

Becoming-Artwork: Rethinking Agency and Performativity Through the Conservation History  
of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642)

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**ABSTRACT**

Becoming-Artwork: Rethinking Agency and Performativity Through the Conservation History of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642).

María Castañeda-Delgado

This thesis stems from the mainstream notion that art conservation is a practice that stabilizes objects with well-defined properties, and it argues that idea is complexified when conservation practices are studied attentively. By considering concepts from new materialism – specifically becoming, agency and performativity – this analysis looks closely at the long conservation history of Rembrandt van Rijn's canonical painting *The Night Watch* (1642), to center on the ontological tensions between states of change and permanency in which the painting *comes to be*. With a focus on process and materiality, this thesis begins with a historiographical exploration of the object in conservation theories, ranging from a positivist understanding of the work of art as a single object with defined physical properties, to a more constructivist definition, where the art object is understood as a multiplicity of forces. The text proceeds to introduce *The Night Watch* as an entity that transits between temporal ontologies of change and permanency, thus destabilizing its identity as a single artwork, positing it, rather, as an entity in transition, a *becoming-object*. Framing Rembrandt's painting as process poses the question of who and what agents co-produce this process. Agency is demonstrated to be distributed amongst the artist, the materials of the painting itself, the conservators, and the technologies used in preservation practices: all forces that interact and mobilize one another in the process of materialization of *The Night Watch*. Accounting for the boundaries of *The Night Watch* not as fixed, but as being *materialized*, forces us to account for the practices – repetitions of doings – that perform those boundaries in the first place. The research and conservation project of the painting, Operation Night Watch, currently ongoing at the Rijksmuseum, displays all these agencies at play at the museum's gallery. Understanding artworks as process ultimately has consequences not only for how an artwork is perceived, as fixed and eternal, but also for conservation ethics.

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## INTRODUCTION

On one of the live social-media updates on Operation Night Watch posted by the Rijksmuseum, junior scientist Victor Gonzalez holds a fragment of Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn's 1642 painting: *The Night Watch* (fig 1).<sup>1</sup> The conservation team took microscopic samples with a scalpel to study the painting's materials, embedded each sample in resin to allow them to be manipulated, and finally polished the samples until the cross-section of the paint sample was exposed to be studied. The scientist points out that the painting's materials are dynamic, as they have "evolved in time,"<sup>2</sup> and that understanding this process of change is key to preserving the painting for the future. As *The Night Watch*'s limits expand beyond its frame to micro-samples of its material components, Operation Night Watch reveals a very particular relationship between notions of preservation, generally associated with stability, and notions of dynamism or change, demonstrating their dependence on each other. Change comes forward as an iterative material process when conservation practices, including scientific research, are analyzed closely, challenging ideas of stasis entrenched in art preservation.

In July 2019, the Rijksmuseum inaugurated Operation Night Watch in Amsterdam as the most ambitious conservation project of *The Night Watch* to date in a long history of at least twenty-five documented restorations. The project, currently ongoing, started with a material research phase that will last at least a year. After a series of instrumental analyses ranging from macro X-ray fluorescence scanning to the study of the micro samples of Rembrandt's painting with a particle

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<sup>1</sup> Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669), *The Officers and civic guards of District II of Amsterdam under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 363 x 438 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-C-5.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Gonzalez (@operation.nightwatch), "Operation Night Watch: live-update 3 December," Instagram video, December 6, 2019, 2:57-3:02. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5uo6SPIDCN/>



accelerator (Synchrotron), an interdisciplinary team of specialists will devise a restoration strategy and will carry out the treatments on site in the public eye.



**Figure 1.** Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Officers and civic guards of District II of Amsterdam under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*, known as *The Night Watch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 363 x 438 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.

One of the catalysts for embarking on this research and conservation project is that the dog at the bottom of the painting has turned whitish over the years, for unknown reasons (fig 2).<sup>3</sup> Describing studies done on the area of the dog in one of the live updates of Operation Night Watch, Katrien Keune, head of the Science Department, uses language that evokes the tension between change and permanence that is at the core of this thesis. Keune comments:

<sup>3</sup> Taco Dibbits, “Announcement Restoration of the Night Watch at the Rijksmuseum,” Rijksmuseum, October 15, 2018, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/nightwatch>

I think we can get very close to discover how the dog looked like, however, we can't bring it back to that original state. We have to accept that things age just like ourselves. But through research, we can try to understand what Rembrandt meant, how it originally used to look and how we can bring that dog back to life.<sup>4</sup>

This quote illustrates how the painting sits uncomfortably between contentious states of fixity and transformation. We can see a clear acknowledgment of the impossibility of “going back” in time given that materials have aged, an assertion that situates the painting in a progressive state of change, its materials in a process of aging. Yet, by referring to the restoration treatment as bringing the dog “back to life,” the researcher implies that the dog in the painting is already “dead” to us, as a result of having lost its original pictorial qualities. The painting, it seems, is both dead and alive, as multiple temporalities coexist: one where the painting is part of a larger trajectory and the other one where it has reached a particular end or is no longer fulfilling its function. However, it would seem that this end-point, or state of deadness, is not fixed either, for this dog has the potential to come “back to life” through a restoration treatment, even if that treatment cannot return the painting exactly to its “original state”.



**Figure 2.** Detail of white haze around the area of the dog. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Officers and civic guards of District II of Amsterdam under the command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch*, known as *The Night Watch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 363 x 438 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.

<sup>4</sup> Katrien Keune, “Live updates of Operation Night Watch: 8 October,” Rijksmuseum, October 8, 2019, 6:24-6:37. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/live-updates-of-operation-night-watch>

While in practice art conservation focuses on observing and mitigating material change, in much of conservation discourse, there seems to be an assumption that a fixed state should be achieved by conservation activities. Luitsen Kuiper, conservator in charge of the restoration of *The Night Watch* in 1975-6, defined conservation in his book *Restoration of Paintings* as follows:

Conservation is everything dealing with the condition of the work of art, controlling the room where it is placed and in time noticing any change in its state. Interfering in the material of the work of art means restoration. The art of restoration is searching for and finding means to stop any changes in the condition of the work of art; to prevent a possible change to repeat itself and as much as possible to restore the original condition.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of fixity, very much related to authenticity, has already been questioned in the fields of indigenous and contemporary art conservation. Researchers working with indigenous methodologies have challenged western conservation practices and have developed new preservation protocols that recognize objects as alive.<sup>6</sup> Decolonizing conservation has become a priority particularly for institutions holding “ethnographic” collections. Material change has also been at the center of the discussion in the field of contemporary art conservation.<sup>7</sup> The dematerialization of the work of art in contemporary practices has led conservators to face new challenges when it comes to preserving ephemeral works, art installations, and time-based media, just to name a few. In recent decades, there has been a shift towards understanding the profession’s intent as “managing change”<sup>8</sup> instead of preventing it completely. When it comes to traditional media like paintings, however, an ideal of permanence remains firmly in place. This tension was the catalyst for me to embark on this research process. How, I wondered, is the changing object

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<sup>5</sup> Luitsen Kuiper, *Restoration of Paintings* (Unieboek, Bussum. 1973), 7.

<sup>6</sup> See Miriam Clavir and John Moses, “Caring for sacred and culturally sensitive objects,” Canadian Conservation Institute, 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/caring-sacred-culturally-sensitive-objects.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Hélia Marçal, “Contemporary Art Conservation,” Research, Tate, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-conservation>

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Staniforth, “Conservation: Principles, Practices and Ethics,” *The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping: The Care of Collections in Historic Houses Open to the Public* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006), 35.

acknowledged in conservation narratives that centre around traditional western media such as painting? How does a focus on process calls into question the ontological boundaries of a painting and its perception as a stable, perhaps even 'timeless' entity?

In considering these questions, I have been guided by the foundational premise that conservation is an activity that stabilizes objects. This happens at two levels: one material and one philosophical. At the material level conservation stabilizes the object by a direct intervention on the object's physical properties, for example by reinforcing its material structure, like adding a new linen support to back a damaged canvas. Material stabilization also takes place in a more indirect way, like storing an object in a controlled environment, i.e. preventive conservation. Indeed, on a philosophical level conservation has articulated much of its practice upon the notion that objects are well-defined entities that can be stabilized and preserved materially throughout the years. This does not mean that conservation objects are not understood as physically changing, but rather that the object itself is conceptualized as ontologically stable. As Hannah Hölling observes, while conservators acknowledge change as an integral part of objects, they implicitly reinforce ideas of a state of stability and permanence.<sup>9</sup> One example would be the recent decision to reconstruct Notre Dame in Paris after the destructive fire in 2019. Notre Dame will be reconstructed as if the fire hasn't happened, materially placing the building's existence in a continuum between the moment prior to the fire and the present. This continuity is what is achieved by conservation practices. Materials can sometimes change if they are altered, but the ontological essence of what the object is, its identity, is perpetuated.

The conservation endeavor of *The Night Watch* today is being carried out in public, in a glass house installed in the gallery, so visitors can follow the process live. The large history of the

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<sup>9</sup> Hanna Hölling, "The Aesthetics of Change: On the Relative Durations of the Impermanent," in *Authenticity in Transition*, eds. Erma Hermens and Frances Robertson (London: Archetype Publications, 2016), 22.

well-documented painting's restorations clearly illustrates the multiplicity of agents that have had an impact on the materialization of *The Night Watch* over the years. Furthermore, the current conservation project, centered as it is around process, presents a perfect opportunity to study what is revealed when we focus on how *The Night Watch* comes to be.

As a theoretical framework, I draw from new materialism, particularly its posthumanist streams as developed by Karen Barad<sup>10</sup> and Rosi Braidotti.<sup>11</sup> Both authors build on feminist scholarship to study the material and discursive entities/bodies from which objects and subjects emerge through a process of iterative becoming. For Barad, matter and discourse are inseparable forces. I propose that Barad's framework can be used to study art conservation practices and the ways in which the object of study emerges from the practice. I will draw from Braidotti's insights on the concept of *becoming*<sup>12</sup> to propose that artworks are not fixed and pre-defined objects but, rather, that they exist as beings-in-process.

Using the idea of becoming to frame *The Night Watch* as an artwork-in-process, enables us to account for the unstable relationship between stability and continuity that it encompasses, and asks us to rethink its material history as a space of possibilities where different agencies enact change. Braidotti proposes that subjects are originated and constituted in the material, and that they are products of a process of negotiations of material and discursive forces, as opposed to the poststructuralist emphasis on language as the only force that determines the subject.<sup>13</sup> From a conservation perspective, allegiance to this re-thinking of the subject implies that the object also needs to be reformulated. From this perspective, "matter becomes" instead of "matter is," and

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden: Polity Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> As will be further discussed in Section 2, "becoming" is a term developed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to describe the process of how things come to be. This process is iterative and open-ended.

<sup>13</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 23.

objects emerge within these relationships “of organic and social processes.”<sup>14</sup> Understanding the conservation process as part of the becoming of an artwork challenges the discourses of fixity and stability that underpin most western conservation practices, and renders objects as dynamic and active in a generative flux. An orientation to *becoming* questions what things might turn into instead of defining them as what they are. It also accounts for the relational materialization of entities and how events and practices in the past have formed them.

