Urs Fischer's *Francesco* (2017): On ephemeral art and material culture

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Abstract

Material culture studies is defined as the study of human culture through artificially constructed objects that have survived in physical or representational form. But what happens when there is no surviving object? How does material culture account for works whose material nature is fleeting, malleable, and ultimately perishable? Ephemeral art—works of art made from perishable mediums such as wax, food, or even found rubbish—is increasingly present in museum collections of contemporary art. This diversity in media has enriched contemporary art practice, but has also created a number of complexities for arts professionals, raising questions on how best to collect, conserve, and interpret these works.

A material culture analysis of ephemeral art reveals why contemporary artists create works of art that deteriorate more rapidly than their traditional counterparts, and how these intentions have changed over time. Drawing on the case study of Urs Fischer's *Francesco* (2017), my research findings indicate that the value of a material culture approach to ephemeral art is derived from analysis of the trajectories of matter comprising a work. Fluctuating critical and popular interest in materials reveals our changing cultural relationship to 'stuff', and under this premise a work of art designed to deteriorate can be just as revealing as an enduring object.

Introduction

Upon its acquisition in 2018 by the National Gallery of Australia, Swiss contemporary artist Urs Fischer's AU$1 million sculpture *Francesco* (2017) was quickly denounced as a waste of money. *The Canberra Times* was apparently so overwhelmed by letters to the editor on this very subject that journalist Ian Warden was compelled to address these critics, labelling them philistines for their belief that $1 million was wasted on a work that will melt into a pile of debris on the gallery floor.[1] Warden added that these naysayers were likely to disprove of any contemporary work with such a price tag, regardless of whether the work melted or endured. However, the concerns of these critics are revealing. Critics of *Francesco* affirm an expectation of permanence, of the immortality of art as an enduring survey of human achievement and, indeed, evidence of the fact we were here at all.

Ephemeral art movements in contemporary art practice—such as Fischer's wax sculptures—are an affront to these expectations. For the purpose of this essay, ephemeral art is defined as a work of art that is perishable; a work that challenges the art world's expectation of permanence. This expectation for permanence is misguided: studies show that far more works will perish than survive.[2] Ephemeral art is not just a concern for researchers of contemporary practice, but is of historical significance too. The mortality of art is also a challenge to material culture studies, defined as the study of 'artificially constructed objects that have survived in physical or representational form'.[3] How does material culture—a methodology focused on the material nature of an object—account for works whose material nature is fleeting, malleable, and ultimately perishable?

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[1] Ian Warden, 'Can You Hear the Philistines, Francesco?', *The Canberra Times*, March 31, 2019, www.canberratimes.com.au/story/5991958/can-you-hear-the-philistines-francesco/.

[2] Gary Schwartz, 'Ars Moriendi: The Mortality of Art', *Art in America* 84, no. 11 (1996): 72–75.

[3] Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 592, doi.org/10.1162/0022195043327426.

The value of a material culture approach to ephemeral art is derived from an analysis of the trajectories of matter comprising a work of art. In this essay, I build upon the case study of *Francesco* to examine the long artistic tradition of wax sculpture and the fluctuating critical interest in the medium. A material culture analysis of wax reveals a changing cultural relationship to matter over time and why artists sacrifice the durability of their medium to explore this relationship. Under this premise, an object that is designed to deteriorate can be just as revealing as a historical or enduring object.

Figure 1. Urs Fischer, *Francesco* (2017).

Sculptures, paraffin wax, microcrystalline wax, encaustic pigment, stainless steel, wicks, aluminium powder, steel, stainless hardware, bronze hardware, electrical wiring, LED light, AAA batteries.

391.4 h x 80.3 w x 103.6 d cm.

Collection National Gallery of Australia, purchased with the assistance of the Foundation Gala Dinner Fund 2019.

Source: Image courtesy National Gallery of Australia © Urs Fischer, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

What is ephemeral art?

