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“Disruptive Conservation”

A conversation with Ellie and Jane

“Why don’t I make this fill in hot pink?” As a conservation professional, chances are this question will stop you in your tracks and initiate a negative knee-jerk reaction. But what if we took a moment to actually think through this possibility? Then-student Ellie Sweetnam and professor Jane Henderson’s paper takes the position that our current practice of infilling with a neutral, rather than matched, colour is deceptive to the viewer and that such deliberate mediation through the act of conservation can deny the viewer an authentic understanding of the heritage object. Ellie and Jane coined the term “disruptive conservation” for the act of challenging the status quo of our usual treatment approaches and perspectives, enabling conservators to account for the object’s journey in how their intervention is portrayed. Below is my interview with the authors, discussing some key concepts in their paper, which I hope will entice you to [read the full paper](#) and have your own discussions.

Sharra: I wonder if we might ease into this discussion a bit and begin with how the idea for writing this paper came about.

Jane: Ellie asked me a question when I was supervising some lab teaching that made me catch my breath: she asked me if she could make her gap fill a bright colour. I had to summon all my inner pedagogy to respond in a way that encouraged her to develop her thinking behind the question.

Sharra: In the paper you clarify that disruptive conservation is not a proposed conservation technique or system and is not meant to specify techniques that are right or wrong. “It is not about the visible mend itself but is an expression of the need to reject our biases and to break away from the façade of neutrality that is presented in a context that is often far from neutral... it asks conservators to push against obvious and traditional narratives...” What are you hoping conservators will do in response to your paper?

Ellie: I can understand how the paper may make for an uncomfortable read as the subject nature challenges how we perceive our role and potentially the power dynamics that follow. I must acknowledge that there are many professionals in this sector who are inciting change and are considering these concepts; with that I do hope that it is taken seriously and not dismissed as the trivial matter of painting a gap-fill hot pink. It is also nice to consider that this paper could also be an initial kernel or resource in the re-examination of our working processes, instigating conservators to consider the core of their thinking and to constantly ask themselves why they may think in a particular way.

Jane: I fear that as conservators we can become complacent, and that sometimes feeds into practice that becomes habitual. Sitting behind such non-reflective practise is the possibility that we don't think fully about the consequences of our work for the tangible and intangible aspects of the conservation challenge. If we seriously include an extreme option in our decision making this helps us to rethink. I feel that there is so much around culture and heritage that has gone

without comment, particularly issues of why collections are where they are and for whom collections have meaning. I fear that in the past some conservation practise has served to further separate people from the meaning of their objects.

Sharra: I love your idea of the “shy elephant in the room” that we as conservators frequently decide how an object is interpreted and presented, yet we often do so without detection or recognition. In my mind, there is another elephant in the room. Could the “urge to avoid visually disturbing fills” actually say more about the ego of the conservator than about the authenticity of the object? I think there is general fear that visible treatment could be perceived as unskilled work, which could harm the conservator's reputation and livelihood.

Ellie: From my own experience, conservation is not a very well-known profession despite our touch being on every object and the very environment within the museum. I agree that being perceived as ‘unskilled’ may be one of the reasons for shying away from a visible treatment. It may be that it could be seen as putting too much of ourselves and our expression (the ego) within the object when the conversation is not ours to be a part of. But as soon as we make any decision regarding the object, we become part of it. An object is never fixed – it moves through time and spaces, and we become part of its many spheres. There are circumstances when a visual mend would be the wrong decision and so obviously should not be undertaken. This circles back to disruptive conservation being more of a thought-process than a colour palette. Consequence and professional reputation are also important aspects to consider.

Jane: I imagine many of us have reversed past repairs or treatments that have us questioning the skills of our predecessors, and of course we take pride in our ability to beautifully integrate a fill using whichever technique we have deemed appropriate. We can be brilliant technicians, but to be a professional, we need to acknowledge all the factors in our decisions and integrate these into an accountable and high quality result. We are no more immune from ego or vanity than anyone else in the world, but as professionals, we can and should build in a process of review and correction throughout our practise that we make available for others to scrutinise. I wonder if, on some occasions, our intervention should be stark in order to attract a discussion, but we will never choose that option if we believe our practise can only be successful if it delivers from a narrow range of options.

Sharra: The most powerful concept, to me, that you present in this paper is that conservation has the ability not only to hide physical damage and decay, but that in so doing, we may also erase important histories and truths that are tied to those damages. Of our treatments you say, “they belie the process by which the lacunae were created... History includes powerful stories of destruction, oppression and looting, captured and embodied in the collections encased in the galleries of the universal museums.” As you suggest, we tend to “slide” collection objects in and out of points in history, which negates their continued journey on that timeline, and suggests that we can put aside whatever eras or parts of their history that don’t serve the museum’s goals or intent. This is a hard truth to accept. How can we as conservators accept this and work toward conservation efforts that do not erase the stories from an object?

Ellie: It is always easier to write about how to navigate these scenarios than it is to realistically put them into action, especially when you are aware of the issues that heritage professionals face: barely-there budgets and lack of resources, support and time. It is also a daunting experience when it seems a fight against ingrained Institutional thinking. Before attempting to initiate any form of change or challenge, conservators need to have a concrete foundation on how they think—their ideals and their ethics. It is from there that you can be clear on the aim of your work. Your conservation efforts and decision-making are your own, and never without bias, but if you understand the type of power you hold, you can begin to at least know how you wish to direct your efforts.

Jane: I suppose all of us instinctively see our present as the natural conclusion of all that's gone before. We are trained to offer the best possible care to our objects, and this can so easily slip into the concept of stopping an object in time, for all of future history, to experience it as we leave it in the now. This makes no sense when we look back at the history of our objects and see the way that they have changed in meaning and offer different stories to different users, but the present day bias is strong. To question our own part in the story and to think how that might be represented in what we do is what we are asking.

Sharra: Our work on collections is, whether or not intentional, a political act.... This is included almost as a conclusion, but it could actually be a whole paper of its own. Can you talk about why you came to this at the end of your paper? Could you have left this out? Is it too tangential (or too big) to just be mentioned at the end without further discussion?

Jane: I think we have so much more to say. I started to talk about politics in my paper "Beyond lifetimes" and have been very lucky I have been allowed to talk in conferences while expanding on my thoughts. I completely understand where people don't wish to express any politics in their conservation, but for that to be a genuine ambition, you must first examine the options for neutrality in any situation. The concept of disruptive conservation is just that: a disruption created to jolt yourself out of complacency and to rethink before any assumptions are made. I'm aware that there are many conservators who want to raise political issues but are not quite sure how to do this appropriately and constructively.

Ellie: Everything in itself is a political act, and because of the immensity and, frankly, intensity of that, it cannot be touched upon lightly. And so, it was natural to end on that note and to tie all the different aspects of the paper together. If I am allowed to say this, we do have another paper in the works which is a lot more political in its nature.



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Figure 1. Roman ceramic vessel excavated from Caerwent, Wales. Newport Museum and Art Gallery.

Photograph by Sweetnam, E. (need Jane to double check?? Maybe won't use?)

Figure 2. Hiking socks darned with a hot-pink mend. Image courtesy of Ellie Sweetnam.

Figure 3. Reconstructed ceramic bowl in pink, next to an untreated broken bowl. Treatment undertaken by Sweetnam, E.