I structure my investigation into four main sections. The first section of this thesis is historiographical in nature. In it, I delve into how the conservation object has been defined in conservation theory, from a positivist understanding of its physical properties that render the object static, to a constructivist approach to the object, which has, in turn, produced a conceptualization of the conservation object as a multiplicity of “intangible” forces, including the social, aesthetic, and historical forces, but at the cost of de-materializing the object itself. I will propose that new materialism is a useful framework to study artworks because it brings back the material, while still keeping the insights of constructivism, thus enabling a more complete understanding of the nature of works of art.

The second section demonstrates that *The Night Watch* is a process by showing the ambivalent ontological temporalities that the painting inhabits as an object that transits between change and permanency. Studying the restoration history of *The Night Watch*, it is clear that the painting as an entity is not inherently stable but that is *stabilized*. The new materialist concept of *becoming* is used here to describe this process where change sits at the center of the painting’s resilience. This has consequences for the way the identity of the artwork is understood, not as a single object, but as a process performed by a multiplicity of agencies.

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<sup>14</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introduction,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

The third section explores how accounting for *The Night Watch* as process entails an engagement with new materialist ideas about agency and performativity. Here, agency is distributed between the different agents that co-produce the painting: the artist, the materials of the painting, the conservators, and the technology used in preservation. This forces us to reckon with a painting that is not confined to its physical properties, but that expands well beyond its boundaries. Arguably, the curators and the audience are also important agents that co-produce the becoming of the artwork, however, the focus on conservation practices from a new materialist framework brings forward how the boundaries of *The Night Watch* are performed in the first place during the material encounter that takes place in a conservation-restoration project.

The fourth, and last, section of the thesis expands into the notion of performativity and how the boundaries of *The Night Watch* are materialized through the repetition of doings. In this section, I give a personal account of my observation of Operation Night Watch at the Rijksmuseum where the multiplicity of agencies that co-produce the painting become evident. With this focus on practice, this section demonstrates that the current musealization of the conservation practices around *The Night Watch* has transformed the painting into a work-in-process instead of a fixed and well-defined artwork. Furthermore, performativity also poses questions about the discourses embedded in the material configurations of the space.

Studying the conservation history of Rembrandt van Rijn's canonical painting *The Night Watch* (1642) through particular concepts from new materialism – such as becoming, performativity and agency – challenges foundational conventions in western conservation that consider objects as stable entities with well-defined physical properties, and allows us to account for the complex, even contradictory, ontological realities that conservation practices bring to light. Examining *The Night Watch* as a "becoming-artwork," positions matter as active and productive

instead of passive, asking us to consider processes of *materializing* as much as states of *matter*. This expands conventional ideas of artistic agency. This thesis demonstrates that artworks do not merely "exist". Rather, they are entities that emerge from an entanglement of change and continuity within a set of material possibilities. This new materialist framework, focused on process and attentive to materiality, enables us to study the different agencies that take part in the iterative unfolding of a work of art, impacting current approaches to ethics in conservation.

### **The boundaries of the single and stable object in conservation theory**

Mainstream conservation and restoration definitions today imply a philosophical understanding of the object as tangible, single, and stable. The Committee for Conservation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CC) defines conservation as “the measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage,” while restoration is defined as “all actions directly applied to a single and stable item aimed at facilitating its appreciation, understanding and use.”<sup>15</sup>

These definitions are rooted in the nineteenth century when conservation was consolidated as a professional field for stabilizing, collecting and classifying the museum object. The professionalization of the discipline was closely imbricated with the establishment of national museums, as narratives of cultural heritage reinforced discourses of the foundations of nation-states in Europe.<sup>16</sup> According to Canadian conservator and theorist Miriam Clavir, conservation emerged from an artisanal tradition of restoration and became the dominant paradigm in the care of objects within museums.<sup>17</sup> Conservation drew from scientific methods and marshaled objective

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<sup>15</sup> “Terminology to characterize the conservation of tangible cultural heritage,” About, International Council of Museums- Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC), accessed June 6, 2020, <http://www.icom-cc.org/242/about/terminology-for-conservation/#.Xqi0JpNKjOR>

<sup>16</sup> See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4; and Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 21-2.

<sup>17</sup> This division between “conservation” and “restoration” is blurry in practice as there are still a lot of practitioners that call themselves restorers rather than conservators and the terms vary depending on location and language,



factual knowledge to investigate the nature of objects, making the preservation of their physical integrity a priority.

The belief that objects have fixed quantifiable properties can be clearly illustrated by looking closely at the historical quest for making conservation an objective practice. This was an effort that started in the field of architectural conservation and aimed at moving away from the practice of “creative reconstructions”. The restorations of buildings that took place in the nineteenth century were subjected to strong criticism because they were considered to be creative interpretations based on style rather than based upon a methodical analysis of the building’s actual state, which led to the first regulations of restoration practices and to the first theoretical debates around what constituted “restoration” and “conservation.”<sup>18</sup> The debate was epitomised by the oppositional views of John Ruskin, who advocated for the value of the ruin and therefore conservation of the actual state, and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, whose restoration of Notre Dame illustrates his inclination for reconstruction to an “ideal” state of the building. These views were the basis of a theoretical production that defined conservation and restoration practices in a modern sense and that positioned these activities as an independent field of study.

This attitude is well illustrated in Camillo Boito’s late nineteenth-century defence of a so-called “scientific restoration” – one was that separated from artisans, and that would not innovate

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nevertheless the division manifested in the English language reflects a change of attitude towards the artisanship nature of the practice to give place to the professionalization of the discipline. Throughout the thesis, I will refer to conservation when I refer to de field at large and restoration as an activity included in conservation, however, when discussing bibliographic sources, I will use the original term used by the authors. When referring to specific practitioners I will respect whether their work title is/was conservator or restorer.

Miriam Clavir, "The Social and Historic Construction of Professional Values in Conservation," *Studies in Conservation* 43, no. 1 (1988): 1.

<sup>18</sup> Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, “The Emergence of Modern Conservation Theory,” eds. Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, *Readings in conservation: Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles: The Conservation Institute, 1996), 203.

but would rather respect the “integrity” of the building.<sup>19</sup> For Boito, monuments had to be respected as “documents” of the past and thus any modification would be considered a falsification. What is implicit in this notion is that the conservation object is framed as an object that contains some form of truth intertwined with the object’s physical integrity. Boito was responsible for drafting the first policies of protection of heritage in Italy, an achievement that resonates strongly with the tendency, even today, of conservation’s theoretical production to be bound to ethical codes.

Notably, what Boito referred to as “scientific conservation” drew largely on methodologies from history and archeology; the actual inclusion of what could be referred to as “hard sciences” in conservation practices took place somewhat later, beginning in the museum context. By 1930, the International Museum Office held an International Conference for the Study of Scientific Methods Applied to the Examination and Preservation of Works of Art in Rome where it was settled that science was the best tool to solve conservation problems.<sup>20</sup> At this meeting, art historians, scientists, and restorers working with painting collections voiced their concern for having a specialized international meeting on scientific methods applied specifically to paintings, which took place in Paris a decade later.<sup>21</sup> Museums adopted the scientific method to study the objects they housed and consolidated a positivist epistemology that accounted for objects as fully defined by their physical properties.

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<sup>19</sup> Camillo Boito presented his theory condensed in seven principles at the 3<sup>o</sup> *Congresso degli Ingegneri e Architetti Italiani*, celebrated in Rome in 1883. Camillo Boito, “Documentos Europeos: de Camilo Boito a la Carta de Atenas,” in *Documentos Internacionales de Conservación y Restauración*, eds. Lourdes Gómez Consuegra and Angélica Peregrina (1883; Mexico City: INAH, 2009), 47.

<sup>20</sup> Marco Cardinali, “Technical Art History and the First Conference on the Scientific Analysis of Works of Art (Rome, 1930),” *History of Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2017): 221-43.

<sup>21</sup> International Museums Office, *Manual on the Conservation of Paintings* (International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation: Paris, 1940).

Conservators working with museum objects moved away from the previous association with craftsmanship and towards an objective praxis that could reveal the truth contained in objects. This positivist way of understanding knowledge and truth is rooted in a Cartesian division of the self and the world, human and nature, where objects are rendered as passive entities with qualities that can be measured and represented by active subjects. What is important to highlight is that under this paradigm, science was understood as representational, a mirror of nature, rather than an intervention with the world around us.<sup>22</sup>

In 1947, the National Gallery of London organized an exhibition called “Cleaned Paintings” that displayed over 70 paintings restored between 1936 and 1945. The conservation team had completely removed the yellowed varnishes from the paintings, arguing that this was the way artists had intended them to be seen.<sup>23</sup> The exhibition caused a long controversy, catalysing discussions around the ethics of cleaning paintings. Art historian Ernst Gombrich considered that conservators that defended total cleanings had ignored aesthetic considerations and overcleaned the paintings for the sake of scientifically removing all the varnish from their surfaces.<sup>24</sup>

While the Rijksmuseum did not have a science department yet, its approach to painting restoration allowed the Dutch institution to participate of these international circles. Painting restorer Henricus Hubertus Mertens and curator Arthur van Schendel restored *The Night Watch* at the same time as the National Gallery controversy. In their detailed article about the restoration of the painting, they explain their effort to leave a layer of the yellowed varnish on the surface of the

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<sup>22</sup> Barad, *Meeting*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Editorial, “The National Gallery Cleaning Controversy,” *The Burlington Magazine* 104, no. 707 (February 1962): 49.

<sup>24</sup> The controversy continued for almost two decades, see: Ernst Gombrich, “Controversial Methods and Methods of Controversy,” *The Burlington Magazine* 105, no. 720 (March 1963): 90-3. For a discussion around patina and “total cleanings” of Italian paintings see: Cesare Brandi, “The Cleaning of Pictures in Relation to Patina, Varnish, and Glazes,” *The Burlington Magazine* 91, no. 556 (July 1949): 183-8.

painting,<sup>25</sup> balancing scientific practice with cultural, aesthetic, and historical sensitivity. Van Schendel gave several international conferences about the restoration<sup>26</sup> and became secretary of ICOM's Commission for the Care of Paintings, founded in 1948 as a response to the National Gallery Controversy.<sup>27</sup> The restoration of *The Night Watch* was well received; Mertens became *the* specialist on Rembrandt and the Rijksmuseum was established as an authority in painting conservation.

The National Gallery controversy had shown the limitations of relying upon science when it comes to cleaning paintings and paved the way for new paradigms that championed conservation objects as artifacts of aesthetic, social, and historic dimensions. This led to the seminal works by Cesare Brandi and by Paul Philippot.<sup>28</sup> In 1964, and for the first time in conservation theory, Brandi defined the artwork as relational. Drawing from phenomenology, he proposed that artworks are not only matter and image but are experiences too. Therefore, experience needs to be taken into consideration when making conservation decisions. Brandi was particularly concerned with how context, space, and atmosphere produce the work of art. The artwork, he argued, is not contained in its material boundaries or physical properties; rather it is its capacity of producing an aesthetic experience that differentiates an artwork from other types of objects. This rendered the conservation object as a relational entity understood as emerging jointly from its material dimension, the space where it is placed, and the perception of the beholder. Brandi positioned restoration as a “critical and scientific consciousness of the moment in which the restorative

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur van Schendel and Henricus Hubertus Mertens, "De restauraties van Rembrandt's Nachtwacht," *Oud Holland* 62, no. 1/2 (1947): 1-52.