The term ephemeral art was first coined in relation to the conceptual art movement Fluxus. Fluxus involved happenings, performance and sound works, and mass-produced objects. Artist George Maciunas founded Fluxus in the 1960s and described the group's purpose to 'promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art' and 'promote living art'.[4] The intention was for the movement to exist outside of the museum structure, and for the objects to hold little or no value. Despite this mandate, many Fluxus works did develop a significant presence within institutions. Fluxus artists such as Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Yoko Ono, and Benjamin Patterson are well represented in museum collections, with more than 400 works between the four artists in the Museum of Modern Art Collection alone.[5]

[4] 'Fluxus', *Tate*, accessed January 24, 2019, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/fluxus.

[5] 'The Collection', *MoMA*, accessed June 10, 2019, www.moma.org/collection/#.

Moreover, the movement has an entire museum and collection dedicated to it in Berlin.[6] Even for ephemeral works conceived outside of the traditional museum framework, the curatorial urge to collect is enduring.

In a contemporary context, an ephemeral work of art is defined by the Tate as a work of art that occurs once, which cannot be embodied in any lasting object to be collected in a museum or gallery setting.[7] This definition could encompass performance or installation works that occur once, that are not intended to be collected, and can only be preserved in the form of photography or video, if at all. The task of defining ephemeral art is a difficult one, as curators, art historians, and artists disagree on its exact definition.

For the purpose of this essay, the term ephemeral art is used to refer to works where the physical medium is perishable. Unlike the Tate's definition of the term, perishable works may last longer than a single occasion. These works may be intended to run their course and disappear over the course of weeks, months, or years, or in other cases are caught in a constant cycle of renewal as the physical materials that comprise them are replaced according to instructions from their creators. The instructions themselves come in various levels of detail, and may stipulate strict parameters or none at all. Contrary to the Tate's definition, museums and galleries *are* collecting ephemeral works, despite the challenges to conservation and collection practices posed by their transient nature.

The institutional response to ephemeral art

The twenty-first century has seen the introduction of increasingly diverse media into the realm of contemporary art. These new mediums are often more vulnerable and susceptible to rapid decay. This can be attributed to corresponding developments in contemporary art that have broadened our definition of the term, and technological advancements that have led to the invention of new materials (such as plastics, latex, and resin) and new ways of combining them. Contemporary works are more vulnerable to technological obsolescence and more likely to suffer rapid chemical decay, due to internal acid hydrolysis prevalent in modern materials.[8] This diversity of media has no doubt enriched contemporary art practice, yet has also introduced an array of complexities for arts professionals.

Ephemeral works exist in direct contradiction to a major tenet of conservation: 'the preservation of cultural patrimony for future generations'.[9] If ephemeral works are so challenging to collect, why do we go to such lengths to preserve them? Conservation has developed as a response to the human desire to resist the degradation of souvenirs of human existence. Debates about conservation have persisted more or less since the eighteenth century, from the time of the first art connoisseurs and the creation of museums.[10]

Historical approaches to conservation demonstrate a constantly shifting debate on best practice. In the eighteenth century, the tendency was to interfere by repainting, reworking, and restoring works. It was an era of renovation, with attempts made to realise the full potential of an object—even if the restoration deviated from the original object. In the nineteenth century, scientific advancements saw a renewed

[6] 'Museum Fluxus+', *Museum Fluxus+*, accessed June 10, 2019, www.fluxus-plus.de/home.html.

[7] 'Ephemeral Art', *Tate*, accessed January 24, 2019, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/ephemeral-art.

[8] Stephan Michalski, 'Conservation Lessons from Other Types of Museums and a Universal Database for Collection Preservation', in *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, ed. Ijsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sille (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), 290–4.

[9] Stephanie E. Hornbeck, 'A Conservation Conundrum: Ephemeral Art at the National Museum of African Art', *African Arts* 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 52, doi.org/10.1162/afar.2009.42.3.52.

