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Art in Flux: Towards the Future of Conservation

The advancement of scientific conservation during the post-war period, coincided with a different phenomenon unfolding in the realm of visual arts. This era witnessed a substantial transformation in artistic concepts and methodologies as artists responded to the societal, political, cultural, and technological changes stemming from the wartime and its aftermath. This led to the emergence of art characterized by qualities that are not easily comprehensible through methodologies grounded solely in the “hard” sciences, such as meanings, perceptual features, functions, uses, aesthetic appearances, relationality, variability, contextuality, performativity, and the ability to perform. This is the case of the rich legacy of Fluxus, an international network of artists that emerged in the late 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. Fluxus artists purposefully adopted practices that defied conventional classifications of artistic expression and media, encompassing domains of music, visual arts, poetry, and performance, and that intentionally blurred the boundaries separating art from everyday life.

Although Fluxus art wasn't a focal point of conservation efforts at the time of its creation, it notably captured the interest of certain prominent conservators. Through the historical exploration and analysis of works collected by Wolfgang Hanh, the chief conservator at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum and later, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, this paper traces the origins of contemporary art conservation and its divergence from the prevalent science-based conservation approach to the Rhineland region during the 1970s. In doing so, this paper serves as a guidepost, delineating the paths along which contemporary conservation developed beyond the post-war period, and contemplates the enduring influence of scientific paradigm on the field today.