<sup>26</sup> Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Archive van Schendel, Folder on the *Night Watch*.

<sup>27</sup> Esther van Duijn, "Changing views, altering practices – A brief overview of nearly to hundred years of painting conservation at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam," *ICOM-CC 18th Triennial Conference* (2017): 4.

<sup>28</sup> Melucco Vaccaro, "Modern Conservation Theory," 204-205.

intervention is produced.”<sup>29</sup> He thus situated the temporality of the conservation object in the present.

Influenced by Brandi’s writings, art historian and conservation expert Philippot argued in 1966 that history is materialized in the physical properties of the object.<sup>30</sup> For him, the object is not contained within its “authentic” materials, as the conservators at the National Gallery had thought; rather, the object is constituted by its own historicity. The Belgian scholar thus defined the figure of the conservator as a “restorer-interpreter”<sup>31</sup> situated hermeneutically in front of the artwork’s present and past. For Philippot, the quest to retrieve the authentic from a material perspective is impossible due to the materials’ physical and chemical transformations in time.<sup>32</sup> The author asks for respect for the object’s history, which, for him, is traced in the patina of the artwork and its modifications. In this way, mid-century theories began to challenge the positivist understanding of an artwork as an object defined by and confined within its physical properties, shifting to a vision of the artwork as a less stable and more multifaceted entity, which existed as a nexus of forces that included social, aesthetic and historical functions embedded in the material.

By the end of the twentieth century, advanced conservation theory bordered on dematerialising the object altogether by championing the "intangible" qualities of artworks as the focus of conservation. Conservator Salvador Muñoz Viñas proposed that the essential characteristic of the conservation object is its significance, that is to say, its ability to communicate meaning. This is what he refers to as the “communicative turn” in conservation:

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<sup>29</sup> Cesare Brandi, *Teoría de la Restauración* (1964; Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2002), 56.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Philippot, “El concepto de pátina y la limpieza de pinturas,” *PH: Boletín del Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico* 4, no. 15 (1966; 1996): 92-4.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Philippot, “L’œuvre d’art, le temps et la restauration,” *Conversaciones... Con Paul Philippot* 1 (1995; July 2015): 10.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Philippot, “El concepto de pátina,” 92-4.

Communication is not a physical or chemical phenomenon, nor it is an intrinsic feature of the object; rather, it depends on the subject's ability to derive a message from the object. In contemporary conservation theory, the primary interest is therefore no longer on the objects, but rather on the subjects. Objectivism in conservation is thus replaced by certain forms of subjectivism [...]<sup>33</sup>

For Muñoz Viñas the goal of conservation is to re-establish the ability of an object to communicate its symbolic meaning. Yet even if Muñoz Viñas argues against the truth-seeking premise of classical conservation, the author still draws from a Cartesian understanding of the separation of subjects and objects. In fact, the object-subject dichotomy is for the first time explicitly mentioned in conservation theory and it is made in an effort by the author to expand the scope of conservation as a practice that deals with meanings and values beyond the material properties of objects. This definition of the conservation object positions the object as a vessel wherein meanings are deposited by subjects, rendering meanings as dynamic and objects as passive entities. Muñoz Viñas' ideas echo constructivist understandings that, in their emphasis on language, have overlooked the material dimension of the objects. Under this definition, meanings are separate entities from matter,<sup>34</sup> something quite far from what Brandi and Philippot defended.

What has been most influential in Muñoz Viñas' work is his embrace of subjectivism over objectivism, a move that recognizes the multiple values that constitute the conservation object as such. Yet the limitation of this way of understanding the conservation object is that it does not account for the ways in which matter itself persists as one of the forces that fundamentally contribute to the multiple and always-emergent understanding of the work of art. Instead, using

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<sup>33</sup> Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (2003; Oxford: Elsevier, 2005), 147.

<sup>34</sup> The separation of matter from meaning is entrenched in the binary notions of "tangible" and "intangible" property present in international heritage institutions, and that remain firmly in place in several methodological and theoretical books. See: Barbara Appelbaum, *Conservation Treatment Methodology* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009); Chris Caple, *Conservation Skills: Judgement, Method and Decision* (London: Routledge, 2000).

relics and religious objects as his examples, Muñoz Viñas refers dismissively to the "material fetishism" of epistemological frameworks that account for matter as being alive.<sup>35</sup>

Recently, conservators have begun to reckon with how their own discourses and practices are among the multiple values that construct the artwork. Annlinn Kruger has studied conservation rhetoric as instrumental for the dominant narratives in history, challenging the neutrality of conservation as well as its inextricable relation to language: "Transformations, of objects and subjects, employ rhetorical devices – in how things are spoken of and how things are arrayed. Rhetorical acts make things happen; they are transformative."<sup>36</sup> For Kruger, conservation deals with cultural constructs rather than material things. For example, consider a polychromed sculpture that is missing a limb. In a church, where it functions as a devotional object, the sculpture would probably be treated to a full restitution of the missing part, while the same sculpture in a museum context might be preserved incomplete in order to emphasize its historical nature. The fact that the sculpture belongs to one context or the other, is what defines the conservation approach. These ways of categorizing "things" into church or museum objects are what constitutes conservation practice as a cultural construct, governed by language and use.

Contemporary art conservation theory, in particular, is pushing our understanding of the artwork to reckon again with the importance of its materiality. However, the approach to materiality is not focused on the physical properties of the artwork, as was the case in the twentieth-century, but rather emphasizes the material object's active role within a larger network of relationships. Scholar Vivian van Saaze considers that the conservation object is not only constructed through language and symbols, but it is produced through practices, accounting for an

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<sup>35</sup> Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Annlinn Kruger, "Fixing History: The Public Sphere and the Transfiguration of Conservation," in *The public face of conservation*, ed. Emily Williams (Williamsburg: Archetype publications, 2013), 30.

active process of production of the object. In an in-depth study of contemporary art installations conservation, van Saaze argues that “things are not things in and of themselves, but are constructed in practices.”<sup>37</sup> Drawing from Bruno Latour’s flat ontology in his actor-network-theory, van Saaze defends the idea that artworks are collective and that they are only one actant in a larger network of relationships between humans and nonhumans. This might include, for example, the archives that allow for the reinstallation of the work, as well as the conservators, curators, and museum staff, but it also includes the material parts that constitute the artwork. Furthermore, “conservation is a productive activity.”<sup>38</sup> Van Saaze defines conservation as a practice that actively constructs its object of study. This is a deep change to past notions of the fixity of the object, as van Saaze accounts for the object as an actor too.

With a similar sensibility, conservator Sanneke Stigter proposes a model that studies an artwork's behaviour, calling for a shift from object-based research towards process-based research in the conservation field. For Stigter, artworks are ontologically dynamic, they behave as contained, installed, or performed, but it is the conservators’ and stakeholders’ interpretation of the work in a particular time that shift that behavior.<sup>39</sup> In the frameworks offered by both van Saaze and Stigter the material components of an artwork are interchangeable to a certain extent, mainly because contemporary art practices have dematerialized the art object and it is necessarily not dependent of material continuity.

While these approaches have had an important impact on the conservation of contemporary art, they have had little effect on conservators who work with more historical media, such as

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<sup>37</sup> Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 27.

<sup>38</sup> Van Saaze, *Installation*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Sanneke Stigter, “A behaviour index for complex artworks: A conceptual tool for contemporary art conservation,” *ICOM-CC 18<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference Preprints* (ICOM-CC: Copenhagen, 2017): 1-7.



paintings, precisely because those practices must reckon with the persistent physical properties of a work of art. It seems that a new model is required for painting conservation: one that can account – as van Saaze and Stigter do – for the agency of the artwork and its status as a multiplicity of entanglements between the cultural and the material, but that also engages directly with the physical properties of materials.

Concepts drawn from new materialist philosophy can help us build that framework. New materialism recognizes the network of agencies and cultural and material entanglements. Scholars in political theory, Diane Coole and Samantha Frost use the term “new materialisms” to define a shared interest amongst several scholars on how matter comes to be. Constructivism, as a framework that understands the world as socially construed, is thus replaced with a realist perspective: “society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed: our material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural.”<sup>40</sup> This shift decenters the human as a liberal subject, to place it among a series of nonhuman agents, where “material bodies, spaces, and conditions contribute to the formation of subjectivity.”<sup>41</sup> This way, new materialism allows us to center matter without losing sight of the practices and discourses that shape and establish its boundaries.

If we bring a new materialist understanding to the study of a painting it forces us to reconsider our very idea of what an artwork is in its temporal and spatial dimensions. In the next section, I will engage the temporal aspect of this dynamic, considering how change and permanency coexist in the ontological reality of the conservation object. I will use the new materialist concept of becoming to shift our understanding of artworks away from static objects

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<sup>40</sup> Coole and Frost, “Introduction,” 27.

<sup>41</sup> Kameron Sanzo, “New Materialism(s),” *Critical Posthumanism*, April 25, 2018, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/>

towards an ontology of process, before moving on, in the subsequent section to consider the actors in that process and how they destabilize the spatial boundaries of the painting itself. I will use *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt van Rijn as my case study.

### **Becoming-artwork: *The Night Watch* as an entity in transition**

To focus on process means to describe how *The Night Watch* comes to be. The new materialist concept of *becoming* is useful to study how Rembrandt's painting does not simply exist as a physical entity, but rather emerges from states of change and stability, allowing for a study of these two contradictory temporal ontologies – i.e. permanence and change – as dependent on each other and not simply as opposites. Becoming also brings to light that the process of material unfolding of the painting itself is co-produced materially and discursively by several agencies. This new understanding ultimately impacts our perception of a painting's identity as an object with well-defined boundaries.

Close attention to conservation discourse around *The Night Watch* exposes an ambivalent tension of paradigms of change and permanence that sit uncomfortably together, raising questions about the object's temporal ontology. In a 2016 *Burlington Magazine* article by researchers Esther van Duijn and Jan Piet Filedt Kok, entitled “The Art of Conservation III: The Restorations of Rembrandt's Night Watch,” the authors offer their extensive research on the different events that have shaped *The Night Watch* since its creation in 1642. Rich with detail about the trimmings, re-linings, re-stretchings, cleanings, and re-housings that the painting has undergone, the text contextualizes the material history of the restorations of the painting. In this study, an interesting tension between ideas of change and permanency is apparent. Consider the following quote:

It is to be hoped that modern techniques and materials can eventually slow down the cleaning cycles that the *Night Watch*, and other paintings, go through during their lifetime, and that the renewed splendour, described after each treatment, will become permanent.<sup>42</sup>

On the one hand, it is acknowledged that the painting has a “lifetime,” which resonates with the cultural biography methodology used extensively in material culture studies and which implies dynamism and change. But on the other hand, there is hope for permanence. So, how do change and permanence, two seemingly opposite states, coexist within a work of art, and what are the philosophical ramifications of that coexistence for theories of conservation?