[10] Iwona Szmelter, 'An Innovative Complex Approach to Visual Art Preservation', in *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*, ed. Iwona Szmelter (Warsaw: Academy of Fine Arts and Archetype Publications, 2012), 10–33.

interest in material authenticity, and by the twentieth century authenticity was a dominant value. The preservation of a work became associated with the preservation of its original, physical substance.[11]

A key architectural example of the cultural construction of conservation practices was the restoration of Notre Dame, particularly through the addition of Gothic motifs. The now-synonymous gargoyles were never part of the original twelfth-century structure, but were carved and installed between 1843 and 1864.[12] It is ironic that this addition has become so iconic, considering that contemporary conservation practice seeks to adhere to truthful representation of the original object. More recently, the 2019 Notre Dame fire incited a visceral and deeply personal reaction in people across the globe, and €750 million towards restoration was raised in the 10 days following the incident. This response is as good an indicator as any of the determination to preserve cultural patrimony at all costs.[13]

This attachment to preservation is profound in historical cultural objects, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (c. 1490), which was subject to rapid degradation due to the artist's unusual technique. Working with a mixture of oil and tempura on a dry surface, rather than a traditional *buon fresco* in fresh plaster, da Vinci's work began to show signs of decay only a few years after completion.[14] After being subjected to extensive restorations throughout its history, the work is estimated to now be comprised of only 20 per cent of the original pigment; however, it is believed the image now most faithfully reflects da Vinci's original intent.[15] In an effort to preserve the work for posterity despite its perishable medium, *The Last Supper* is now arguably more the work of conservators than da Vinci himself.

Ultimately, the cultural and institutional expectation for permanence is unrealistic. In the article 'Ars Moriendi: The Mortality of Art', Gary Schwartz draws on statistical evidence to conclude that as little as 10 per cent of historical works of art have survived to today.[16] In 1962, German historian Gerhard Eis reached the conclusion that 99.4 per cent of Central European library manuscripts of the Middle Ages had been lost (this was revised in the 1990s by Uwe Neddermeyer to a loss of 92.5–95 per cent). In 1971, Gert von der Osten estimated that 98 per cent of all prewar altar carvings and panels in Germany were lost. In the same year, Edward B Garrison estimated that as many as 70–80 per cent of paintings produced in Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are lost.[17] As Schwartz argues, 'the natural condition of art is not to live on but to perish'.[18]

Of the 10 per cent that does survive, there is by no means a comprehensive or representative sample of cultural production throughout history. The works that do remain generally favour classes or societies that have been historically privileged in the canons of art history, or mediums that are the most durable. Considering how slow institutions have been to adapt to this challenge, it seems the museum is dedicated not to conserving an individual work of art, but rather to sustaining the fiction that a work of art is unchanging and eternal.

A material culture approach to ephemeral art

A key methodology regarding our cultural relationship to objects is that of material culture studies, defined by Richard Grassby as the study of 'artificially constructed objects that have survived in

[11] Monika Jadzinska, 'Back to the Future: Authenticity and Its Influence on the Conservation of Modern Art', in *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*, ed. Iwona Szmelter (Warsaw: Academy of Fine Arts and Archetype Publications, 2012), 82–99.

[12] Jan M. Ziolkowski, 'Notre Dame: The Virgin in Nineteenth-Century France', in *The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity, vol. 2, Medieval Meets Medievalism* (Open Book Publishers, 2018), 51–96, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv4ncpb5.5.

[13] *BBC News*, 'Notre-Dame Fire: Has Too Much Money Been Given to Rebuild It?', April 25, 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48039770.

[14] Charles Nicholl, *Leonardo da Vinci: Flights of the Mind* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), 292–302.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Schwartz, 'Ars Moriendi', 72–75.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid, 72.

physical or representational form'.[19] Through this study of the material, historians attempt to grasp the 'more nebulous concept of culture' as objects give material form to the ideas and values of those that used them.[20] Analysis into material culture began as an attempt to extract information from objects left behind by prehistoric and non-literate cultures. In the absence of textual evidence, material artefacts allowed for the reconstruction of lost histories and cultures.[21] The challenge with Grassby's definition is how material culture, a discipline focused on the material nature of an object, might account for works whose material nature is fleeting, malleable, dynamic, and ultimately perishable.

