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The price tag of contemporary art is just the beginning of what it will cost you

The Art Preservation Index wants collectors to know that much art today is made from materials that will deteriorate fast

by RACHEL CORBETT | 2 December 2015



Dan Colen's chewing gum paintings may cause conservation problems for collectors © Ruth Fremson/New York Times/Redux/eyevine

The fragility of much contemporary art is one of the most pressing yet least discussed issues facing collectors today. A new company is aiming to tackle this thorny subject head on by issuing reports and credit ratings on works of art based on the likelihood that the materials they are made from will deteriorate over time or become technologically obsolete.

“There are certain artists whose names make every conservator laugh, but no one is telling collectors,” says Emily MacDonald-Korth, a former specialist at the Getty Conservation Institute and the founder of the Art Preservation Index. She says that collectors need this information to budget for their future conservation work before buying art. “We need to speak to them ahead of time so that they can make informed purchases,” she says.

The company currently employs eight conservators and is already issuing reports on the stability of materials used in specific works of art for a starting fee of \$1,975. It is also raising funds to launch an index that would assign ratings to art based on its material durability.

“Contemporary art presents more challenging conservation issues than Old Masters,” says the London-based dealer and collector Kenny Schachter. “With technologies shifting faster than fashion, this information is more relevant than ever.”

The services provided by the Art Preservation Index could be especially valuable for new collectors, who may be unaware that they have little recourse after buying works of art if unexpected conservation issues arise. Many dealers now “wisely require purchasers to sign a release at the time of sale” that absolves the gallery of responsibility should things go wrong, says Brian Kerr, of the New York legal firm Spencer Kerr. Even without this waiver, “it could be difficult” for collectors to obtain compensation from dealers “since some materials are so obviously fragile and subject to deterioration that you would be hard pressed to say you didn’t know what you were getting involved in”.

Some collectors agree that more information is needed up front, but say they prefer to gather it themselves. “We have started asking a lot of questions about future conservation considerations before acquiring a work,” says Aebhric Coleman, who manages the collection of mostly video art assembled by Richard and Pamela Kramlich in San Francisco and has to confront the difficulties presented by technologies likely to become obsolete.

Serious collectors already obtain on their own the information provided by Art Preservation Index before buying art, says Christian Scheidemann, the president of Contemporary Conservation in New York. “If you’re a relatively passionate collector, you talk to the artist and gallerist [in advance] and know what to expect. If you buy art you’re also responsible

for its upkeep and maintenance—that’s what makes you a collector. Otherwise you’re just buying a commodity.”

Auction house resistance

These services could be particularly useful for art being offered at auction. MacDonald-Korth hopes that when her company launches its ratings system, this information will be displayed next to works in sales catalogues. But she predicts resistance from the auction houses since a low rating “could lower the value of works of art. But on the other hand it could also raise the value of many. It could be a huge selling point to say something is rated AAA. If collectors start demanding this information, the auction houses will have to include it.”

A spokeswoman for Phillips says she is not familiar with the Art Preservation Index and that the auction house has “not confronted” the issue of durability in contemporary art. Sotheby’s did not respond to our queries and Christie’s declined to comment.



Anselm Kiefer in front of paintings from his series *The Secret Life of Plants for Robert Fludd* (2001/02) Photo: © Rolf Haid/dpa/Corbis

Durability Challenges

Dan Colen’s Bubblegum paintings

Dust sticks to the gum and, after a few years, the gum tends to harden, crack and fall off. It will also “attract insects and rodents”, warns Emily MacDonald-Korth of the Art Preservation Index.

Damien Hirst's Spot paintings

Some of these contain household paints, which can sometimes crack, wrinkle and flake.

Anselm Kiefer's plant-based paintings

Organic matter is notoriously fragile and prone to drying out. "A massive painting in Italy had to be treated because of biological attack to the sunflower seeds that were scattered across the surface of the painting," says MacDonald-Korth.