The evocation of permanence here is heavily indebted to the norms of painting-conservation in particular, which demonstrates a tendency to see paintings as stable. Historically, change has most often been defined as a disruption of continuity.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in conservation theories, stability has been defined in opposition to the ephemeral, which in turn has had an impact on the way museum objects are categorized and perceived. Paintings are perceived as stable whereas other forms of contemporary art, like installations, are categorized as ephemeral. Yet these categories are artificial, for as sociologist Fernando Dominguez Rubio has pointed out, paintings are not inherently stable objects; rather, conservation has emerged as an apparatus to tame them and museums have engineered the infrastructure to stabilize them.<sup>44</sup> This is mainly because within the museum institutional structure “material stability is regarded as necessary to preserve the identity between material form and artist’s intention.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Esther van Duijn and Jan Piet Filedt Kok. “The Art of Conservation III: The Restorations of Rembrandt’s ‘Night Watch.’” *The Burlington Magazine* 158, no. 1355 (February 2016): 128.

<sup>43</sup> Barad refers particularly to the notion of change in Newtonian physics. See: Barad, *Meeting*, 233.

<sup>44</sup> Fernando Dominguez Rubio, “Preserving the unpreservable: docile and unruly objects at MoMA,” *Theory and Society* 43 (2014): 617-45.

<sup>45</sup> Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the unpreservable,” 624.

As the quotation from the *Burlington Magazine* also implicitly recognizes, paintings are not inherently stable, but they are rather stabilized through practices and this process is quite cyclical. This has been particularly so in the case of *The Night Watch*, as the Rijksmuseum has developed its institutional apparatus around the painting. By 1920 the Rijksmuseum hired full-time restorers and created a conservation department dedicated to studying how to stabilize and preserve the paintings collection.<sup>46</sup> As the table of contents of the 1940 *Manual on the Conservation of Paintings* by the International Museums Office<sup>47</sup> clearly illustrates, museums at large in Europe started to adopt conservation protocols turning their galleries and storage rooms into sanitized spaces with controlled heating and air conditioning to promote stable environmental conditions and arrest the decay of paintings. The Rijksmuseum caught up with Europe's largest museums installing climate control systems by the 1950s.<sup>48</sup>

Paradoxically, however, it is *change* that has allowed *The Night Watch* to survive as a stable and persistent entity, maintaining the perception of Rembrandt's masterpiece as eternal. In the case of *The Night Watch*, it is precisely the trimmings, re-linings, and cleanings, that have allowed the painting to adapt to new social uses. The painting's first dwelling-place in 1642, was the great hall of the Kloveniersdoelen in Amsterdam, and like many paintings of its time, it had a decorative function. In 1715, *The Night Watch* was placed in the Kleine Krijgsraadkamer in the city's town hall, and to adapt to its new location it was trimmed from all four sides, losing an important part of the original composition (fig 3).<sup>49</sup> Until the nineteenth century paintings were

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<sup>46</sup> Van Duijn, "Changing views Rijksmuseum," 4.

<sup>47</sup> International Museums Office, *Manual Paintings*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> I thank Esther van Duijn for drawing my attention to this fact.

<sup>49</sup> Van Duijn and Filedt Kok, "Art of Conservation," 117.

not stand-alone objects, but were generally considered to be utilitarian and part of the architecture and furniture, therefore trimming a painting to adapt to space was not an uncommon practice.<sup>50</sup>

Between 1813 and 1885, Rembrandt's painting hung at the same level of the spectator in the Trippenhuus with lighting from the left side.<sup>51</sup> Eventually, as the Rijksmuseum was consolidated as the Netherlands' national museum,<sup>52</sup>

*The Night Watch* was rehoused again,

and transformed from interior decoration to national treasure. Since the museum site itself was both spatially and discursively articulated around *The Night Watch*, the dominant museal discourse of "timeless masterpieces" further entrenched the work's aura of permanence (fig 4).

Yet change remained integral to *The Night Watch's* public presence; indeed, the museum would adapt its very infrastructure to properly exhibit the obscured oil painting. By 1900 many



**Figure 3** In this copy of *The Night Watch* attributed to Gerrit Lundens is possible to get an idea of the missing areas particularly evident on the left and the top of the canvas after the trimming of Rembrandt's painting. Gerrit Lundens, *Copy of The Night Watch*, c. 1642 - 1655, oil on panel, 66.5 x 85.5 cm, National Gallery, London, currently in loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.

<sup>50</sup> Noémie Étienne, *The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750-1815: Practice, Discourse, Materiality*, trans. by Sharon Grevet (The Getty Conservation Institute: Los Angeles, 2012), 128.

<sup>51</sup> Jeroen Boomgaard, "'Hangt mij op een sterk licht' Rembrandts licht en de plaatsing van de Nachtwacht in het Rijksmuseum," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 35 (1984): 329, 349.

<sup>52</sup> The National Museum (National Kunstgalerij) was first founded in 1800 in The Hague. Napoleon moved the collections in 1808 to Amsterdam, and *The Night Watch* became part of the collection as a loan from the city of Amsterdam. In 1813 the museum changed its name to the Rijks Museum and relocated to the Trippenhuus. The current building started construction in 1876 and was officially inaugurated in 1885. "History of the Rijksmuseum," Rijksmuseum, last accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum>

complaints were lodged, particularly by artists who claimed that the skylight illumination at the gallery was not appropriate for *The Night Watch*. In 1901 a series of experiments took place after the controversy, which included moving the painting into a temporary building, specially adapted for the purpose of trying different lighting environments and deciding which arrangement would improve the “effect”<sup>53</sup> of the painting. Eventually, *The Night Watch* was moved into a new room built behind the gallery with side windows that would illuminate the painting tangentially, resembling the layout at the Trippenhuis, which was regarded as the most ideal lighting condition.<sup>54</sup> These experiments illustrate that *The Night Watch*'s dynamism is not only manifested through its material alterations but that it is physically in motion, modifying the architecture around it.

One of the biggest changes *The Night Watch* underwent in the twentieth century was the removal of its yellowed and dark varnish after World War II. The painting owes in part its popular name to the thick varnish it had by the end of the eighteenth century;<sup>55</sup> the famous gallery-toned



**Figure 4.** The canopy was installed at the Rembrandt Gallery because the public complained that it was hard to see the obscured painting under the skylight. Anonymous, *Rembrandtzaal gezien vanuit het noordoosten*, c. 1886-1886, photographic paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RMA-SSA-F-00041-1. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.

<sup>53</sup> Boomgaard, “‘Hangt mij op een sterk licht’ Rembrandts,” 349.

<sup>54</sup> According to conservator Esther van Duijn, it is possible that the issues regarding the legibility of the painting were only partly attributed to the light when the thick varnish could have been the underlying issue. Esther van Duijn personal communication with author, March 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Van Schendel and Mertens, “De restauraties Nachtwacht,” 10.



varnish in vogue during the Romantic era was so dark that people thought that the militia group portrait was a night scene. During World War II the painting was removed from its stretcher, rolled, and transported to several bomb-free shelters to protect it from the Nazi invasion (fig 5). After the war, the painting had to be remounted onto a stretcher to be hung again in the gallery. Henricus Hubertus Mertens, restorer at the Rijksmuseum was in charge of the restoration. He, along with Arthur Van Schendel, curator of the museum, decided to reline the painting and remove the thick varnish in 1945-7 (fig 6). The varnish removal was so visually dramatic that *The Night Watch* was described in the press as “The Day Watch.”<sup>56</sup>



**Figure 5.** Evacuation of *The Night Watch* to a bomb-proof shelter. Anonymous, *Mannen transporteren opgerold doek uit schuilkelder*, c. 1939-1941, gelatin silver print, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RMA-SSA-F-05307-1. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.



**Figure 6.** 1945-7 Restoration of *The Night Watch*. Image Source: Nationaal Archief. Rijksmuseum Twitter account (@Rijksmuseum), August 20, 2019. [<https://twitter.com/rijksmuseum/status/1163810450196197376>]

<sup>56</sup> *The Night Watch* had been described as “The Day Watch” in the past, particularly after the varnish regenerations between 1889 and 1936. Van Duijn and Filedt Kok, “Art of Conservation,” 123.

As this example makes clear, conservation has been one of the major agents of the painting's change, even while actively working to produce the illusion of stability. Because of the aforementioned dark varnish of *The Night Watch* in the nineteenth century, it was difficult to appreciate Rembrandt's composition, as the multiple layers of brown varnish impeded the view. Between 1889 and 1936, restorers made multiple efforts to regenerate the varnish,<sup>57</sup> a treatment that consisted of exposing the painting to ethanol vapors that would partially solubilize the varnish and make it translucent. Arthur van Schendel wrote in 1950 that by the end of the nineteenth century the layers of varnish were regenerated, and a new layer of copaiba and mastic coating would be added "every five or six years"<sup>58</sup> to maintain its visibility to the audience, promoting a sense of continuity. Borrowing Dominguez Rubio's terminology, we might observe that *The Night Watch* has transitioned from an *unruly* to a *docile*<sup>59</sup> object over the centuries, as it has gone from being in a cycle of re-varnishings and regenerations every few years to more sparse interventions as conservation and restoration treatments have developed to tame the painting.

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<sup>57</sup> Van Duijn and Filedt Kok, "Art of Conservation," 121-122.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur van Schendel, "Some Comments on the Cleaning of the Night Watch," *Museum* 3 (1950): 220.

<sup>59</sup> *Docile objects* are those that comply with their "object-position" and therefore are "easy" to collect and preserve within the museum structure. *Unruly objects* are those that are not easy to classify, and that their preservation challenges the institutional structure in place as well as the relationship between curators and conservators. Dominguez Rubio, "Preserving the unpreservable," 624-5.



While conservation promotes stability and stasis, conservators sometimes emphasize change, managing the expectations and perceptions of change during a conservation treatment. We can see this reflected in the different instances where the varnish of the painting was removed and in the ways these processes were presented to the public. Mertens and van Schendel went to great lengths to document and publish the contrasting varnish removal of *The Night Watch* through color reproductions that were not common in the 1940s,<sup>60</sup> to emphasize the striking change of the



**Figure 7.** Varnish removal in 1945-7. Image Source: Arthur van Schendel and Henricus Hubertus Mertens, "De restauraties van Rembrandt's Nachtwacht," *Oud Holland* 62, no. 1/2 (1947): Plate 1.

painting as a positive outcome of the intervention (fig 7). Broadly speaking, the function of a varnish is to protect the painting from external factors, however, it also plays an important role in the aesthetic qualities of an oil painting because it saturates the colors improving the contrast. In 1975-6 *The Night Watch* was restored again, this time behind glass in public display. In the detailed article about the intervention, conservators report that:

The scene on the painting was difficult to see without varnish, so, for the benefit of the public who were allowed to look into the studio at certain times, a temporary varnish was applied, which was eventually removed again with rectified turpentine.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Colour photography was not widely available in the 1940s. The photographic plates in colour that van Schendel and Mertens published were taken with screen-plates, an expensive and intricate process. Esther van Duijn personal communication with author, March 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Luitsen Kuiper and W. Hesterman. "Restauratieverslag van Rembrandts Nachtwacht/ Report on the Restoration of Rembrandt's Night Watch." *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 24 (1976): 43.