Material culture provides a methodology that considers the material contexts of a work of art in addition to its visual contexts. Jules David Prown—a historian of American art and eminent scholar in material culture—argues that objects provide a 'cultural stylistic fingerprint' from which we can discern shared stylistic values by individuals living in the same place at the same time.[22] It follows that a '*change in style* [is] concurrent with a *shift in cultural values*'.[23] Material culture as a methodology provides an insight into the material contexts of a work of art, as well as how these material contexts reflect shifting cultural values.

Prown provides a comparative analysis case study to demonstrate this link between change in style and change in values. Referring to a pre-revolutionary Philadelphia Rococo side chair, he describes the form as irregular, 'with knees and ears jutting out in different directions'.[24] In comparison, a post-revolutionary side chair from Salem, Massachusetts presents a completely different aesthetic. The chair has a much more slender form, is lighter, and breaks more easily. This contrast demonstrates not only a change in values after the American Revolutionary War, but the 'willingness of the producing culture to sacrifice a practical benefit (durability) for other values'.[25] Ephemeral media in contemporary art demonstrates shifting cultural values in relation to art and the material world, along with a willingness to sacrifice practical benefit—the endurance of art objects—for these values.

Objects that are now materially absent—or in a state of transformation—still influence and offer insight into the experience of the material world. That which is unseen or absent is nonetheless present, 'precisely because its absence is marked or emphatic'.[26] Material culture studies encourages an approach that reaches beyond fixed states; one that considers all the transformational possibilities of matter and what that means in relation to the ways in which humans have intervened, aided, and determined those transformative states.

Francesco, ephemeral art, and existentialism

A visual analysis of Fischer's *Francesco* reveals an interest in mortality and the contemporary *memento mori*. *Francesco* is cast entirely from wax, and is lit each day throughout his exhibition from a wick set atop his head and then moved as he melts. He is large in scale—slightly larger than life-sized—and elevated on a fridge-cum-plinth. The figure is hunched in a *contrapposto* position, gazing at his iPhone in a pose 'emblematic of our contemporary era'.[27] The fridge, facing backwards and slightly ajar, invites its viewer to circulate the sculpture, consuming *Francesco* from all perspectives, peeking inside the fridge door to observe the fruit and vegetables. The wax and food motifs create a strong association to the *memento mori* symbolism of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, where motifs of human skulls, candles, flowers, fruit, vegetables, and hourglasses reminded observers of their own mortality. As

[19] Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', 592.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 56.

[23] Ibid, author's emphasis.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Severin Fowles, 'People without Things', in *An Anthropology of Absence: Materialisations of Transcendence and Loss*, eds. Mikkel Bille, Frida Soerensen and Tim Flohr (Berlin: Springer, 2010), 25, doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-5529-6_2.

[27] Jaklyn Babington, 'Urs Fischer Sculpture', *Artonview*, no. 97 (Autumn 2018): 14–15.

Francesco melts, undergoing a metamorphosis from figurative sculpture to abstract anti-form, the work creates an impression of decay.

Figure 2. Urs Fischer, *Francesco* (detail) (2017).

Sculptures, paraffin wax, microcrystalline wax, encaustic pigment, stainless steel, wicks, aluminium powder, steel, stainless hardware, bronze hardware, electrical wiring, LED light, AAA batteries.

391.4 h x 80.3 w x 103.6 d cm.

Collection National Gallery of Australia, purchased with the assistance of the Foundation Gala Dinner Fund 2019.

