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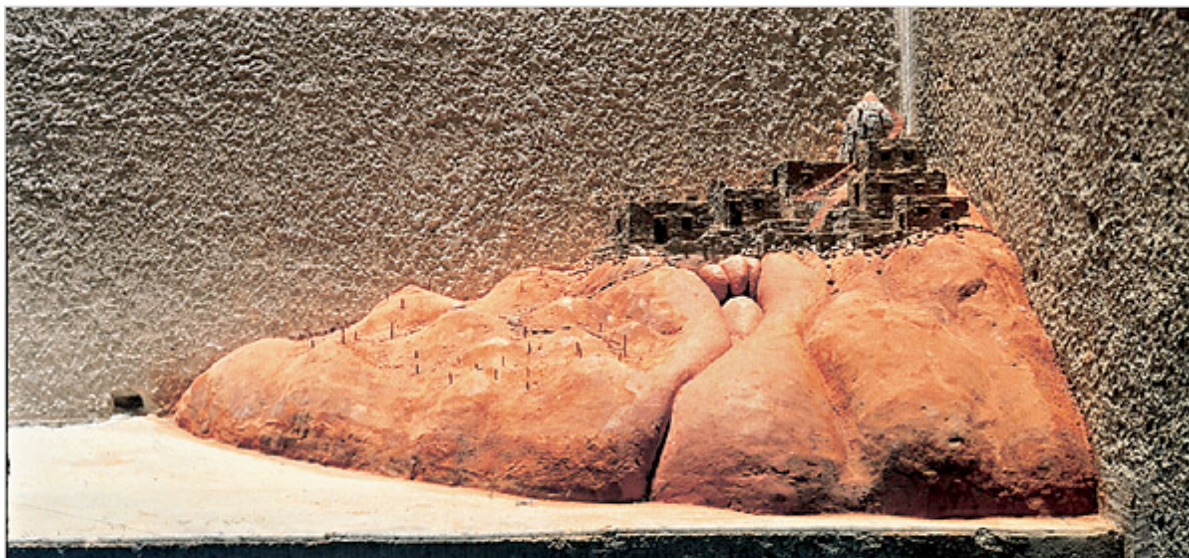
Giving the Artists a Voice in Preserving Their Work



Charles Simonds/Artists Rights Society, New York
Charles Simonds's "Dwellings" (1981) is included in the Whitney's "Full House" show, opening today. He was allowed to restore the piece himself.

By RANDY KENNEDY
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While art may be a matter of life and death, as Bruce Nauman has said, the painstaking and highly technical practice of conserving it has rarely been seen in such mortal terms.

For 20 years Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the Whitney's director of conservation, has persuaded artists to consider the future care of their work.

But Carol Mancusi-Ungaro can cite several compelling reasons why that should change. Jean Tinguely, the sculptor, for example, died in 1991, just before she had a chance to talk to him. "I felt so awful about it," she said. And then there was Al Held, the abstract painter, whom Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro called last year, seeking to schedule a videotaped interview with him about how his work should be preserved.

"Al said he wanted to do it," she recalled, "but he was on his way to Italy, and he asked if we could talk when he got back. I said, 'O.K., but just let me talk to you for an hour on the phone, so I can start thinking about it.' And we did. And then a few weeks later he died in his swimming pool."

Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro runs the conservation and research department at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Before that, for many years, she worked at the Menil Collection in Houston, where she directed the well-regarded restoration of the paintings in the Rothko Chapel and constantly found herself struggling to figure out what Mark Rothko, who committed suicide in 1970, would have wanted done with his work.

It led her to ask herself a question: Why do conservators tend to wait until after artists die to begin figuring out how they would have wanted their work cared for, searching for clues in archives, in the memories of friends and in chemical paint analysis? Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro decided to wait no more, and with the help of

a video camera and a grant, began an unusual oral history project, persuading many prominent artists — some of them famously averse to talking about their work — to sit down and help her draw road maps for the care of their increasingly complex and often fragile paintings, sculptures and installations.