The gesture of temporarily varnishing the painting for the audience, as much as it can be considered a minor treatment in a very large and intricate project, also renders evident how it was important to manage the public's perception of the changing *Night Watch*. During the restoration process some treatments like removing yellowed varnish, past infills, or retouchings can alter the appearance of the painting very drastically. This raises the question of whether the temporary varnish was a way to ease the audience into a new state of the painting, and while it is hard to know the exact reasons why the painting was varnished, the fact that it was coated illustrates the ways in which conservation performs the painting's stable state, controlling how change would be perceived.

This ambivalence between states of change and stability is also present in the relationship between ephemeral, or temporary, and permanent materials that coexist in the same artifact. While conservation narratives privilege discourses of permanence, in practice conservators fully engage with the temporary nature of their interventions. While discussing the 1945-7 restoration, the curator in charge of supervising the project, Arthur van Schendel, described all previous treatments as only "temporary remedies"<sup>62</sup> thus championing the 1945 varnish removal as a more "permanent solution" to the obscured surface. Yet, this claim contrasts with the restorer's choice of materials. That restorer, Mertens, used mastic resin to varnish *The Night Watch* in 1945 precisely because he knew that it would become powdery over time and so would be easy to remove in the future by rubbing or fretting. As Mertens' consideration for future conservation treatments demonstrates, the properties of conservation materials influence their application, and some are meant to be ephemeral, as sacrifice materials.

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<sup>62</sup> At this point, regenerations were becoming more frequent and less effective. Van Schendel, "Some Comments," 220.

This brief survey of the conservation history of *The Night Watch* demonstrates the extent to which conservation practices themselves show us that change and stability are not opposite temporal ontological states of an artwork, but that they coexist and are dependent on each other. This in turn illustrates the need for a new kind of conceptual framework that describes artworks as a heterogenous process. One framework to study artworks has been that of object biography, a notion borrowed from the field of anthropology and used widely in conservation.<sup>63</sup> Object biographies study works of art as they circulate, are consumed, and modified over time, but they are limited when it comes to explaining the simultaneity of ontological temporalities, as well as to studying how the artwork is constituted by different agents including the artwork itself.

The new materialist notion of *becoming* is a well-suited model to describe the heterogeneous temporal dimension of artworks, for it focuses on how objects emerge from the entanglement of change and continuity. *Becoming* is rooted in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy and it is a verb, an active tense, that counteracts the concept of "evolving" by allowing for an understanding of entities that *are* not singularities but rather dualities or even multiplicities.<sup>64</sup> This vein of poststructuralist thought allowed for a new perspective on things viewed not as well defined identities, but as multiple and in constant motion, leading to a re-thinking of the subject as something that persists precisely by enduring "sustainable changes and transformation."<sup>65</sup> Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti has built on Deleuze and Guattari's ideas

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<sup>63</sup> The object biography methodology was first developed in: Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91. For its application in the field of conservation see: Renée van de Vall, Hanna Hölling, Tatja Scholte and Sanneke Stigter, "Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation," *ICOM-CC: 16<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference*, (September 2011): 19-23.

<sup>64</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1980; Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 238.

<sup>65</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 62.

to emphasize how these changes take place within discursive constructions of power while also being embedded in the material world.<sup>66</sup>

Karen Barad has also applied the Deleuzian concept of becoming to embrace the ontological contradictions that coexist in being, and to describe the ongoing, open-ended, ever emergent, relationships that are formed in each particular time and space of existence. This relationality allows us to understand materiality as a dynamic phenomenon, rather than a fixed substance, that is stabilized and destabilized by enactments.<sup>67</sup> For the philosopher, becoming describes the heterogenous unfolding of the universe in which *we*, as humans, “are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity.”<sup>68</sup>

Returning all this to conservation theory, I propose that the term *becoming-object* is useful to describe the double nature of objects as both stable and in-transition, not only because they can be in motion in a literal sense, but also because entities like *The Night Watch* can so readily transit between states of change and stability. The notion of *becoming* allows for a focus on the study of these transitions, on how such limits are materialized, as well as on how objects emerge from the entanglements of change and continuity that produce them. While traditional conservation narratives depend, implicitly, on a linear understanding of time,<sup>69</sup> the framework of becoming disrupts this linearity by positing a temporal folding that allows for both, change and stability, to coexist in the present.<sup>70</sup> Objects embody their past while simultaneously they are agents that

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<sup>66</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 28, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Barad, *Meeting*, 210.

<sup>68</sup> Intra-action is a term coined by Karen Barad that refers to the mutual constitution of agents in the becoming of the world. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 828.

<sup>69</sup> Hanna Hölling, “Time and Conservation,” *ICCOM-CC 18<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference Preprints* (2017): 1-7.

<sup>70</sup> Chris McLean and Gillian Evans, “Becoming object: Introduction,” in *Objects and Materials*, ed. Penny Harvey, Eleanor Conlin Casella, Gillian Evans, Hannah Knowx, Christine McLean, Elizabeth B. Silva, Nicholas Thoburn and Kath Woodward (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 327.

influence our present and future. By so clearly demonstrating the interactions between change and permanence, the conservation history of *The Night Watch* enables us to understand how conservation's own ontological model – in which artworks are posited as stable and preexistent entities – is belied by the reality of conservation practice itself. To adopt the conceptual model of becoming would enable conservation *theory* to align itself more fully with the realities that conservation *practices* make visible. When we study closely the cycles of varnish regeneration, re-varnishings, and varnish removal that *The Night Watch* underwent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it becomes clear that the painting's becoming is an iterative process of materialization, an unfolding, in which the identity of *The Night Watch* is never fully formed but it is constantly being reconfigured. Moreover, the use of ephemeral or short-term materials in the restoration of the painting shows that the painting not only embodies its past – as an object biography methodology would let us see – but it actually embodies de material possibilities for what it can be for the future.

That said, accounting for *The Night Watch* in an iterative process of becoming in which different temporalities co-exist, has significant consequences. To consider *The Night Watch* as becoming rather than being destabilizes our sense of the work's identity and renders evident the multiplicity of agencies that produce its boundaries. In the next section, I will delve into the impact of the notion of becoming on our understanding of *The Night Watch* as a spatially well-defined entity with clear boundaries, and explore how these boundaries, too, are partially produced by conservation practices and the technology involved in those practices.

### **Distributed agency and the boundaries of *The Night Watch***

If a work of art is a *becoming-object*, who and what are the agents that produce and perform its unfolding? The co-existence of change and permanency that characterises a work's becoming

foregrounds these questions about agency and performativity; together, these notions affect our understanding of the very definition of a work of art, and thus our understanding of the functions and impacts of conservation.

One understanding of a work of art is that it is the materialization of an artistic idea: the imposition of an idea or concept onto matter. The essence of the work lies in its conceptual content – the artist's intent – thus the artist is regarded as the main agent in the production of the artwork. *The Night Watch* helps us to see the problems in this way of understanding what an artwork is. In the context of Rembrandt's scholarship, the concept of becoming has already been used with reference to the genesis of his paintings. Art historian Ernst van de Wetering notes:

Time and again I feel myself drawn into Rembrandt's spaces, where figures and objects – but I myself as well – get a specific weight and balance. And in a way that is certainly difficult to prove, this is in part due to my conviction that this space is not “made” but has “become”<sup>71</sup>

Van de Wetering not only describes Rembrandt's embodied practice as a master painter but also alludes to the material engagement that the artist had with his paintings and the influence the medium itself had in the process. Rembrandt did not paint *The Night Watch* from an independent drawing but he sketched directly over the ground layer and solved most aspects of the composition as the painting process unfolded.<sup>72</sup> Rembrandt as a master of his craft developed his knowledge by working *with* the material, collapsing the notions of “idea” and “matter” as separate,<sup>73</sup> and rethinking artistic making as a process of mutual influence. The notion of becoming is well-

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<sup>71</sup> Ernst van de Wetering, "Rembrandt: The Painter at Work," edited by David Bomford and Mark Leonard, *Issues in the Conservation of Paintings* (1997; Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2005), 219.

<sup>72</sup> As far as we know Rembrandt painted *The Night Watch* alone, however this was not the norm since he typically worked in his studio with apprentices. Gary Schwartz, *The Night Watch* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum dossiers, 2002), 32.

<sup>73</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 30.

adapted to express this more processual view and highlights the difficulty of separating the painter's intellectual process from the actual making forcing us to rethink agency.

Within new materialist thought, the term 'distributed agency' is key to apply this rethinking. Rather than attributing agency solely to the artist as the bestower of concept upon matter and form at the moment of manufacture, we need to consider the ways in which agency is distributed across actors and over the course of *The Night Watch*'s existence. From a new materialist framework, agency is not only aligned to human intentionality, i.e., the liberal subject, but it is “an enactment of *change*”<sup>74</sup> within a space of possibilities where material configurations take place. Studying the conservation of *The Night Watch* enables us to see how the painting is the co-production of several human and non-human agents that continue to *enact* change. These agents include but are not limited to: 1) the artist, as just described, 2) the materials that constitute the painting, 3) the conservators that engage with it, and 4) the technologies used in conservation to quantify and delimit what the object is as well as to carry out treatments.

One of the consequences of studying *The Night Watch* as process is that matter is acknowledged as transformative; the **materials** that constitute the painting are productive agents of *The Night Watch*'s own becoming. Increasing research about the physical and chemical alterations of pictorial materials points out that artworks are changing constantly, and that oil paintings are complex systems of materials interacting. Oil reticulates with oxygen, forms soaps with the metals in pigments, pigments oxidize one another, some layers become transparent, while varnishes yellows. *The Night Watch* is continuously changing on a micro-chemical level by virtue of the interactions between its constituents and the environment. This is readily evident in the craquelure patterns of *The Night Watch* that show the loss of flexibility of the pictorial layer, which

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<sup>74</sup> Barad, *Meeting*, 178.

has contracted due to its natural polymerization (fig 8). These internal changes are also manifested in the white haze that surround the area of the dog in the painting (fig 2). The chemical cause for this effect remains unknown and it is one of the main research questions that drive the project Operation Night Watch.<sup>75</sup>



**Figure 8.** Craquelure detail of the spear. Screenshot from ultra high-resolution image. Image Source: Operation Night Watch, Rijksmuseum, Accessed June 11, 2020. [[http://hyper-resolution.org/view.html?pointer=0.428.0.006&i=Rijksmuseum/SK-C-5/SK-C-5\\_VIS\\_20-um\\_2019-12-21](http://hyper-resolution.org/view.html?pointer=0.428.0.006&i=Rijksmuseum/SK-C-5/SK-C-5_VIS_20-um_2019-12-21)]

The **conservators** who have engaged with the painting are also agents that have shaped *The Night Watch* on a material level. This is clearly illustrated when we think about Mertens decision to leave a layer of varnish as patina when removing the yellowed coating in 1945-7 as discussed in the last section. Mertens was physically altering the boundaries of the work – reducing its thickness from what it had been, but also adding to what it originally was with a new varnish layer and retouchings. Conservators and the materiality of the work do not exist in isolation, however, but also interact as agents of co-production.