Source: Image courtesy National Gallery of Australia © Urs Fischer, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Fischer's choice of medium challenges the expectations of art history and the art world. At the National Gallery of Australia in 2019, *Francesco*'s movement began with a slow drip down the forehead—much like a sweaty brow, perhaps in recognition of his own impending demise—and accelerated to the dramatic tumble of *Francesco*'s head onto the gallery floor. The so-called 'choreography' of the melting of the work is up to chance.[28] It will melt differently each time, depending on where the wicks are placed. There is no formal consistency, and this is what the artist is most interested in: the unknown results of the work.[29] Fischer's use of medium and visual motifs impart an overall sense of temporality, an ironic riposte to an art world which is primarily concerned with the survival—or saleability—of the object.

Francesco reveals Fischer's existential concerns, in both the temporality of life and as a critique of the monumentalism and fickle interests of the commercial art world. While *Francesco* will be recast and reborn for each installation, an awareness of loss pervades. Fischer is musing on the rapid continuum of the next generation of artists, curators, and works of art as they step up to their fleeting moment on the art world stage. The sculpture is modelled after star curator Francesco Bonami, and the disappearance of this sculpture is a sly reference to statements by Bonami on the presumed demise of the curator in the twenty-first century.[30] Fischer critiques the commodification of art, exploring a 'conundrum of the commercial art world' in which a valuable commodity can be burnt to the ground—quite literally![31] In prioritising expiration in his works, Fischer rebels against the expectations of the institution.

[28] Jaklyn Babington, in conversation with Sophia Halloway, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, May 31, 2019.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Jaklyn Babington, 'Urs Fischer Sculpture', 14–15.

[31] Ibid.

Figure 3. Urs Fischer, *Francesco* (detail) (2017).

Sculptures, paraffin wax, microcrystalline wax, encaustic pigment, stainless steel, wicks, aluminium powder, steel, stainless hardware, bronze hardware, electrical wiring, LED light, AAA batteries.

391.4 h x 80.3 w x 103.6 d cm.

Collection National Gallery of Australia, purchased with the assistance of the Foundation Gala Dinner Fund 2019.

Source: Image courtesy National Gallery of Australia © Urs Fischer, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Collecting ephemeral works

Both the purchase price and the ongoing cost of maintenance of ephemeral installations may be prohibitive to public collections considering an acquisition. In addition to the AU$1 million price tag, *Francesco* must be returned to the Swiss foundry in which he was made to be recast and returned to the National Gallery of Australia for the next viewing.[32] The cost of freight alone is prohibitive. The work requires insulated crating to avoid melting during transit, and must be immediately removed from the tarmac. Once installed, the work places immense pressure on climate control in gallery spaces due to the live flame; the National Gallery recirculates 60,000 litres of air every five minutes to maintain the appropriate climate.[33] Under the pressure of declining funding and increasing scrutiny from the public—such as that demonstrated by responses from some of the *Canberra Times*' readership to *Francesco*—public collections must use their funds wisely and may not be in a position to dedicate resources to ephemeral works which are not only expensive but entail high maintenance.

Fischer's choice of medium certainly makes for a challenging acquisition, but ultimately he is not seeking to completely undermine the art world. Fischer is still creating a collectible object and is very much embedded in the commercial art world. He is a highly successful artist, represented by major commercial galleries Sadie Coles HQ and Gagosian, and is closely associated with significant art world figures. Indeed, many of the influential arts professionals featured in Fischer's wax works—Francesco Bonami, Dasha Zhukova, Rudolf Stingel—are close friends of the artist.[34] His major survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2013 was largely drawn from private collections and commercial galleries,[35] and the exhibition listing on his website lists frequent exhibitions at major commercial galleries.[36] At four metres tall and AU$1 million, *Francesco* may perpetuate the very monumentalism that Fischer seeks to critique. It follows that his use of wax is not simply derived from a desire to subvert the gallery as an institution, but is instead a means to convey other ideas.

