closer look reveals something much more complex than that. New materiality has tossed conservators into a constellation of novel ideas relating to their work. Partaking in an object's life, acting within networks, understanding the generative nature of conservation treatment, and extending out into the world from a material center are ideas that are rich for conservation practice. The complexities of the file, the assemblage of all those things, images and texts, echo the indeterminacy and messiness inherent in the conservation process, entangling it in increasingly interesting ways with the connective tissues of material culture debate.

AFTERWORD

I remember well how my colleagues responded to my object choice during our strategic planning meeting, because I saved the comment sheets that were passed around during the exercise. We were asked to think about the other participants' objects, and in addition to writing general observations, to produce ad copy, an exhibition label, and an obituary for them. Interestingly, M1's obituary mourned the imminent loss of the material file (heretofore maintained in a digital afterlife), while the ad copy noted, in breathless tones, the possibility of acquiring an original manuscript document written by a conservator, notes in the margins included. Several colleagues referred to the importance of "understanding objects"; another spoke to "secrets . . . revealed through process." All this is very interesting to me, and has led to the long reflection that has brought about in this chapter. As a result, I have recently decided to add a new section to the museum's treatment documentation form, one that I hope will broaden its scope and relevance. I have decided that the heading of this new section will be "Conservator's Comments."

NOTES

1. I lead a team of five people in the Conservation Department of the McCord Museum, a museum of social history, located in Montreal, Canada. The McCord's collections comprise about 1,500,000 objects in six collections: Indigenous Cultures; Dress, Fashion and Textiles; Photography; Textual Archives; Paintings, Prints and Drawings; and Material Culture.
2. For an investigation of the material turn across the humanities, see Peter N. Miller, editor, *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, U of Michigan P, 2013, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/25312.

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