<sup>75</sup> “Sample Examination,” Operation Night Watch, Rijksmuseum, last accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/sample-examination>



We can get a more detailed description of the type of material interaction between conservator and painting when we study another major intervention on *The Night Watch* in the twentieth century. On September 14, 1975, a man stabbed *The Night Watch* twelve times at the Gallery of Honour of the Rijksmuseum (fig 9).<sup>76</sup> The head of the



**Figure 9.** *The Night Watch* after stabbing in 1975. Image Source: Rijksmuseum Archive, RMA-SSA-F-06510.

paintings' restoration department at the time, Luitsen Kuiper, documented the damage and was in charge of directing the project. The gallery was rapidly closed, and the painting went into intensive care on-site. Because some of the cuts went through the original canvas and the 1945-7 relining, the priority of the restoration treatment was to reline the painting to reattach the segmented canvas.

Restoration treatments are hardly linear; they are driven by a series of material interactions between the conservators and the painting. In an archival document entitled the “Script for the re-lining of the Night Watch–Sep. ‘75”<sup>77</sup> (fig. 10) the restoration team clearly established the steps to re-line the painting. Several handmade annotations break the sequential format of the typed list of steps, showing changes in date as arrows change the order of processes, while other notes document changes of materials and methods. For example, the typed description of the removal of the old cloth indicates that the linen should be loosened and removed, and that if the edges of the

<sup>76</sup> This is not the only time *The Night Watch* has been attacked, on January 13, 1911, a marine cook attacked the painting with a knife damaging only the thick varnish. Then again on April 6, 1990, a man sprayed acid at it. Thanks to the guard's reaction to spray the painting with water, only the varnish was damaged, thus the painting was partially treated in that area at the time. Van Duijn and Filedt Kok, “Art of Conservation,” 125.

<sup>77</sup> Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Archive, *Night Watch* conservation files, “Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept. '75,” September 1975, f. 1-2.

canvas are not wide enough, all edges should be left with an overlap of approximately 10 cm. A handwritten note adds that “depending on the adhesion, if bad, 20-25 cm”<sup>78</sup> and a second note in a different ink, probably added later, reads “reduced to 15 cm.”<sup>79</sup> The documentation of these micro-decisions during the restoration process shows that as much as there was an initial plan for the treatment, it was ultimately oriented and defined by the state of Rembrandt’s painting itself, the resistance of the two canvases and their aforementioned adhesion, as well as the restorers’ own experience in past cases and intuition.

The embodied knowledge of the restorers(s) who wrote the “Script for the re-lining of the Night Wat–Sept. ’75” comes across in the way some notes describe how to physically do certain treatments, like the stitching of the canvas. Step number 35 in the script states that the stitching of the cuts of the canvas ought to be made with linen thread and an adhesive, either Araldit or glue. Later it reads that the team should investigate whether some of the cuts would need to be pre-ironed before the stitching, and here it is established that restorers should apply “As little strength as possible; do not force anything.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Original in Dutch: “\*afhankelijk van hechting, indien slecht 20-25 cm,” Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Archive, *Night Watch* conservation files, “Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept. ’75,” September 1975, f. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Original in Dutch: “teruggebracht tot 15 cm”, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Archive, *Night Watch* conservation files, “Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept. ’75,” September 1975, f. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Original in Dutch: “Zo min mogelijk kracht; niets forceren.” Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Archive, *Night Watch* conservation files, “Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept. ’75,” September 1975, f. 2.

telefoon 732121  
postgiro 425180

R I J K S M U S E U M

afdeling:

AMSTERDAM.

uw ref.:  
onze ref.:  
uw brief:

Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept.'75 -

29 Sept. C+u.Z. 1. achterzijde spieraam uitsteeksels verwijderen.  
S+H. 2. sneden en scheuren a.d. achterzijde met krijt  
\* aangeven. *overploeg schilderij vasthouden, via voorkant, liggend*  
S+H 3. eventueel losse verfpartijen a.d. voorzijde  
vastzetten met celluloselijm en japans papier.  
4. mogelijke beplakking verticale barst i.h.midden.  
ladder - werkploeg  
~~W.P.5.~~ 5. schilderij verwijderen uit lijst.  
Spec. W.P.6. schilderij door ruimte achter nachtwacht naar  
de werkruimte vervoeren (werkploeg).  
K.S.H. 7. schilderij plat neerleggen, met verf naar boven,  
ter inspectie van verflaag en randen etc.  
verdere voorzieningen treffen. \* *letten op pastasiteit*  
15 *is vermelding op alle plaatsen die genoeg i.v.m. hechting met lijm*  
8. schilderij wegzetten.  
C+u.Z. 9. flanel en melinex op vlonder spannen.  
*afgevoerd met stofdekk.*

30 Sept. 10. Coen en van Zanten lijst bekijken en omwikkelen.  
11. schilderij omdraaien, verf naar onder en op  
vlonder neerleggen (werkploeg).

30 sept. 12. schilderij losmaken van spieraam.  
13. spieraam a.d. kant zetten en de voorkant schoonmaken.  
14. beginnen met losmaken doubleerlinnen  
*verbaal \**  
*Proef doen hechten met Goutron, zodat een snee ontstaat*  
*'s van doubleerlinnen. proef met Afaldit.*

1,2,3,6 Oct. 15. doubleerlinnen losmaken en verwijderen (mesjes,  
strijkbouten); indien omslagranden niet breed  
genoeg zijn alleen de randen laten zitten met een  
overlappend van  $\pm 10$  cm. \* *afhankelijk van hechting, indien*  
*steekt 20-25 cm. heringeweerd tot 15 cm.*  
LETTEN OP: weersverandering i.h.doek  
event. ruimte i.h.doek  
op schets deze plaatsen tekenen  
deze aangeven met krijt o.d.  
achterzijde  
mesneden a.d. achterzijde pas leggen en fixeren.  
*niet gedaan - niet mogelijk.*  
\* *nu verband met sterke uitzetting van Terp.*

doc.foto's

correspondentie betreffende het Rijksmuseum te richten  
tot de hoofddirectie met vermelding van de afdeling

Figure 10. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Archive, *Night Watch* conservation files, "Draaiboek m.b.t.de doublering van de Nachtwacht -Sept. '75," September 1975, f. 1.

It is only in that material encounter between experience and material that the decision on how to use a particular material or do a particular treatment can be made, and this takes place in a very practical and physical way (fig 11). In the detailed restoration report published by Kuiper and Hesterman, for example, it is possible to see how the material agency shapes what the treatment becomes. After conservators re-lined the painting and removed the varnish, they made several tests with different formulations of varnishes. After making these tests, Kuiper observed

that the paint layer was more absorbent in some areas than in others, so they had to adapt the formulation of the varnish to achieve a homogenous layer of coating.<sup>81</sup>

The last agent of *The Night Watch's* co-production to become visible through examination of the painting's conservation history is **technology**. Consider the story of the painting's relinings. In 1851, *The Night Watch* was relined for the first time using the wax-resin method, also known as the Dutch method.<sup>82</sup> This technique required the impregnation of the painting with a mixture of beeswax and resin, which also could include turpentine and copaiba balsam. The wax-resin mixture functioned as an adhesive for a new canvas support that backed the original cloth, providing structural support from the verso and consolidating the pictorial layer. *The Night Watch* was relined again with this method in 1945-7, and then in 1975-6. Subsequent research on the wax-resin method has shown that the impregnation of the painting may produce important changes in colour,<sup>83</sup> while the combination of heat and pressure produced by the hot irons used in the treatment may flatten the texture of the painting (fig 12). Moreover, paintings lined with this method become more susceptible to changes in humidity, provoking bulging of the canvas.<sup>84</sup> This method is no longer common practice in paintings conservation, however, it is an important part of the material becoming of *The Night Watch*, as the tools and materials used in the relining

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<sup>81</sup> Kuiper and Hesterman, "Report Night Watch," 43.

<sup>82</sup> Van Duijn and Filedt Kok, "Art of Conservation," 120.

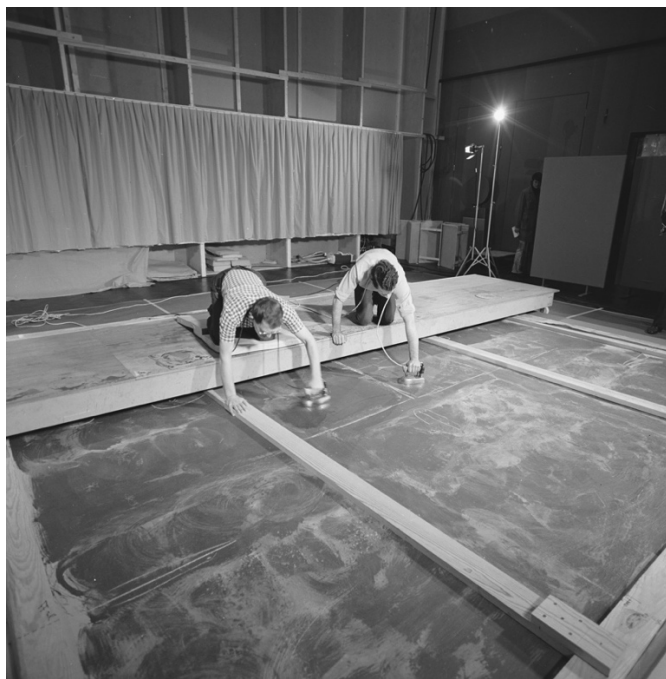
<sup>83</sup> I thank Esther van Duijn for pointing out to me that the present conservation and research team working on *The Night Watch* has found that this change of colour only took place in areas where the ground layer was bare or the paint layer was very thin. Latest research has shown that the changes on colour are largely determined by the properties of the ground of the painting, for example its porosity and thus its capacity to absorb the wax-resin mixture. See: Emilie M. Froment, "The Consequences of Wax-Resin Linings for the Present Appearance and Conservation of Seventeenth Century Netherlandish Paintings on Canvas," abstract, (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2019), <https://aihr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2019/01/phd-defense-froment.html>

<sup>84</sup> Cecil Krarup Andersen, "Mechanical properties and structural response to fluctuating relative humidity, exemplified by the collection of Danish Golden Age paintings at the Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK)," abstract, (PhD diss., Centre for Art Technological Studies and Conservation, 2013). <https://adk.elsevierpure.com/en/publications/dublerede-1%C3%A6rredsmalerier-mekaniske-egenskaber-og-strukturel-resp>

treatments have profoundly changed the materiality of the painting,<sup>85</sup> impacting its composition, attributes, and behaviour in reaction to the environment.



**Figure 11.** Luitsen Kuiper stitching *The Night Watch*'s canvas in the 1975-6 restoration. Image Source: Rijksmuseum Archive, RMA-SSA-F-06494.



**Figure 12.** Conservation team ironing the new wax-resin lining in the 1975-6 restoration. Image Source: Rijksmuseum Archive, HA-0020429.