The disappearing history of wax

Fischer's use of wax as a medium draws from a long history of wax sculpture that has remained largely unexplored in scholarship. The malleability of the organic material has lent itself to artistic production for millennia as an ideal simulacrum of human flesh. It has been utilised in refined Renaissance wax medallions, Baroque wax reliefs, Degas' small figurines, and the hyperreal fragmented body parts of Robert Gober. Yet despite this rich history, the medium holds a 'liminal status in art historical discourse'.[37]

This raises the question of why wax holds a relatively insignificant position in scholarly literature, despite its extensive use. This relative silence on the history of wax could be attributed to its ephemeral nature, and the fact that not many works have survived in physical form. The fluctuation of interest could also be attributed to a changing cultural relationship to wax. A material culture approach to the ductile nature of wax and the transformation of matter can shed light on our changing attitudes towards the art form over time. It is the *absence* of wax objects in art history—rather than their *presence*—that is most revealing.

Julius von Schlosser's 1911 essay 'History of Portraiture in Wax' discusses the challenges that the materiality of wax poses to art history. The challenge lies in the refusal of the material to conform to a

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[32] Alison Kubler, 'Remain in Light', *Vault Australasian Art & Culture Magazine*, February, 2019, vaultart.com.au/ISS25/urs.php?fbclid=IwAR3NqH9hvFcbt1RyqY3QWIt2_fgZ8LE8KE6aydpnboZf0cLi7Mmcba-O6p0.

[33] Debbie Ward, in conversation with Sophia Halloway, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, May 13, 2019.

[34] Kubler, 'Remain in Light'.

[35] Christopher Knight, 'Art Review: Urs Fischer's Grand Gestures Come up Short at MOCA', *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 2013, www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-xpm-2013-apr-25-la-et-knight-urs-fischer-review-20130425-story.html.

[36] 'URS FISCHER', accessed March 10, 2019, www.ursfischer.com/images.

[37] Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Getty Research Institute, 2008), 1–12.

'Vasarian conception of progress'.[38] Renaissance artist Georgio Vasari's 1550 text *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* presented a linear, chronological approach to the lives and works of artists, and art historical scholarship is founded on this approach. Schlosser challenges foundational thinkers of art history to assert that the development of wax portraiture cannot be traced stylistically—nor effectively categorised—as wax lacks a proper, formally consistent object. While the medium remained an integral part of artistic practice, its form continued to transform throughout history.[39] As once-popular Renaissance ex-voto statues or wax busts fell out of favour, the use of wax in the visual arts did not disappear altogether, but rather re-emerged at one stage or another in a new form. The history of wax is as manipulable as the material itself; it is moulded and remoulded in different periods, and defies traditional methodologies of studying and categorising the history of art.

More recently, the scholarly silence on the subject of wax has been attributed to the ephemeral nature of the medium. In 2008, Roberta Panzanelli published *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, in which she argues that throughout history wax has been relegated to the realm of low art in favour of more permanent art forms. In the first comprehensive survey of wax as an artistic medium in almost one hundred years, Panzanelli describes the history of wax as 'the history of disappearance—transformed, softened, liquefied, and sometimes lost forever'.[40] Despite their immense popularity throughout history, few wax works have survived the passage of time and consequently have not survived in art history. This reinforces the notion that the survival of an artwork is inseparable from that of its physical form.

For Schlosser, the shift away from wax portraiture in the nineteenth century was not solely attributable to the medium falling outside any classification or category, but due to the 'excessive verisimilitude' of the medium.[41] He describes the mimesis of wax sculpture—the medium's uncanny ability to imitate life—as 'indiscreet', because it transgresses the sort of naturalism we are accustomed to seeing in art. The Western canon of art history is deeply influenced by Christian thought, a history where image-making is fraught with controversy. In the Middle Ages, sculpture was considered a sinfully proud attempt to compete with God's creation. The Catholic Church was not willing to give up on sculpture altogether, however, for it was a crucial tool for reaching and educating a largely illiterate public. The permanent nature of most sculpture constantly reminds the spectator of their mortality. Indeed, the use of sculpture by the Catholic Church was used to remind its congregation of their own mortality and the afterlife.[42]