The project, which is approaching its 20th year, has stockpiled dozens of hours of videotaped discussions with artists like Michael Heizer, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt, Lee Bontecou, James Rosenquist and Brice Marden. It has inspired and guided similar documentation programs around the world. And it is now receiving renewed attention because of Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro's work on the show opening at the Whitney today, "Full House," which uses the museum's 75th anniversary as a chance to raid its storage rooms and dust off important examples of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism, many of which have not been exhibited in years.

During the years in seclusion, some of those works did not age gracefully, and it became Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro's job to get them back into viewing shape. Sometimes the works were made by artists who had died long before she began her historical mission. Sometimes the artists were around and happy to help. And other times they simply had no interest in revisiting the past.

For example David Hammons, the elusive artist who has called museums collections of the "grateful dead," never responded to Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro's requests for guidance in restoring a piece of his made of hair threaded onto long rods that shoot up into the air, like a yucca plant growing dreadlocks. (Some of the rods had begun to weaken, and conservators relied on educated guesses about how to replace them.)

The challenging installation of the exhibition demonstrated how elastic — and sometimes simply odd — the demands of conserving modern and contemporary art can be. One day, Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro recalled, she was talking to Charles Simonds, whose tiny model of a village, called "Dwellings," has been permanently installed in the Whitney's stairwell atop a window ledge. Many museumgoers are unaware that the work includes two other miniature models, made of clay, sticks and other materials, that rest on parts of a building across the street, visible from the museum's windows facing Madison Avenue.

As Mr. Simonds and Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro looked out the window that day, they saw what looked like a statue of an owl very close to one of the outdoor pieces. "I asked him what the owl meant, and he said: 'That's not my owl. I don't know whose owl that is,' " she said, laughing.

It turned out to be a common plastic owl, installed by the owners of the building to repel pigeons, oblivious to the artwork they were obscuring. A Whitney conservation assistant, Heather Cox, was quickly dispatched across the street and managed to persuade the owners to retire their owl.
"I consider that a victory for conservation," Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro said, beaming.

Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro, who also serves as director of the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art at the Harvard University Museums, said she learned early on in her project that the responsible upkeep and repair of modern works was far more complicated than conserving oil painting, with its long-established traditions of restoration.

With contemporary art, questions of conservation begin to touch on the nature of the works themselves. In some of her videos what begins as a technical discussion about acrylic paint, concrete or a torn scrap of paper becomes instead a kind of Socratic dialogue about intent, impermanence, accident and the purpose (if any) of art, with Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro as the gentle moderator.

"It became clear to me over time," she said, "that there was no way I was going to be asking the important questions, the right questions that would matter in the future." Instead she often simply starts out by asking, "So, how does this piece look to you now?"

Sometimes the answers are not what conservators or collectors may want to hear. In an interview six years ago George Herms talked about how many of his trademark early assemblages were an "indictment of materialism," making any effort to preserve them in amber almost a contradiction. Mr. Marden, in one of several interviews he granted for the project, talked in 1992 about his growing feeling that many of the accidental scuffs and marks that ended up on his monochromatic paintings should probably be left instead

of painted over. And Mr. Heizer, in a 1991 discussion, sounded at times as if he were trying to negotiate a new noninterventionist treaty for the conservation of contemporary sculpture, or at least his.

"This is not a painting," he said firmly, of a concrete creation at the Menil Collection. "I'm a sculptor. It's not about looks. It's about stuff."

No matter how attenuated and philosophical the discussions of her project become, there will nearly always be the "stuff" that art is made of, Ms. Mancusi-Ungaro said, and figuring out how to treat it the right way will probably become only more difficult.

Recently, she said, she interviewed the young artist Dario Robleto, who uses materials as exotic as mammoth ivory, whale-bone dust and homemade crystals. She asked him whether a delicate antenna for a butterfly was made from vinyl, and he said it was, adding that it could never be just any vinyl. "He was adamant that it had to come from a copy of James Brown's 'Sex Machine' album," she said.

"And I thought, oh great, now I'm going to have to go to eBay and track down copies of this damned record. What's next?"

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