In other instances, the agency exerted by technology is less direct, but no less influential. This is apparent in the application of analytical technologies to Rembrandt's paintings and the effect these have had on the way *The Night Watch*'s material identity is constituted. Conventionally, paintings are perceived as well-delimited artifacts that have clear attributes: a canvas mounted on a stretcher, and maybe a frame. However, the intelligibility of the attributes that determine the identity of the painting is not inherent to the object itself, but is established through practices that determine these properties.<sup>86</sup> Technical art history has developed as a field

<sup>85</sup> Colophony resin from this method was identified in the ground layer of samples of *The Night Watch*. E. Van de Wetering, C.M. Groen and J. A. Mosk, "Beknopt verslag van de resultaten van het technisch onderzoek van Rembrandts Nachtwacht/ Summary Report on the Results of the Technical Examination of Rembrandt's Night Watch," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 1/2 (1976): 87.

<sup>86</sup> Barad, *Meeting*, 208.

to study through analytical techniques the fibers, pigments, binders, and varnishes that constitute what a painting is. The attack on *The Night Watch* in 1975 offered an opportunity to put such new technologies to use. In the wake of the attack Ernst van de Wetering, Karin Groen, and Jaap Mosk of the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science, carried out detailed material studies on the canvas. The research team took micro samples from the fragments that resulted from the attack and used them to study the layers of the painting in a cross-section under optical microscopes. The researchers reported on the technical examination of the layers of varnish as follows:

The dark layers above the yellowish-brown layer with transparent red particles are the layers of varnish. There are three of them: the two lower layers are the thickest and are separated only by a series of dust particles, the top layer (of 1947) is thinner and easier to distinguish as a separate layer.<sup>87</sup>

We can see that materials were dissected and classified according to temporal categories. It is hard not to wonder how this separation of the painting's materials into strata, influenced the decisions made during the restoration, since the original was for the first time easily discernible from the subsequent layers that look like sediments over Rembrandt's pictorial layer. Kuiper ultimately decided to remove all the varnish layers, including the coating that Mertens had considered to be integral to the painting three decades earlier.

Another instance where technology played an important role in impacting the material constitution of the painting was the interpretation of radiographs of *The Night Watch*. In 1975-6, Kuiper revisited the X-rays from the 1945-47 restoration and noticed that that the direction of the weave of an insert of cloth in an old hole was not parallel to the original canvas.<sup>88</sup> Based on this

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<sup>87</sup> Van de Wetering, Groen and Mosk, "Report Technical Examination Night Watch," 83.

<sup>88</sup> Inserts of canvas today, are usually always placed parallel to the direction of the original weave because otherwise they would have different mechanical movements provoking damage on the pictorial layers. Research made on this insert, which is still preserved at the Rijksmuseum, showed that the fragment was added before 1900. So now the fragment is considered relevant enough to be part of the collection and it is in storage as a stand-alone object.

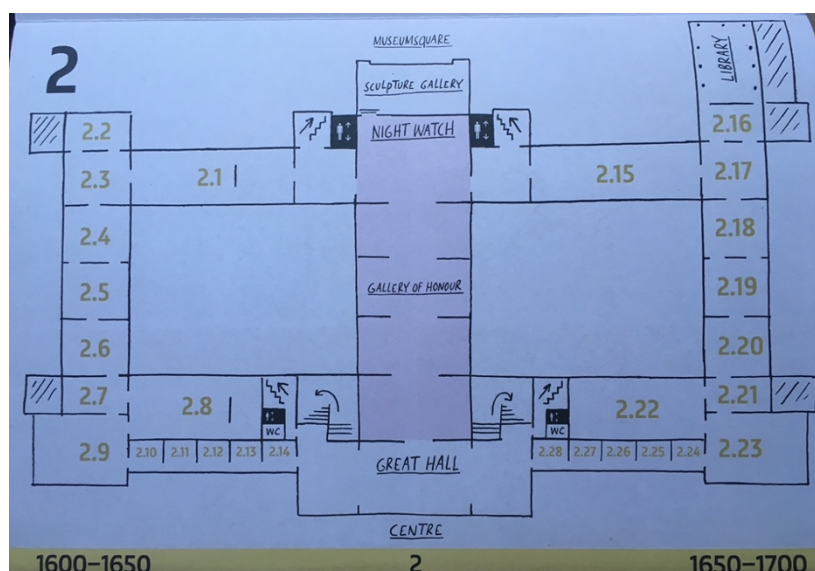


information, the restoration team decided to remove the old repair. Other inserts had lost adhesion, so they were replaced too. The inserts were substituted with new pieces of cloth according to 1970s methods. Therefore, technology is not only used to know the painting, but it actually constitutes its material identity by allowing conservators to delimit what to preserve and what to exclude from preserving.

As these examples have clearly demonstrated, no one agent alone is responsible for the production of *The Night Watch*. Materials, conservators and scientists, and technologies all affect each other forming sets of relationships, networks of interactions, which ultimately impact the becoming of the painting. Materials shape treatments; technologies shape treatments; treatments shape the work and the materials that constitute it. Studying restoration methods as technological devices allows us to describe the entanglement of agencies, tools and techniques, that together profoundly determine the materiality of the painting.

*The Night Watch*, moreover, is not simply the passive product of these intersecting agencies. After describing how multiple agencies shape the artwork's becoming, is important to

take a moment to describe still further the extent to which the artwork also influences the conservators and researchers involved with it. Meaning and matter are inseparable, therefore the painting's own symbolic value legitimizes the conservation practices that allow for



**Figure 13.** Floorplan of the Rijksmuseum 2<sup>nd</sup> floor dedicated to seventeenth century Dutch history. Photograph by María Castañeda-Delgado, March 2020.

conservation itself to take place. *The Night Watch* hangs today in the Gallery of Honour of the Rijksmuseum, between “The birth of the Dutch Republic (2.1)” and the “Naval Power (2.15)” galleries (fig 13), as a beacon of the Dutch splendor in the seventeenth century. In art history, Rembrandt has been regarded as one of the great masters, a notion entrenched in a romantic construction of his character as a genius that remains firmly in place today.<sup>89</sup> These semiotic attributes also shape the way conservation practices around them are perceived. The painting confers its prestige to the conservation team. This was quite clearly the case for restorer Mertens, who became an authority in painting restoration after treating *The Night Watch*.<sup>90</sup> There is also a discursive alignment between the most important painting of the museum and the importance of its conservation process. This is illustrated by *The Guardian* referring to Operation Night Watch as “the largest and most elaborate public art restoration in history.”<sup>91</sup> Even though, the conservation team of the Rijksmuseum has not made remarks of this nature directly, the reaction of the press towards the conservation process reflects the public perception of the project.

Studying the material-discursive agencies that co-produce the becoming of the artwork, also open up for questions around the influence of the institutional structure over conservation decisions. Painting restorers, like Mertens and Kuiper, would have to get their treatment decisions approved by the curator, and the curator would ultimately make many of the aesthetic decisions, like the level of cleaning.<sup>92</sup> While the role of the curator is beyond the scope of this thesis, a new

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<sup>89</sup> The exhibition *Rembrandt: Quest of a Genius* of the Museum Het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, and the Gemäldegalerie, took place at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, April 8- May 11, 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur van Schendel promoted Mertens image as a specialist, this is an attitude that is reflected in Arthur van Schendel, "Some Comments on the Cleaning of the Night Watch," *Museum 3* (1950): 221.

<sup>91</sup> Kate Connolly, “The Night Watch: Rembrandt painting to be restored under world’s gaze,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/16/the-night-watch-rembrandt-painting-to-be-restored-under-worlds-gaze>

<sup>92</sup> This is best illustrated by the relationship between Arthur van Schendel and Henricus H. Mertens. See: Esther van Duijn, “Head and Hands? – Arthur van Schendel & Henricus Mertens and their Role in the Development of the paintings restoration studio in the Rijksmuseum between 1930 and 1970,” (unpublished manuscript, March, 2020).



materialist perspective does not exclude the larger set of power dynamics that art objects also stabilize and perpetuate within the museum.<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, the notion of distributed agency has direct consequences on the way we understand the object itself as a contained and well-defined entity. In section 2 we studied how the tensions between permanency and change expand the *temporal* frame of the work. The notions of becoming and distributed agency, which account for *The Night Watch* as process destabilize the *spatial* understanding of the work too, expanding its boundaries. In the humanities, Phenomenology has already exploded the limit of the object by treating it as an experience rather than a thing, while constructivism has pushed the limits of the artwork into the symbolic values of the work. A new materialist approach, with a focus on the process of becoming, allows us to question how those boundaries are made in the first place by attending to the multiple and intersecting agents who produce them.

### **Approaching performativity: *The Night Watch* in practice**

The notion of distributed agency shifts our focus from a finished artwork towards the practices that materialize the work. When we define agency as an enactment, this means that the artwork is materialized through *doings*. Performativity is useful to study how practices – repetitions of doings – materialize the boundaries of the object. Here performativity is used in Judith Butler’s sense of the word, that enacted discourse “produces what it names”,<sup>94</sup> but Barad has further expanded on Butler’s definition, moving beyond the power of rhetoric in order to more fully encompass matter’s

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An important aspect of Operation Night Watch today is that the project is directed by the conservation department and not the curatorial.

<sup>93</sup> For a new materialist study of the conservator-curator dynamics at MoMA see: Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the unpreservable,” 617-45.

<sup>94</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

own transformative capacity and to emphasize the entanglement of material and discursive forces in the constitution of objects and subjects, humans and nonhumans.<sup>95</sup> With its radical openness to public view, Operation Night Watch offers the perfect opportunity to see the multiplicity of agencies that perform *The Night Watch*, co-producing it through enactments,

Today, a black steel and glass pavilion stands at the end of the gallery of Honour at the Rijksmuseum (fig 14). Three glass walls encase Rembrandt's canvas as it hangs without frame from a steel easel. The modern clean structure contrasts with the seventeenth-century painting in the neo-gothical gallery. A platform stands in front of the painting



**Figure 14.** Glass house of Operation Night Watch, 2019. Image Source: Rijksmuseum Twitter account (@Rijksmuseum), October 1, 2019 [<https://twitter.com/rijksmuseum/status/1179001557045714944>].

obfuscating the view. Two scenes are unfolding, one where Captain Frans Banninck Cocq leads the militia company and another one where two figures in black coats with a microscope examine the captain's collar, barely touching, encountering, this world. The reflection of the stained-glass windows from the other side of the gallery lingers over the glass wall. The glass house, which functions as a vitrine for the conservation activities, decenters the painting and foregrounds the research team working in the middle of the pavilion as a theatrical space. Visitors use their phones to take pictures, some even decide to touch the glass in search of support. While the transparency of the glass is an invitation to look inside, it also establishes a physical barrier between the audience and the process (fig 15).

<sup>95</sup> Barad, *Meeting*, 66.