This mimetic effect of wax was described by Schlosser as an 'indiscreet naturalism' several years before publication of 'The Uncanny', Sigmund Freud's seminal 1919 essay. Freud refers to wax figures to describe the difficulty in distinguishing a life-sized figure from a human person. The true disturbance of wax figures was not simply due to their realism, but what Freud referred to as their 'animation'.[43] The figure that we encounter seems simultaneously similar to us and unnervingly 'Other'. As Freud's contemporary Ernst Jentsch observed, 'art, in wise moderation, avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings, well knowing that such an imitation can easily produce uneasiness'.[44]

Freud concludes that these types of encounters may cause the surfacing of an instinctive impulse, a surmounting of the unconscious by our latent and primal fears that momentarily displaces the intellect.[45]

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[38] Hanneke Grootenboer, 'On the Substance of Wax', *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1–12, doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kct001.

[39] Julius Von Schlosser, 'History of Portraiture in Wax', in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Getty Research Institute, 2008), 171–312.

[40] Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies*, 1.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Grootenboer, 'On the Substance of Wax', 1–12.

[43] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. J. Strachey (Vintage: London, 2001), 245.

[44] Ernst Jentsch, quoted in Jaklyn Babington, 'The Hyperreal Figure: From the Uncanny to the Cyborg', in *Hyper Real*, ed. Jaklyn Babington and Otto Letze (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2017), 27–28.

[45] Freud, 'The Uncanny', 245.

The disappearance and re-emergence of wax figures throughout history could be attributed to their ephemeral nature, or equally to their embodiment of the uncanny and an ambivalence as to whether this perfect verisimilitude is a part of us, or essentially Other.[46]

Conclusion

The mortality of art is by no means a purely contemporary issue. This is apparent in conceptual art practices of the twentieth century with movements such as Fluxus—where works are intentionally transient—and in even earlier cases such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, where the use of experimental media had unprecedented effects. These challenges are shared by contemporary institutions, which seek to collect works where the media is so new that no precedent guides its preservation and care, or where the artist actively seeks to create a perishable work. Despite the historical and contemporary prevalence of ephemeral works, institutions have been slow to adapt. The institutional response to ephemeral art demonstrates the cultural expectation for permanence, an expectation challenged by artists working with perishable media.

Material culture as a methodology is applicable even in cases where the art object is perishable or malleable. In the case of ephemeral art, the eventual absence of an object—and the decision an artist makes to achieve this—is perhaps even more revealing than a surviving object. Urs Fischer's wax sculpture *Francesco* is intended to melt away to almost nothing, drawing on the medium's disappearing history. Few wax works have survived in art history and are rarely referenced in art historical literature. It is the absence of wax, rather than its presence, that is most representative of the cultural relationship to the medium.

Material culture analysis of wax exposes the combination of factors that have seen it excluded historically from academic literature and revived again in contemporary art. The scholarly silence towards the ephemeral nature of the medium confirms the expectation for permanence in art history and an inability to assess and record works that do not survive in physical form, which may simply be due to the fact there is no object remaining to study. This is perhaps too simplistic, however, as other factors such as the uncanny resemblance of the medium to human flesh, or a cultural discomfort with its ephemerality, indicate a far more complex relationship.

While *Francesco's* larger-than-life scale and saturated red colour excludes him from the realm of the uncanny, Fischer's use of wax is inseparable from the connotations of the mortal body and its inevitable decay. Fischer teases out an existential angst that is an affront to the expectations of art history and the contemporary art world. In addressing the mortality of art, artist Marcel Duchamp reflects our own relationship to death: 'I believe that a picture, a work of art, lives and dies just as we do'.[47] In refusing to acknowledge the death of art, we make the inevitability of our own death more tolerable.

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[46] Grootenboer, 'On the Substance of Wax', 1–12.

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