**Figure 15.** Glass house. Photograph by María Castañeda-Delgado, March 2020.

On March 9, 2020, I arrived early in the morning at the gallery.<sup>96</sup> Two researchers were bent over a table looking at an apparatus inside a case. The table was close to the glass wall and they were both facing the public. The researchers made gestures as they tried to connect cables and instruments with no apparent success. For over twenty-minutes I watched the two of them trying to get what I later learned was a Reflectance Imaging Spectroscopy (RIS) scanner to work. Both researchers seemed to arrive at an inaudible consensus and left the glass house. Later in the afternoon, the scanner was already mounted on a mechanical platform, with two lamps, one on each side of the scanner facing the surface of *The Night Watch*. Now three researchers made small adjustments to the lighting, measured the distance between the lamps and then between the scanner and the painting. One would go back and forth to the monitors and move their head side to side in a negative gesture. Switches came off, light bulbs came loose and were replaced. Yet again the

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<sup>96</sup> Fieldwork by author at the Rijksmuseum in February and March 2020.

response the researchers were expecting to get in that monitor did not take place. An hour passed, and I heard the announcement that the museum was closing.

The day after, the scanner was fully working. In one of the monitors, there was an augmented image of the surface of the painting that the researchers were using as reference for the scanning, I was able to distinguish some brushstrokes, the cracks of the paint layers, and the reflective varnish (fig 16). The boundaries of *The Night Watch* expand beyond its surface into the monitor, as we can see details that would be impossible to see with the naked eye. However, this new set of boundaries is only materialized thanks to the imaging techniques, the display monitors, and all the tools and technology used in between (fig 17). For the audience to perceive these limits of the work, they have to be performed by the technology and the practitioners. It is only through practice that this material state of the artwork is produced.



**Figure 16.** Technologies and researchers working inside glass house. Photograph by María Castañeda-Delgado, March 2020.



**Figure 17.** Scanning of *The Night Watch*. Photograph by María Castañeda-Delgado, March 2020.

Thinking how the boundaries of *The Night Watch* are performed in practice by the interaction of several agencies, means to also account for the discourses embedded in the way conservation is musealized in Operation Night Watch. The Rijksmuseum is an institution that has actively promoted the transparency of research and conservation, from the thorough publication

by Mertens and van Schendel of *The Night Watch*'s restoration in 1945-47, to the openness of the Ateliegebouw building, which houses the museum's conservation department, the University of Amsterdam studios, and the laboratories of the RCE. This transparency, also illustrated by the institution's use of social media, plays a very important educational role within the museum and is successful when it comes to engaging the public with the collection. Museological practices have become increasingly more participatory, turning audience members into active agents in the meaning-making of exhibitions. In this sense the collection is very much alive. However, just as the state in which the work of art is exhibited is hardly neutral in the museum gallery, the space and the material configurations of the display perform the stabilization of the work of art, and the institutional structure legitimizes certain practices of knowing and stabilization.

The glass house is not passive in the musealization of conservation, but it also produces cultural value. Glass windows have been a motif in exhibitions that display conservation.<sup>97</sup> After the 1975-76 restoration, *The Night Watch* remained behind glass in the gallery for five years<sup>98</sup>, not only because the team wanted the painting to remain in a controlled environment until the varnish had



**Figure 18.** *The Night Watch* restoration of 1975-6 also took place in public. Anonym, *Nachtwacht achter een scheidingswand met vensters waar publiek doorheen kijkt*, 1976, photograph, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, HA-0012582. Image Source: Rijksmuseum.

fully dried, but also because the vitrine provided a sense of security after the traumatic attack. In

<sup>97</sup> Glass windows have been a motif in exhibitions that display conservation in action. The restoration of the *Night Watch* in 1975-6 took place behind glass but the painting was only available for the public to see when the curtains were open, and the restoration team was not working. Arguably, the first restoration project where the conservators' activities were fully in public display was Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (1665-7) in 1994 at the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

<sup>98</sup> I thank Esther van Duijn for drawing my attention to this fact.

that case, the vitrine functioned as shelter to *The Night Watch* (fig 18). Today the glass pavilion that allows for a complete view of the actions unraveling inside with no obstacles also opens up a discussion about the musealization of conservation.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has defined the process of introducing an artifact to the museum context as musealization.<sup>99</sup> When conservation is musealized, meaning when it becomes the object of exhibition, on the one hand, it is rendered as meaningful, which is important to the profession at large, and on the other, it legitimizes conservation within an institutional framework as more valid than other preservation paradigms that operate outside of this framework. Working conservators have expressed their concern about the increasing demand for opening to the public the backstage of museums and the challenges museum professionals face to balance outreach and education risking to beautify conservation treatments and spaces to cater to the museum's audience.<sup>100</sup> The glass encasing legitimizes what is inside as stable and valuable as it materializes the museum's authority over the production of meaning of the objects (and practices) it houses. While this subject is not directly discussed in this thesis, this reflection raises the question, is contemporary conservation being fixed as a perennial and unquestionable science/practice as solid as the glass that protects it? While there is no simple answer to this question, it has practical implications on the way conservation is instrumentalized to perpetuate dominant narratives.

Studying conservation practices from a new materialist perspective enables us to better understand how *The Night Watch* is not a timeless or unchanging masterpiece but an open-ended work-in-process. The analysis of the historical restorations of the painting proves that it is an entity

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<sup>99</sup> Peter van Mensch, "Museology, Museography," *XXXII Annual ICOFOM Symposium* (2009): 6.

<sup>100</sup> A Conference in November 2011 was dedicated to this topic: "Playing to the Galleries and Engaging in New Audiences: The Public Face of Conservation," See: Emily Williams ed., *The public face of conservation* (Williamsburg: Archetype publications, 2013).

in transition co-produced by multiple agencies that mobilize each other in different ways. This is visible in Operation Night Watch today, which has transformed the gallery of *The Night Watch* into an open conservation laboratory, transforming the painting from a finished product into a work-in-process where agencies, like the materials of *The Night Watch*, the researchers, curators, conservators, and the technology in tandem with the audience perform the artwork.

## CONCLUSIONS

Understanding *The Night Watch* as becoming is useful to the field of conservation because it accounts for the artwork as a process. This processual nature of the painting expands on previous notions of paintings being fixed and “eternal,” describing the temporal states of change and continuity as dependent on each other rather than opposites and mutually exclusive. Artworks can simultaneously be both stable and dynamic, and they can also transit between these temporal ontologies. *The Night Watch*’s conservation history shows how the painting is continuously changing, as transformations in use and meaning, as well as its twenty-six past restorations, have allowed the painting to persist throughout the years. Furthermore, developments in material science show that oil paintings on a physicochemical level form a matrix of interactions that continuously transform. This proves that paintings are not inherently stable, but they are stabilized.

As institutions that safeguard objects, museums rely on the fact that these objects can be collected and stabilized. In the case of *The Night Watch*, the Rijksmuseum had to develop appropriate infrastructure and a conservation apparatus to turn *The Night Watch* into a stable, manageable, object. Operation Night Watch today, as a project articulated around studying the material change of Rembrandt’s painting, is an opportunity to experience live how that stabilization apparatus operates. The project also makes visible the different agencies at play that co-produce the boundaries of *The Night Watch*.

Becoming also destabilizes agency, conventionally attributed solely to the liberal subject, to give place to a notion of agency as distributed among co-producers that together enact change within a particular set of material configurations. In order to account for *The Night Watch* as a becoming artwork, this thesis recognizes the artist, the constitutive materials of the artwork, the conservators and researchers, and finally the technologies used to examine and restore the work,



as agencies that materially and discursively perform the painting. This notion of agency allows for an understanding of artworks as process, collapsing the separation of matter and meaning.

In this regard, the agency of the conservator, in particular, needs to be problematized further, as conservation is heavily oriented by an ethical imperative that is articulated around a liberal understanding of the subject, which reinforces the idea that conservators act *upon* objects, imposing their choice over the material. However, this approach to ethics excludes the larger set of relationships conservators are part of and fails to recognize the multiplicity of forces that impact their object of study. Increasingly, conservators are calling for a direct reckoning of the role of the discipline – and its practitioners – in legitimizing structures of power that have been instrumental to oppress peoples.<sup>101</sup> This would mean to confront the discipline's own history as well as to recognize the conservators' role as an active producer of matter and meaning. New materialism de-centers the liberal subject but does not remove accountability: "Accountability and responsibility must be thought of in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering."<sup>102</sup> As clearly illustrated by the conservation history of *The Night Watch*, the figure of the conservator cannot be described anymore as removed from the object itself, and the other agencies of production, but it is an active participant in the process of becoming.

As a conservator myself, philosophical streams that describe matter as transformative resonate with my personal experience working directly with objects. As I began writing this thesis my goal was to bring new materialism into conservation theory, however, as I continued my research it became clear to me that knowledge derived from conservation can also add to a larger

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<sup>101</sup> See Sanchita Balachandran, "Race, Diversity and Politics in Conservation: Our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis," *AIC's Annual Meeting* (May 25, 2016), [http://resources.culturalheritage.org/conservators-converse/2016/05/25/race-diversity-and-politics-in-conservation-our-21st-century-crisis-sanchita-balachandran/?fbclid=IwAR3jGHRUbyCn2MH3i8bZT7X\\_hLAmVyA-To6kDj\\_drFuHMez2HaR\\_7iwB1eU](http://resources.culturalheritage.org/conservators-converse/2016/05/25/race-diversity-and-politics-in-conservation-our-21st-century-crisis-sanchita-balachandran/?fbclid=IwAR3jGHRUbyCn2MH3i8bZT7X_hLAmVyA-To6kDj_drFuHMez2HaR_7iwB1eU)

<sup>102</sup> Barad, Meeting, 220.

philosophical conversation about the becoming of the world. Art conservation practices are a very real encounter between matter and meaning. Many definitions of conservation have offered insight into understanding the discipline as a cultural endeavor, but when we move past the conceptualization of conservation and focus on how it is done in practice the entanglement between the material and the discursive becomes evident.

Ultimately, understanding the artwork as a co-production of multiple agencies that materially and discursively constitute each other forces us to rethink causality in conservation narratives. Conservators already reckon with the different forces that materially constitute objects; these are described as ‘agents of deterioration.’ This notion, however, is fundamentally different to the philosophical idea of distributed agency, because the paradigm of agents of deterioration classifies the agents as forces that act *upon* the object rather than seeing them as part the object. The new materialist notion of distributed agency considers the object itself as part of this network of interactions among agencies, as well as the figure of the conservator, that constitute the artwork’s becoming. Moreover, the concept of ‘deterioration’ confers a negative connotation to alterations, and thus places conservation as the activity that mitigates this type of negative change. This way of describing cause and effect, agent and deterioration, consciously or not, legitimizes conservation treatments as the unquestionable response to change.

Lastly, the ways in which conservation categorizes change also impacts the way objects have been classified, and thus conservation specializations have developed accordingly. There is an important gap between theoretical production in the field of contemporary art conservation and paintings conservation. This is mostly because the first one has understood objects as ephemeral/changing or unruly, whereas the latter frames the object of study as traditional, easy to define, and stable. Without trying to homogenize the differences in the practice according to the

behavior of each object, this thesis recognizes that these categories are artificial too as they are rooted in the museum's collecting practices. For this thesis is important to use and apply the theoretical production within conservation as a broader field that produces philosophical knowledge. As artworks have increasingly become more relational, participatory, community-oriented, it seems natural that *The Night Watch*, once again adapts.

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